With a Teaspoon of Sugar and a Hint of Lemon

Tuhina Saha Nandi

University of Colorado at Boulder, tuhinasaha@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/engl_gradetds

Part of the Modern Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.colorado.edu/engl_gradetds/18

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by English at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
WITH A TEASPOON OF SUGAR AND A HINT OF LEMON

by

TUHINA SAHA NANDI

B.A., University of Calcutta, 1998

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master in Fine Arts
Department of English
2011
This thesis entitled:
With A teaspoon Of Sugar And A Hint Of Lemon
written by Tuhina Saha Nandi
has been approved for the Department of English

________________________
Dr. Marcia Douglas

________________________
Dr. Elisabeth Sheffield

________________________
Dr. John-Michael Rivera

Date____________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
When I joined the Creative Writing program at CU Boulder during the fall of 2007, the only end in my mind was to learn how to write, and to do it well. I wanted to tell a story and as simply as possible. Saying that I want or wanted to tell a story, the story, as simply as possible, is not to insinuate aversion to the more experimental forms of story telling. It is to reiterate my belief in the simplicity of the singular word that never misses its mark. Some might consider that- the conventional method of story telling, to be non-adventurous, non-experimental and they are right in their own way. But sometimes, often times, ‘the story’ gets lost in the myriad of experimental fiction.

I enjoy mixed media works of fiction- comic books, graphic novels, dialogues superimposed upon real life snapshots, the occasional tastefully placed illustration or space in between dense writings, which usher in fresh air, and more. Space is good, except when half the page is empty, which to me suggests laziness and not so much experimenting with space. What I don’t like are glitters all over the page, on a page that says “Glitters” and has absolutely no relevance to the text. That is redundant. Good stories do not need to be superfluous. The word, language, is what I am looking for in a book, and on the page, not sparkles.

Writing for me is a personal, intimate process. I like to know everything about my characters- the bright red mole beside the right nipple, sweat that smells like carp, pregnant bellies like cardamom pods. These are the details, some of them, that bring my
characters to life. And as my characters live their lives, I transcribe it into language.

Relationships are more real to me than anything else and that is what I strive to capture in my stories- the essence of relationships and the players caught in the complexities of their environment.

My process starts with the singular word. I sleep and arise with it each morning. It lives with me and torments me till I sit down and write it on a piece of paper. Then it just lies there on that otherwise barren whiteness, lounging till I fill in the emptiness with meaning, giving it purpose. Sometimes it is just a word, other times a phrase or a sentence. I pick these up when I am least expecting them- in a can of red kidney beans, in a flash of magenta, the sparkly angel (sparkles do have some use), on the top of the Christmas tree, a tram ride, in burnt food, uneven tones of skin, old sepia toned photographs falling apart, peeling away at the edges, the simple task of peeling potatoes, salty onion tears mixed with a runny nose, and in the last crumble of the chocolate brownie. Some times the word gets lost. Often times they stay in the peripheries, while I weave the story on the empty sheet, that otherwise mocks.

And I write. And then I write some more.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have had three very important influences in my life, when it comes to writing. My father introduced me to Tintin and it has had the most impact when it comes to my love affair with books. My mother’s love for books and writing and non-acumen for things mathematical was what I grew up with. She championed the importance of non-scientific discourse in the household, when all around other mothers were chauffeuring around their children to special math and science after-school tuitions. My husband is my first and worst critique. Even before the workshops, I knew what feedback I would receive, thanks to my husband’s discerning reading. He has been an incredible support and fantastic reviewer.

I am grateful to my thesis advisor, Dr. Marcia Douglas for her helpful feedback about the stories and the thesis as a whole. I wish to thank Dr. Elisabeth Sheffield and Dr. John- Michael Rivera for being on my thesis committee and I’d like to add here as to how much I value their opinions.

And last but not the least, all my peers in all the workshops that I have taken, for being such patient, thoughtful and sincere critiques of my work.
READING LIST

1. The Adventures of Tintin – Herge
2. The collected works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay
3. YA Fiction as a genre
4. Fairy Tales
5. To Kill A Mocking Bird - Harper Lee
6. Pride and Prejudice – Jane Austen
7. Gone with the Wind – Margaret Mitchell
8. Lead Belly - a book of poems by Tyehimba Jess
9. Knowledge is it’s Own End – an essay by Cardinal Newman
10. Twelve Angry Men – the movie starring Henry Fonda
11. Marcia B. Douglas
12. Brian Evenson
13. Stephen G. Jones
CONTENTS

1. A TEASPOON OF SUGAR AND A HINT OF LEMON.................................1
2. BROWN PEOPLE HAVE BROWN ANGELS..................................25
3. MISS ANGELA’S LAYER CAKE......................................................41
4. SEN OPPURTUNIST..................................................................53
5. THE STORY OF A BLUE SUIT......................................................66
6. THE COLLECTION AGENT..........................................................76
7. BUTTERFLIES AND COOTIES......................................................89
8. MR. GARGARI AND MRS. GARGARI.........................................103
9. KABIR AND THE ROSES.............................................................115
10. HIS KNOWN DURGAS.............................................................126
11. INDOCTRINATION....................................................................143
Everyone addressed my father as Bahadur. Everyone addressed Dadaji, my grandfather, as Senior Bahadur. Both men had names, different names, individual names, that I think they were proud of. Dadaji had a birth certificate, which was the single most important document in his possession. He kept it protected, sandwiched between several layers of thick plastic, which he kept in a polythene bag at the bottom of his trunk. He kept the package surrounded by several naphthalene balls that he replenished from time to time without fail.

It certified his name to be Ashok Pyakurel, son of Srimati Sunita Pyakurel.

Dadaji’s mother that is Srimati Sunita Pyakurel named my father. My father’s real name was Ajay, the undefeated one. He survived a thirty-hour labor ordeal, half of it in a rickety bullock cart on a gravel road.

You see, not all tea estates had or have a resident doctor and none of the estates are ever near town.

But over the years, owing to both men’s vocation and it’s unnaturally natural expectations, they came to be known as Bahadur, which is funny since neither men had any brave deeds to their credit.

Dadaji worked as an estate overseer for Mr. Sharma. But every year, the estate shrank a bit and with it Dadaji’s duties. Until finally, he became the overseer for Mr. Sharma’s domestic needs, necessities, and comforts.

Dadaji made the best tea in Darjeeling. He practically created and claimed that title for himself and not many refuted it. Tea making, as a responsibility, did not fall on to Dadaji as a part of the domestic responsibilities brought on by the dwindling profits of the estate. Even with
enough estate to overseer, his first call of the day had always been to serve the morning tea to Mr. Sharma.

Every morning, at exactly 7am, Dadaji bore a huge lattice weaved bamboo tray with a gold rimmed and otherwise stark white teapot under a pink blossom tea-cozy, a matching pot for cream, a pot for sugar and a set of two cups and saucers.

Mrs. Sharma, Mr. Sharma’s wife, a chronic hypochondriac, later changed the cream into skimmed milk powder. The powdered milk, which had to be transported from the plains, lost their powdery finesse by the time they hit the wet green slopes. They floated like tiny, dirty icebergs on the warm tea, refusing to melt away and dissolve. Mrs. Sharma also had the crystalline sugar changed to a white powdery substitute. While she lived, she had been determined to see a size reduction in her husband’s bulging waistline, which not even the best fitting trousers managed to hide. That his protruding proof of appetite, healthy or not, made her look too lean- was her main complaint. Unfortunately though, as I have already mentioned, she had not lived long enough to observe the expected contraction of the waistline in question here. Mr. Sharma, a firm believer of - once a devoted husband and hence always one, continued to add skimmed milk that floated like resilient, dwindling glaciers and the non-sugar as a tribute to her memory.

And one day Dadaji didn’t wake up and Mr. Sharma missed his morning tea.

The next day my father, who was then twelve years old, began serving the morning tea to Mr. Sharma. And that is how my father became a Bahadur. My father inherited not only his father’s post but also his title.

My father married young. He married Ma when he was only eighteen. Ma was no more than sixteen at that time. I was born after two years or two long years depending on who you
asked. My Grandma would make it “the two long years,” as she often did while she lived. She would open her eyes wide and roll them heaven-wards. It was not epilepsy. It was her way of being grateful to God, for his heavenly interjection.

She would end her thanksgiving with the release of deep anguish in the form of a sigh. It was not just any sigh. It was the one practiced and reserved for timely expression of grief caused by the birth of a female child, in this case for my birth.

I think that it was a mix of that, the girl child anguish thing, and pure envy that Grandma felt towards Ma and me. It was not just plain resentment. My father loved Ma and adored me. Not many people loved or respected their wives on the estate. They were ‘their women’, like they were their property to own. I wondered if Dadaji addressed Grandma like that.

Your father is very proud of you, Ma often said, though she didn’t need to. I knew that already. He was also very proud of his tea. No one made tea like my father.

And that summer, it would be acknowledged, and not just by anybody but Tina Memsahib.

* 

Mr. Sharma had his tea with milk and sugar. His son Raj, Tina’s husband, drank only coffee. But it was a dream come true for my father when Tina Memsahib ordered her tea just the way it should be.

“I will have my tea with a teaspoon of sugar and just a hint of lemon.”

Dadaji had learned the art of brewing the perfect cup of Darjeeling tea from Sister Aloysious. She had come to Darjeeling all the way from Wales a very long time ago. The Diocese had sent her on a mission to Darjeeling: to impart pure English education to the locals. Ironically, the locals were too poor to afford the expensive missionary education at the St. John’s
Diocese Day School and Boarding for Boys. The school survived solely on students who came from the rest of the country, from parents who paid huge sums of money to enroll their sons in a boarding school, far from home.

Nevertheless, Sister Aloysious, who had arrived in Darjeeling as a young nun who wore tiny pink satin bows under her drab garb, such was the rumor, had decided to stay on long after the other English teachers and the Brits’ left their beloved Hill station. She said that it would be almost impossible to get a decent cup of Darjeeling tea in Wales. She wasn’t a big fan of Earl Grey, apparently. And moreover, she said, she hated sad brick walls. She would rather die in front of the window of her modest living quarters in Darjeeling, watching the pristine white Himalayan peaks set on fire by the sun, twice a day.

It was she who taught Dadaji the art of brewing the perfect cup of tea. My father had had the opportunity of knowing Sister Aloysious. “Tea,” he would often mimic her sermon like tone, “Should be served in warm teacup made of fine china, with a teaspoon of sparkly white sugar and just a hint, more like just a whiff,” this is when his fingers would drive the unseen, escaping fast, tea fumes towards his nose, just like her, “Of lemon, free of dregs and the color of warm amber, not a shade darker nor lighter. Only the unsophisticated drink tea with milk and sugar.”

Mimicking was easy, making the perfect cup of tea, not so much. It had taken Dadaji several days and even more rejected cups of carefully prepared tea to master the art of tea making, such that pleased Shishter Aloshus, that’s how my grandfather referred to her. It was not an easy task, but Dadaji, the brave, finally accomplished it, so the story goes.

Maybe that’s how he became a Bahadur.

My father learned the art of tea making from Dadaji.
Sister Aloysious was the one who had sent Dadaji with the best recommendation letter to Mr. Sharma. She said she didn’t need his services anymore. She had very little need left. So, Senior Bahadur AKA Dadaji AKA my grandfather took up his position as the overseer of Sharma Tea Estates. It had been disheartening for Senior Bahadur to learn that Mr. Sharma liked his tea like “the unsophisticated”, with milk and sugar.

Dadaji was determined to not give up his learned-the-hard-way special skill. He brewed his own tea like Sister Aloysious had taught him. My father developed a taste for Dadaji’s tea. Father and son brewed tea for each other with the finest Darjeeling tea to practice their skill. Since the best Darjeeling Tea was expensive, as it still is, they limited their indulgence and critical appreciation thereof to Sunday evenings.

My father often complained to Ma, that every time he served tea to Bade Sahib or Mr. Sharma, he felt as if he was serving tea in cheap terracotta pots to tourists by the highway.

“I ought to serve him tea in Kulhars, drink your foul tea and throw away the clay pot,” he said. “Why use fine china?” And finally after so many years of serving tea with milk and sugar and the occasional foul smelling coffee, my father had been given the opportunity to brew tea as it should be: served in a warm fine china cup, with a teaspoon of sugar and a hint, almost a whiff, of lemon that floated sleepily through the air to arouse the small sensory beads in the nostrils, free of dregs, colored like liquid amber, neither too hot nor cold, just warmer than warm.

*

Mr. Sharma loved to talk. And it was father’s unwritten, non-negotiable duty to listen. The weekdays were more tedious than the weekends. Saturdays and Sundays were socializing days. Mr. Sharma would entertain a steady stream of visitors both days, all day long. Which did mean a little respite for father in terms of being the sole listener of endless tirade but also meant
a nonstop supply of refreshments from the kitchen; and tea, with milk and sugar, powdery substitute for some.

It was also slightly easier when his son, Raj visited him once a year. They didn’t get along too well. He worked and lived in New Delhi and visited his father once a year during the summer months.

Summers in New Delhi are all about the hot wind called Loo and extreme dehydration thrown in with inconsistent water supply. Darjeeling, on the other hand, is just the place to be.

The first time I heard about Tina Memsahib was in an overheard conversation between father and Mr. Sharma. I overheard lots of things, most of which I promptly forgot, because I was all over the place all the time. And that was because I spent more than half of my time foraging for my pet goat Lattoo who had an insatiable appetite. His only vocation in life was to eat and excrete dark pellets all over the place. He could do both at the same time too: eat and shit.

I foraged mostly near the Big house. That’s where the big trees were: maple, birch, rhododendron, they were Latto’s favorite. Also nobody ever told me not to. We lived in the staff quarters, behind the Big house. I could see the hill slope down deep into a very green and dense valley from a back door behind our quarters. There were four units with attached bathrooms in the quarters, for four families. Each unit had a bedroom and a kitchen. We were the only occupants of the quarters. Mr. Sharma needed somebody to be within calling distance at night. So Babloo slept on a small makeshift bed outside his room at night. Mr. Sharma was aware that Babloo was ‘slow’, but not that he had only one functioning ear.

“The son is getting married,” Mr. Sharma started one day as father poured his evening tea. “The numbskull has already got married. He is bringing the girl to show… introduce her.”
Numbskull was one of his favorite words. I watched as my father added a dash of milk and a teaspoon of sugar to the golden liquid in the cup, and just like that, like some evil spell brewing in a witch’s cauldron, the amber potion turned a cloudy mess. “They were married… on Sunday…the girls family and friends.” Father handed him the cup. And just like always, he stepped aside to distance himself without getting too far away.

Mr. Sharma carelessly picked up an arrowroot biscuit and dipped it into his cup. He had years of experience and knew that the biscuit would not sustain more than a second of the hot tea soak. He put the dipped end of the biscuit into his mouth and took a big bite. The action left half a moon biscuit in his fingers.

He would dip and eat another biscuit the same way before he finished his tea. He always did that. Then he would cough. Every time I saw Mr. Sharma drink tea, I always expected him to cough out his tea and biscuits, but he never did. Instead he went to the nearest pine bush and spit out a big blob of green phlegm at its roots. Then he would pick up the day’s newspaper, for the second time, probably just to make sure that the news had not changed since he last time he had read it. I always wondered, what he had against the poor pine bush. It wasn’t a bush really. He had Babloo trim it down so often that it never grew up to be a tree.

That day, however, he did not eat another biscuit. He simply sat there for a long time. He had barely touched his tea. The tea had stopped steaming and the sun had begun to go down for the day, leaving behind a splash of diminishing orange glow.

Lattoo had stopped eating, not chewing. I sat and watched the two men: silent dusk silhouettes.
In the distant, I heard my mother call out for me. Father motioned for me to go home. As I left, trying to urge my obstinate pet goat to hurry up and keep pace, I looked back once and saw the two men, still and motionless as darkness intensified around them.

*

The next morning, Mr. Sharma had his tea as usual and spit out a disgusting big blob of green phlegm at the root of the pine. My father just stood by his side, at a respectful distance. He was saying, “I don’t think we should order meat from Ram Das for the party. His meat was too tough the last time.”

“Okay. Order it from the other guy then. What’s his name again?”

“I am not sure. I will find out,” my father replied.

There was going to be a party at the Big house.

My mother had told me stories of huge gatherings of people at the Big house. Stories of all the enormous quantities of food to cut and prepare, the silverware that had to be cleaned and polished, the big tables that had to be scrubbed clean and covered with the best hand embroidered table cloths and all the work that everyone had to put in. I never quite understood who everyone was. The only people I ever saw working at the Big house was my father and Babloo. But all I cared for then was that we were going to have a party, a big party at the Big house.

*

About Lattoo, he was my pet goat. I know this part should have come earlier along with all the other exposition. But I just couldn’t talk about Lattoo before I had introduced my family. Dadaji would roll in his grave if he were in one. Thank God for cremation. A silly billy before him and my father, sacrilege!
I am just exaggerating. He probably would not have cared because he would never read it. And why am I talking about a goat when all this time I have spoken of nothing else but tea? Because he was my pet and like family to me.

And in a way I want to mention him, because apart from my father’s tea triumph, which this story is about, it is also the summer when Lattoo underwent his transformation from the loving pet to the brutish animal.

So, going back to Lattoo- he had just followed me home. That’s what I had told my parents. And that’s the truth. I had lied. The truth was I had forced Lattoo, then a nameless glutinous stray baby goat to follow me. I found him while returning from school one day. He was stretching his neck to pick out some green leaves from a young birch on the mountainside. He was black all over and had a shiny coat that made me want to squeeze oil from it. I had this incredible urge to smell him. H smelled like a goat. I had only to pluck the birch leaves for him to lure him and he had followed me, bleating like a goat.

He followed me home- was the true part.

My parents did not believe the story of a goat following me home like a dog, but my mother thought a black goat was auspicious and that I might be allowed to keep it if no one claimed it. However, they decided it would be solely my responsibility to take care of the goat, which in the meanwhile had begun to consider me the mother figure of its life. The stupid goat! My parents did not want it anywhere near the vegetable patches or the flowering bushes. And so, I had been ordered to hang a bell around its neck for me to keep track of its whereabouts. It also meant that I would have to return home as soon as school got over to free him from his enclosure. It meant no more straying from the path that led back home and finding more goats.

*
So, I was accumulating food for Latto when I saw Tina Memsahib for the first time. Mr. Sharma’s old fiat had given away once again. It would do so every now and then. The uphill drive from the valley to the Big house on the top of the hill was not an easy task. Driver Singh’s was the first head that popped out of the corner where the road made a sharp curve. He hauled two large suitcases, one on his shoulder the other under his arm. The suitcases had wheels. Raj and Tina Memsahib followed him.

Mr. Sharma had spent the entire morning pacing up and down the porch, looking expectantly at the curve on the road at regular intervals. But had retired to his room as soon as he heard driver Singh’s loud vocals complaining about the old car. “Tell Sharma Sahib that the car is stuck near Two Pine Trees, it refuses to budge,” said driver Singh. “I will bring the mechanic tomorrow. He really should get another car.” He spoke to no one in particular, but he knew that the information will be passed on and duly disregarded, as always.

My father went inside to inform Mr. Sharma of the party’s arrival.

Mr. Sharma came out in a while. It was not cold but he had covered his head in a monkey cap, and wrapped a shawl around his shoulders. He looked old. Just a while ago, before he heard Driver Singh, he had been lounging in only his tee. I wondered why he was suddenly cold.

Lattoo had taken the lion share of the visitors’ attention. Tina Memsahib couldn’t stop “how cute” –ing it. The little brat! There was no mention of the nice blue frock with white lacy borders that I was wearing, my best frock, which the stupid goat wanted to chew. It had gotten through a section of the lace.

Mr. Sharma coughed slightly to announce his arrival and presence on the porch. Raj and Tina Memsahib walked towards Mr. Sharma. They bent down to touch his feet and receive his blessings. Mr. Sharma spread his open palms on their heads and gestured for them to get up.
I always thought that receiving blessings was a funny affair. What exactly came out of open palms?

“Bahadur show them to their room.” He went back into the house after that.

*

“I think the man has fallen in love with you.” I heard Raj telling Tina Memsahib. She looked up from the book in her hand. Her eyes looked greener with all the green mountains around her. She adjusted the gold brocade-on-red velvet bookmark to the page she was on and put down the book on the table. It wasn’t cold but she had a shawl loosely wrapped around her. She took a deep breath and smiled at Raj.

“Are you jealous?” She asked.

She walked up to Raj and placed a small peck on his cheek.

Raj blushed. He looked around nervously. He saw me watching him from the shadows of the birch. I blushed. Raj blushed again.

“Baba will be back any minute,” he said.

Tina smiled at him and walked up to the edge of the garden. She wasn’t beautiful. But I found it difficult to take my eyes off her: brown eyes, fair skin, thin lips that disappeared when she pursed them, a small face framed by a tight pony tail, that accentuated her small round face. Her dark hair betrayed her appearance. It seemed to not belong to her. She often caught me staring at her.

I wonder if she knew my thoughts.

She knew me as Gudiya, the caretaker’s daughter, but she insisted on calling me “Sunflower”. I liked that.
My father walked in with the tea tray, an ensemble of pristine white china, golden yellow lemons and thin slices of bright green lime.

My father dutifully poured the tea into a cup.

Tina sipped at her cup of tea, a long and soundless sip. And then she closed her eyes. Just like father did when he made tea for us. She took another small sip and opened her eyes. Slowly. The reflection of the warm liquid fell on her brown eyes and turned them golden brown. It was a split second ephemeral beauty, almost eerie in a way. She lowered the cup and raised her eyes. They were no longer golden brown. She looked at Raj and then at my father.

“This is ... unbelievable,” she said. “I had no idea tea like this could be made. This is drink fit for no less than the Gods.” She smiled at my father. “I feel like I should kiss your hands.”

My father had turned a wild shade of peachy orange. His ears were red. He quickly summoned me from under the shadows of the tree and rather unceremoniously began to pull me towards the house. It was as if my presence had embarrassed him. I protested. I still had to forage for Lattoo. And just then I saw it.

My father was smiling. My father never smiled. In fact, he was the grumpiest man I had ever seen. The only time he appeared to be distantly enjoying a little was when he made his tea for us. But he was smiling, as we moved further into the house, his smile widened. He was happy. It was his happiest day.

Ma was waiting for us. She saw it too.

“Bahadur, what about some coffee for me?” I heard Raj as my father led me away, far away from his scene of embarrassment.

*
Ever since the death of his father, my father had hardly ever got the chance to make tea the way that it should be. Even if he did make it there were no admirers.

“They don’t understand tea. It’s the drink of the great Himalayan God.” He would say. “Its not for mere mortals to understand its refinements.”

And then came Tina Memsahib, like lemon scented mountain fresh air, someone who really understood tea. The glow of happiness was unmistakably visible on his face for all to see. Sometime he made tea for us, my mother and me, very rarely though, and it was hardly a consolation for him. To tell you the truth, I liked tea the way ma made it for her and sometimes me on cold days: with milk and sugar, lots of sugar, cloves, cardamoms and ginger. The terracotta pots we drank them from accentuated its burnt sienna.

*

The next few days were busy, very busy. Even Ma, who hardly ever went to the Big house, was called upon for additional overseeing support. I could never tell if she was happy doing it. She reported back to Tina Memsahib. She too was overseeing the preparations for her own reception. I think the term they, Raj and Tina Memsahib, used was crunch-manpowercrunch. Whatever that meant.

I had never seen such flurry of activity, ever, in the house, although all of it was restricted to the first floor of the Big house. I heard Ma say that there was going to be about twenty-five houseguests. And so one day, Mr. Sharma handed over a big bunch of keys to father and asked him to open up the Big house. He also hired half a dozen laborers to help with the cleaning up. Some building construction contractor friend had helped him out with the men.

So, rooms that had been locked for many years were opened and polished clean for out of town guests, invitees to the reception for the newly weds. Fresh linen had been spread in all the
rooms. The flower decorator came in every other day with a fresh supply of flowers. The flowers would still be good when they were thrown away unceremoniously after only two days. They made a spectacular feast for Lattoo. Most days, his excretory pellets would appear wrapped in pink or red daisy petals.

* 

The big day of the reception was still ten days away.

Mr. Sharma had begun to feel less cold. He went about in only a tee and delegated tasks and ordered the men about, like he probably used to before his retirement. The whole family sitting together in the evenings sipping tea and eating biscuits had become as natural as the green hills around. Tina had introduced the father and son to my father’s beautiful amber tea and Mr. Sharma had taught her the fine art of soaking biscuits in tea. They looked like the happy family on the birthday cake, in the Great Gorkha Bakery showcase, baked and decorated to perfection for all to see and marvel.

Father had taken out his best Gorkha cap. He wore it with a slant, such that it seemed precariously balanced on the edge of his head. It was made out of some sort of furry animal skin, dark chocolate with flecks of white and black all over. It also had a small metal insignia stitched to the visible side: two Kukris laid across on one another, the pride of the brave. The only other time father had worn it was, Ma said, on their wedding day. And the day I was born.

He looked a changed man.

It was as if all the activity around had given his rock like stature a never seen before momentum. Everything about him seemed to be rushing around all over the place, all the time. At one time he would be shouting orders to the hired helps while dictating the grocery list over the phone to the Army Store. It wasn’t an army store really, just a silly name to gain importance
with the locals. But the thing is that never before had I ever heard him raise his voice like he did the other day at Babloo.

Babloo was no doubt a fool and additionally slow, but my father had always been patient with him. He always gave him the simplest of tasks and saw to it that his clumsiness didn’t cause chaos in the otherwise quite household. And anyway it was just a small spot on the teacup. And Tina Memsahib would not have noticed it anyway. He really didn’t have to shout at Babloo like that. I had to spend the entire afternoon consoling him. And finally I had to promise him a Kala Khatta, sweet and sour black candy from my already depleted stock before he would stop howling.

My mom wasn’t too happy either about the whole incident. Apart from that everything else seemed to be under control.

Well mostly. There was one hitch. The butchers of Darjeeling were on a strike, an indefinite one. The government had imposed strict hygiene standards and that according to the Darjeeling Butchers Association was hampering their business. How was the customer going to buy meat without poking the meat hung in the open and test it for freshness? How could the government agency forget that severed goat heads, with a tiny bit of pink tongue carelessly hanging out on display in the show case, was an indication of the approximate time of its last moments on earth? The matter was in truth very simple and should not have taken more than a couple of days to solve. You just had to let them have it their way. But the fact, that it was really too simple a problem affected the efficacy of the problem solvers. And it was unthinkable to not offer several meat dishes along with, once again, several kinds of fish and chicken dishes at a wedding. Neither chicken nor fish were the problem. There were plenty of chickens running around in the kitchen garden. It was Babloo’s daily task to collect their eggs. And butchers didn’t
sell fish. The fish had been special ordered from Calcutta. They were already on a train on their way up to the hills, packed tight in dry ice: stiff silver scales and red garnet eyes looking at nothing. It was the goat meat that was the problem.

“Those vegetarian numbskulls!” I heard Mr. Sharma say.

“It’s actually the Health Minister who is the vegetarian.” Raj said.

“And he has turned the entire office into a vegetarian numbskull brigade. No one seems to want to solve the problem.”

“That’s the problem, father. The system doesn’t work in this country.”

“What do you mean the system doesn’t work? I was in the system. I was the system. Or have you forgotten that I spent ten years as the District Magistrate of Darjeeling before my retirement?” Mr. Sharma muttered. “Talks about system.” I distinctly heard the grumble. “And you sound like you don’t live in the country. Delhi happens to be the capital not only in terms of geography but also when it comes to bureaucratic corruption and inefficiency.”

“I am just saying what everyone says.” Raj added quietly.

“Stop it you two.” Tina Memsahib said out loud to be heard, not to shout. “That’s enough. If the strike doesn’t end we’ll have one less dish. No goat meat curry. Okay?”

“What do you…? What does she mean no goat meat? Raj?” Mr. Sharma looked at Raj. He had the look of disbelief in his eyes. “People from all over the place are going to be at the reception. I have a reputation to maintain. Please explain it to her.”

Tina Memsahib got up and went inside. The father and the son remained seated, quiet. Everything seemed so hushed and peaceful that the matter seemed to have solved itself. How? I don’t know. And then out of nowhere and without any provocation, Lattoo let out this shrill goaty-bleat.
Mr. Sharma’s eyes fell on my corner where I was as usual foraging for Lattoo. He motioned for me to approach him. Lattoo was in the middle of his weekend midday snack and in no mood to let go of the maple leaves he was munching on. I had to forcibly pull him away before I could get to Mr. Sharma. Latto decided to bleat incessantly to complain against my rude-with-goats behavior.

“Go fetch your father.”

I turned toward our quarters where my father was resting. Latto raised his voice as he realized we were headed in the wrong direction.

“And shut that numbskull goat,” Mr. Sharma added.

A goat is always a goat. Latto didn’t want to shut up in spite of my quiet entreaties.

Mr. Sharma walked up to us, bent down to face Lattoo and shouted “Choop.”

He was still a goat.

*

My father was very quite that evening. It was a sudden change. He seemed to have turned back into the somber grumpy man in just an afternoon. My mother had the look in her eyes which said if your father is quiet let us be quiet too and eat in peace without the daily complains. I obeyed. And anyway I had nothing to complain about. She had made my favorite Kichdi, with few vegetables and the lentils were not overdone; just the way I liked it. And I had more potatoes than carrots on my plate. It was then I remembered that Lattoo had never gotten the chance to finish his midday meal. And I had also not fed him in the evening. Usually Lattoo would bleat to remind me of his evening meal. But he had not done so that day.

“I forgot to feed him!”

“What?” My father sounded startled.
“Lattoo. I forgot to feed him.” I got up hastily, leaving behind my unfinished plate. “I am going to feed him.”

“Finish your dinner.” Ma said.

“No, he is hungry.”

I was already half out of the door when I heard my father.

“Get back in here.”

It was a shrill shout in a broken voice, squeaky and harsh. It woke the birds resting on the rhododendron tree. I heard a huge rush of fluttering wings, as I stood rooted to the spot on the doorway. After a while everything was quiet.

“Listen to what your mother is saying.” He said quietly. He didn’t look at me. Ma was looking down. Neither of them wanted to look at me.

I could not move. My legs felt heavy. And for some weird reason I found myself scraping wood chips off the broken door with my nails, like a chisel. It just seemed to be the most natural thing to do.

Father looked up at me and said very quietly, “Eat your dinner. Goats don’t need to eat at night.”

“They are only animals.” He added quietly.

I wanted to say that I always left a little snack for Lattoo at night and it would be always gone by morning. I wanted to tell him that we needed to eat at night. And that my teacher had taught us in school that man is also an animal.

As I dozed off to sleep that night I heard Ma whisper to father.

“What will you tell her tomorrow?”

*
Lattoo was nowhere to be found the next morning. I had not spared a single spot that we had visited while foraging: under the birch trees, near the pale rhododendrons, on the secret ledge near the maple trees where the garden seemed to suddenly vanish but didn’t, in the big kitchen, in my mother’s small kitchen, behind the house on the edge of the slope, under our thatched storehouse, near the Two Pines Trees, where the car had broken down, inside Babloo’s quarters where he liked to munch on his dirty under wear, and in the kitchen garden. I almost set out for the Cactus Park but he didn’t like chewing the thorny stems.

And this was not the first time that he had gone missing. It had never taken me more than thirty minutes to find him or he came bleating for me. His shiny black skin stood out among the green hills. Or his tinkling bell would give him away. I had found his bell on the grass outside our quarters the first thing in the morning. Only I was unable to find Lattoo.

By midday I was equally exasperated and exhausted. I simply could not find him. And to top it, I could not engage the help of either my parents or Babloo. They were all too busy, visibly so, since the reception was only a day away. I had missed school, which my parents had no knowledge of. It meant that I would be received with wooden ruler lashings on when I went back to school without a note from the parents. Our teacher, the same who taught us that we were all animals, believed that if we missed school it was because we wanted to miss it; that we had no respect for education and as a natural subsequent, none for the teacher. Therefore such an offence was corporeally punishable. No valid reason or reasoning would ever persuade him otherwise. We were after all, all animals. I had been out all morning roaming the hillside and I had not eaten. And for quite some time I had been feeling a kind of twisty and nasty churning in my stomach, which also spiraled up on down my throat at unequal intervals. It left a burning sensation there. I had begun to feel dizzy and so I sat under a Rhododendron tree, not too far
away from the Big house, but not close either. It was just not somewhere you would expect a lot of foot traffic. I think I must have fallen asleep for a while because I do not remember how it had all started. I remember the feeling of an internal heave and then falling facedown on a small amount of very bitter and pungent bile.

* 

I am not sure why, but to this day in spite of my semi consciousness, I have a very clear recollection of all that ensued after my small accident under the rhododendron tree. The one part that I don’t remember, however, is how I got home from under the tree. I was told that it was Tina Memsahib who found me lying unconscious under the tree. She lifted and carried me up to a distance before she eventually gave up. That was when she ran back to the Big house and raised the alarm. Raj was not only faster but also stronger than my father and he carried me back to the house. They said that the fever burned my skin and that I was quite delirious. In my state of delirium, I kept calling out for Lattoo where I asked him not to stray too far from me and ordered him to eat the leaves that I had gathered for him. I remember quite clearly the dream that I frequently dreamed while I lay indisposed. It was a most bizarre dream. I was in some kind of a space with no visible source of light, but it wasn’t dark. And I didn’t walk; I floated, with a basket of leaves on my left arm. As I floated I heard a bell ring, a slight, almost subdued tinkling, which when I turned to became a bell with a mouth with neatly arranged smaller bells as teeth. I would then begin feeding the leaves in my basket to the bell. But the bell refused to chew and like a hat with a hole, the leaves would drop from the other end of the bell. At this point I would angrily tug the bell and it would begin to ring very loudly, which would wake me up. I saw the dream several times during my month long recovery.

Apparently, I had caught, or rather the pneumonia had caught up with me.
Ma spent all her time beside me, nursing me back to health. When I was slightly better I asked for Lattoo. She said that he had been found and that he was home waiting for me to return and take care of him again. I promptly dictated a set of instructions for my mother to follow till I was able to handle his responsibilities again. As soon as I seemed to be recovering consistently, Ma wanted me out of the house. I woke up during an afternoon slumber only to find my parents arguing over the fact that I was still at the Big house. Ma was for some reason extremely mad at father. I know that because she kept using the word Bahadur. My Ma considered calling my father Bahadur, by a family member, to be the ultimate form of disrespect. And I had learned it the hard way quite early as a child when it had taken my fancy to imitate Mr. Sharma. Later she explained to me that irrespective of what the whole world thought of or addressed my father as, he was always going to be my father and that I should never disrespect that relation. But in that hushed conversation by my sick bedside that afternoon, Ma called him Bahadur, again and again. My father kept quite the entire time.

It was Tina Memsahib who would not let me be removed from the Big house. She insisted that I stayed there till I was fully recovered. The wedding reception had taken place on the designated date and time, which was two days after Lattoo went missing or the day after my small incident under the tree. The party was over and I had missed it, the guests had all departed and Tina Memsahib had become the official lady of the house. When I could sit up and take my meals by myself, she would join me sometimes. And stay back late to tell me stories till I dozed off.

Unlike my mother’s constant presence, my father had more of float-in-float-out kind of a presence. He was somehow there without actually being there or not there when he was there. It
seemed that my pneumonia had played more havoc with him than me. He looked exhausted and had more of a ghostly presence, literally. And his tea making skills seemed to have taken the greatest hit, but then again, not really perhaps. Well I don’t know how to explain it, it seemed have developed a kind of bias. I use the word bias because his tea tasted just as good to me, but not to all.

Tina Memsaab had spent the whole afternoon by my side, reading me stories from an old and tattered book. It had been green once with gold letters. I think it said Grimm on the cover. So she asked father to bring in her tea in my room. She wanted to have her evening tea with me. And I saw him squeeze the lemon a little harder than usual in her cup and he definitely added an extra spoonful of sugar too. And it was not ‘an accidental one time’. It was definitely deliberate, because he did the same thing even when, on subsequent occasions, he was asked to be careful with the tart lemon and the sugar. He had begun serving tea with lemon instead of lime. It was as if he wanted to make bad tea. Tina memsaahb said nothing.

It took me almost a month to fully recuperate. During the month I took a day-to-day account of what Lattoo had been fed and how he was doing and if it appeared that he missed me. Ma usually answered them with single yeses or nos. She did mention that he has been eating a lot and that had doubled in size but nothing had prepared me for how I found him.

* 

He seemed to have really grown. That much was true. His teeth were larger and dirtier. He still ate and excreted all the time but his coat had lost its beautiful luster and he was almost ready to chew my hand off when I tried to feed him for the first time after a month. And it was his favorite maple leaf. My month long indisposition had changed him. He was a changed goat.
I resumed school and was happy to provide my friends with an accurate, almost accurate account of my month long invalidity. I thought it best to skip a little here and there and let the minuscule incident under the tree remain unmentioned. But each time I spoke about my sickness, it got a bit more severe than before.

I would be sad when ever I went to feed Lattoo but with time I just learned to ignore him. And finally, as God had always intended, the responsibility to take care of Lattoo fell entirely on my father, who, strangely enough, was happy to do it.

After a few days, Tina Memsahib and Raj went back to Delhi. She left me a picture. It was a very bare picture and quite dark. It only had Lattoo and me. I was feeding Lattoo in the picture and the setting sun was behind us. I didn’t know that such a photo had been taken. But it must have been some time during the first few days of their stay. Lattoo was not his later conceived menacing self.

I was at school when they left and I never saw her again. Very soon Mr. Sharma packed his bags and left for Delhi. I don’t know if he ever came back because around the same time things changed for my father and us. The subtle change in his demeanor that I had noticed that day when he made tea for Tina Memsahib had continued its course and eventually made him leave Darjeeling. We left Lattoo with Babloo and promised to come back for him as soon as possible; my father promised. I didn’t care for him any more. We moved to Calcutta where my father took up a new job as an assistant salesman at an upcoming jewelry chain. Eventually people bought lots of jewels and father was made the manger at one of their new stores.

We never went back to Darjeeling. I don’t know what happened to Babloo or Lattoo. I was admitted to a new school where I learned to speak English, so that people would call me a
Memsahib, father said. Ma was happy too. No body referred to him as *Bahadur* in the new city. People called him by his name: Ajay.

***
“And then just like that, I came out of the dark. And then there was the softest plop.”

“Did you really hear the plop, Cocoa?” asked Tully.

“Let her finish, will you? Go on Cocoa,” snapped Pipli. She took another big bite of the chocolate muffin. The muffin was dry, slightly salty, and it crumbled in her hands.

“You know, I’d rather not.” Cocoa opened the yellow flap of her fading back sack full of books and notebooks. “I don’t think I want to waste my story, my true story, on you. And besides I need to get back home. Ma said they are going to deliver the big cake today.”

“Can I come too?” asked Tully. Her eyes shone like white plastic ping pong balls about to pop.


Tully bit into her cookie; it was chocolate. She had wanted to take it home and save it for after dinner.

“Not much. I’ll tell you in short.” Cocoa said in a punishing tone. She picked up her bag and slung it on her right shoulder and flipped back her hair with a gentle stroke of her forefingers.

She watched as Pipli and Tully sucked in her graceful movement with fascination. She always made the fashion statement. And, the right shoulder it would have to be. Her left shoulder refused to carry any weight. The bulge refused to go. In fact it seemed to have grown in size. Soon the extra shirts and tees would not be able to hide it anymore.

“Then I got stuck and no amount of pushing, pulling or twisting could get me out. The doctors were dumfounded and Ma began to pray to the Cocoa God.”
“Why did your mother pray to the Cocoa God?” asked Tully, her mouth full of chalky cookie paste.

“Hush up, Tully. Or go home.”

“You know if you want to know then you need to stop interrupting me. I really want to go home.”

“Sorry Cocoa.” Pipli glared at Tully.

“To answer your silly question, Tully, we are bakers. We bake big and sweet chocolate cakes and we pray to Cocoa God.” Cocoa coughed and paused before she said Cocoa God. “As Ma prayed to Cocoa God, something incredible happened. All the doctors and nurses, mind you, that there were more than a dozen of them in the room at that time from this town and the big city. There were six doctors and nurses on each side of Ma’s bed.”

“Wow! That’s twenty four,” said Tully.

Cocoa smiled. Good girl Tully. “Yes,” she said. “So, I was stuck in that position for hours and they were not able to get me out. And then he appeared.”

“Who?”

“The chocolate angel.” Cocoa paused for a deep breath. “All the twenty-four doctors and nurses saw him. He was beautiful. He wore a brown silk chocolate robe and his hair was long and flowing chocolate.”

“His hair was made of chocolate too?” asked Tully.

“And his skin too. He came and touched Ma’s forehead. He left her his mark and whispered something into her ears.”

“What?” Asked Pipli.

“What mark Cocoa?” Tully had finished half of the cookie.
“It is a sacred mark, Ma says. She keeps it hidden most of the time; otherwise it will lose its power.” Cocoa said proudly. “Only when she bakes, she ties her hair back so that the chocolate mark can guide and help her. And so that she never forgets all the secret recipes.”

“Are all the chocolate recipes hidden there?” Asked Tully.

“What did the angel tell her?” Pipli sounded annoyed. She licked the muffin crumbs off her fingers.

“I don’t know. No one knows. Even Ma does not remember. But then it happened. I glided out in to the hands of the waiting nurse’s palms and after me gushed out the sweetest chocolate that one has never seen before or after that day.”

“What happened to all that chocolate?” asked Tully. She was still holding on to the unfinished cookie.

“I don’t know. Maybe they ate it.”

“Yuck,” Pipli made a belching noise and spit nothing on the ground. “We should go now Tully.”

“I have to run. They must have already got the cake out and ready.” Cocoa shifted her fading yellow sack to the other shoulder. Pipli and Tully, sisters, no one knew their last name, were gone.

“Stupid.” Cocoa said out loud.

Tomorrow, she thought, she would have some chocolate cake and lemon tarts. She had seen Ma bake a big batch of chocolate cakes and lemon tarts the day before yesterday. There would be some left over for her to take to school tomorrow. There were always some leftovers. There were always lots of leftovers. Maybe if there were enough of them she would invite two more girls to walk back from school and share her stack.
Tomorrow, she decided she would tell them the truth about her birth, the full truth. She would tell them about the bitter sweet chocolate that gushed out of mother and her chocolate breast milk.

*  

“Why didn’t we just go to the bakery?” asked Tully.

“What good is that?” Pipli took a big bite out of Tully’s cookie.

“We could see the really big cake?”

Pipli stuck out her tongue at Tully. She was two years younger to her and she was responsible for her. She hated it. She hated her sister. “Stupid.” She said.

“Is that why Cocoa is brown?” Asked Tully. She watched as Pipli finished the remaining half of her cookie.

“What, why?”

“Cocoa and the Chocolate God.”

“Stupid. Everyone knows Cocoa’s mother hates her.”

*  

Cocoa’s mother was white. As snow. Her name was Raisin.

She was not whitey white white.

Or maybe she was whitey white white. Okay, she was.

Raisin’s mother was whitey white. Her grammy was whitey white white. She knew. She has seen it with her own eyes.

Raisin’s father was white. Her mother’s father was white. She had been told. Cocoa’s father was white. Cocoa had been told.

Cocoa was brown.
White Chocolate Bakery was the only Bakery in Mandi. It was the only bakery on the beach. It sold chocolate cake that smelled like the dull green sea. Its cookies were best eaten dried for a day under the hot Goan sun. It made them taste of the sun and the sea.

The store had belonged to a Mr. White from England who sold it to a Mr. Branco from Portugal, who before packing of his entire family and shipping them off to Portugal across the seas sold it to Raisin’s Grammy.

Raisin’s Grammy and Raisin’s mother perfected recipes for years. They used chocolate, dark brown chocolate, for their recipes. Raisin followed those recipes, word for word, ounce by ounce.

They never used white chocolate.

Years ago green coconut trees with dark brown barks lined the beach. There were many trees. There was a lot of beach. The store was beside a rough sidewalk on the beach. The sidewalk was gone. The store was truly on the beach now. It had taken it years to get there.

“And one day it will swim away.” Raisin complained to no one and everyone. “It wants to go back to the English master. It wants to swim away.”

But Bubba thought the opposite. “You are wrong Misses. The bakery does not want to go anywhere. Look how deep it has sunk into the sand?”

Bubba worked at the bakery. He was responsible for putting and taking out the heavy cake tins and loaf pans in and out of the hot brick oven. The heat of the oven had slow tanned his skin. Burned his hair. But one could still see white skin near his hairline.
Bubba’s father Bubba, worked at the bakery before him. Bubba’s father’s father Bubba, before him. They all had slow tanned orange skin, burned hair and white hairlines.

Bubba lived next door to Raisin and Cocoa in what was once the outhouse of the property. It was the first house Cocoa had drawn using her new box of crayons in her art class: a small room with two yellow windows, a red door, green roof, and a gray something of a porch. Bubba kept the windows closed. The salty, moist air, he said, would destroy his things. The rusty tin roof was overgrown with squash that were always too many to eat.

Bubba lived alone. In the evenings, he sat on his gray something of a porch, and told stories to no one.

Sometimes Cocoa listened to him, she like his stories.

He told stories of, “white beautiful people with wings, as light as feather, as white as silvery snow. They lived in the land of silk, under the evil queen of satin.” Cocoa would ask, “Why is she the queen of satin if she is in the land of silk? Why is she evil when satin is so soft?” But Bubba would go on without answering, “She wore a red velvet hat with black diamond buttons and a white cotton undershirt to court everyday.” He never answered her. “The queen liked to drink hot pepper with a hint of chocolate and cinnamon.” Cocoa never heard the ending of any of his stories. She would be called back before any of his stories ended. Bubba would still be sitting on the gray, cracked something of a porch that had half sunk deep into the sand, when she went to bed. She wondered where Bubba’s stories went on to end. As she went to bed, she strained her ears for some words that she hoped the sea breeze would carry to her. But nothing ever did.

*
Raisin stood naked in front of her oval mirror. Four tiaras, rusty tiaras, wood curved like tiaras held the mirror between them. A faint shade of gold lingered in between the curves.

The smell of fresh baked bread filled the house.

Her jet-black hair stood out against around her white skin. Her hair as dark as a clear night, her skin as white as bleached, enriched flour. The razor thin lines on her forehead did not match the down turned corners of her mouth. Her lips were pink, bubblegum pink, Ella Pretty in Pink, 303. She never took it off. Her neck looked noosed. Mismatched matched.

She cupped her breast and lifted them. Up. She let them go. Down.

Up then down.

She ran her fingertip along the intricate weaved stretch lines on her belly, like tributaries and distributaries that ran through a delta. They felt uneven, smooth and dry. They looked like the little unseen brown mark, like a brush stroke of chocolate, on the corner of her forehead, hidden under her jet-black hair. They matched.

“Ma,” she heard.

She saw Cocoa stand outside her bedroom door in the mirror.

Cocoa looked down, “the big cake,” she said.

Raisin put on her work frock. It used to be her Sunday frock. Splashes of batter made it look like a collage without a theme. The belts were gone, long gone, the frock no longer showed, it covered. She walked up to Cocoa, “It’s gone,” she said.

* 

“Tell me a story, Ma.”
It never gets dark enough when you live by the sea. Dark silver blue light filled the small room. The sky reflecting off the water made it blue, the foam made it silver. Cocoa played catch-catch with the dancing shadows of the coconut trees.

“Do you know the story about the evil queen of satin who lived in the land of silk?”

“No.”

“It is Bubba’s story.” Cocoa turned away from the dancing shadows of the coconut tree. Outside the window she saw Bubba sitting on his gray something of a porch, facing the sea. He looked like a question mark in the distance. Cocoa hugged her mother’s waist.

“Tell me how I was born.”

“You already know that. You are a big girl now.”

“Tell me again. Please.”

“Will you go to sleep after that?”

“Yes.”

“It was not a rainy day, the day you were born. It was very sunny.” Raisin leaned up on her elbow. Cocoa could no longer see Bubba. It did not matter.

“I was making the most exquisite cake, a chocolate cake, a huge chocolate cake, for a wedding. I had chocolate flavored royal icing for the decoration. And I had hand sculpted the chocolate bride and groom.”

“What about the fondant? Had you covered the cake with fondant?”

“No. But I was about to. The fondant was beige.”

“I don’t like beige, Ma.”

“Neither do I, but if the customer wants, I give it to them”

“Was there really twenty four doctors in the room when I was born?”
“No jumping ahead.”

“Tell me about the angel, Ma.”

“What about the rest of the story?”

“The angel first.”

“Okay. The angel sat near my head and touched my forehead.”

“What happened before that?”

“Cocoa, you have to learn to be patient.”

“Okay.”

“You were not coming out. And the doctors thought that I was losing consciousness. But I was actually asleep. And I was dreaming of the beautiful chocolate cake that I had to finish covering with the fondant and design with the icing. In the dream I began to eat the cake and it was the best cake of this world. Then I felt a very soft touch on my forehead. As soft as”

“Warm yeast dough.” Cocoa was sitting up now.

“Yes. And sticky like honey. Like chocolate syrup.”

“Praying to the Chocolate God then,” yawn swallowed Cocoa’s question.

“Yes.” Raisin said quietly. “Lay down Cocoa. I will run my fingers through your hair.” Cocoa lay down; she pressed her face near her mother’s bosom. It smelled like chocolate. She hugged her around the waist. It felt sticky and cool. “The Chocolate God sent his angel to you.”

“Yes.” Raisin kissed Cocoa’s head. “The angel sat beside my head while I slept. His touch was the softest I had ever felt. I opened my eyes to see him. But he did not want me to see him. He closed my eyes shut.”

“Hmmm,” said Cocoa.
“But I wanted to see him anyway. So I opened my eyes again. I think the angel got angry. I felt warm sticky chocolate running all over my face. Soon my face was covered with the chocolate and I could not open my eyes.”

“Hmm,” came Cocoa’s soft response.

“The doctors were too busy with bringing you out in to the world to notice. But I frantically tried to clear my face of the dark chocolate. And most of it was gone.” Raisin touched the corner of her forehead. Her hair was tied back. “The angel was angry. And then he brought his face close to my ears.”

Cocoa was asleep. She breathed like the sea.

Raisin went to the mirror. She closed her eyes and touched the corner of her forehead and felt chocolate mark that she knew was there. She looked out the window. She had never been able to finish the story. Cocoa always fell asleep before she was born. She went back to the bed and lay down beside her daughter. She took her lips near Cocoa’s ears and whispered, “Brown people have brown angels.”

*

Cocoa’s bulge grew in size. Every single day, like a baby feeding inside the womb, like fractions, in fractions, it multiplied. She woke up with the lightness of weight on her back every morning.

At night she dreamt of brown snowflakes falling around her. They fell on her skin and melted away like silk, cool and drowsy.

In the morning, she told her dream to Rasin.

Raisin packed her a pack of left over cookies and cakes and sent her off to school.

In the evening, she narrated the dream to Bubba.
Bubba told stories of “green squash flat cake with honey cream filling” to the sea.

She found a feather one day. A tiny brown feather as light as the snowflakes of her dreams, under her bed. She didn’t know why she was under her bed. She was sleeping and then she woke up.

She showed the tiny light brown feather to Raisin.

Raisin packed her a box of left over tarts and sent her off to school.

She showed the tiny light brown feather, which looked like the light that reflected of Raisin’s hair in the light, to Bubba.

Bubba told stories of the snowflake queen. “She wore a crown of lead diamonds on her head,” he told the sea.

She found two light brown light feathers another day.

She found three light brown feathers another day.

She pressed them inside a thick volume of *Fairy Tales of The World*. She checked on them after a week. The feathers were gone; two blank pages between two stories were tinted brown.

Cocoa’s bulge didn’t disappear.

One night Cocoa dreamt she was flying. She saw the tiny little figure of Bubba sitting under a roof overgrown with green squash, looking at the sea, telling stories of “brown feathers as soft as satin, as smooth as silk, that felt like powdered air.” She saw her mother working with chocolate, finishing a chocolate angel.

She told the dream to Raisin.

Raisin packed her some soggy cookies and sent her off to school.
Cocoa hated soggy cookies. Raisin made one hundred cookies a day when it was sunny. She made one hundred cookies a day when it rained. The monsoons had arrived. Raisin would make one hundred cookies everyday. Cocoa hated soggy cookies.

One night it rained. The coconut trees rocked and swayed. They bent all the way down to stoop down and kiss cocoa on her forehead. They stopped outside her window. They saw her sleeping and hushed themselves quietly back on their feet. Cocoa slept and dreamt. She was flying again, but this time she felt heavy, and wet, like some thing was dragging her down, drowning her. Bubba told his stories to the sea. She called out for help. His stories went on. Her mother took out a batch of fresh baked cookies from the big old brick oven. They crumbled. She dipped them in the sea to make them moist. She didn’t see Cocoa as she drowned. Cocoa woke up scared. Her body felt heavy. Her thighs felt sticky. She hid herself in the corner and wept. Raisin made one hundred cookies.

In the morning, Cocoa’s room was full of feathers, hundreds and hundreds of light brown light feather as light as powdered air. They were beautiful brown feathers. She went to the oval mirror on the wall. She looked at herself in the mirror. Two little brown wings, brown feathers as light as feather stuck out of her back. She tried to move them; they didn’t move. She tried to touch them; she couldn’t reach them. Two little useless wings with brown feathers as light as air stuck out of her back. Cocoa’s bulge had shifted. She hid herself in the corner.

Raisin came up to check on Cocoa when she didn’t respond to her. She found her sitting beside the window, with the big volume of *Fairy Tales of the World* on her lap. All around her were light brown light feathers.

Cocoa turned her back to Raisin. She showed her puny little wings to her mother.

“Are they beautiful?” Cocoa asked.
Raisin saw the tiny little brown wings on her back. She called for Bubba. Bubba came up after a while. It always took him a while to get anywhere. Bubba looked at Cocoa and left. When Bubba did not return and a while had gone by, Raisin got her shiny serrated bread knife and sawed off the wings. She packed Cocoa some soggy cookies and sent her off to school.

Bubba was nowhere to be seen for the rest of the day.

Cocoa didn’t dream that night.

* 

“We want a white cake,” the father and the mother reiterated. They spoke at the same time, “a three tier cake, like a wedding cake,” they pointed to the showpiece on the windowsill, “just like that; only white, and not beige.” They spoke at the same time.

“But that is a chocolate cake, inside,” Raisin said. “Do you want it to be chocolate inside?”

The mother and the father looked at each other. “Don’t care what’s inside. The outside has to be white,” they said and looked at their albino daughter. The mother bent down and hugged her. She squeezed her tight, the child squealed, in delight.

“I want an angel on the top,” the little girl said, “a chocolate angel on the white cake. Pretty angel for pretty cake.”

Raisin looked at the father and the mother, they were dressed in white. They nodded. “You will have the prettiest angel of all on your cake,” she said.

“The party is on Saturday,” they said.

“Will be ready by Friday,” Raisin said.
She watched the father, the mother, and the little child, all white; walk out in to the bleached sunshine.

*

“The waves are really big today,” Cocoa said to Bubba.

“The queen ordered the felling of all mulberry trees in the land. She didn’t want any more silk. She wanted the silkworms to eat jute.”

“She can’t tell the worms what to eat,” Cocoa protested.

“The people chopped down the mulberry trees and the silkworms crawled to the river to feed on jute.”

“You think a big wave might crush our house,” Cocoa looked at her tiny house. She turned and saw the big sea. Raisin was inside, baking a three-tier cake, a white cake, a chocolate cake with white icing and a chocolate angel. “The worms will get an upset stomach,” Cocoa thought out loud.

“And the silkworms began to make silk out of jute.”

“I think, your house will stay if the sea comes to it. All those green squash will hold it down.” Cocoa walked around the Bubba’s house; the red windows were closed and she counted the squash. “About fifty, I think. Big ones.”

Cocoa touched her back. She looked at the sea. It looked gray. It looked green. The coconut trees whispered among themselves, loud whispers. Cocoa walked back to her house. It was warm inside the kitchen. It felt hot in front of the oven. She stood with her back to the hot, but cooling down oven. She felt warm.

“It hurts Ma,” she said.
“I have to get chocolate for the angel,” she felt Cocoa’s back at the spots where she thought it hurt, “I will take a closer look when I get back,” she said. Raisin kissed Cocoa on her forehead and walked out under the dark sky.

The kitchen smelled of cake, bitter sweet, salty chocolate cake. Cocoa saw the three cakes of the three-tier chocolate cake on the worn out wooden table. The table’s surface was splattered with dark brown sticky batter. Thick, chalky white icing covered the cakes. The whiteness absorbed the dark clouds outside.

Cocoa walked out, back to Bubba.

“I don’t like white cakes,” she complained to Bubba, “they look sad.”

Cocoa looked at Bubba. He was looking at the sea. Cocoa turned to the sea. She saw what he saw.

* 

Cocoa did not remember the exact moment when she began to fly. All she remembered was the big dark wall of salty sea green slime, that left a scratchy feeling. She woke up to scratching. She woke with a lightness that made her forget to scratch. The bleached yellow sun against a blanket of consistent blue warmed her back. Below her, the green waters were at peace, in their place, flat and level. She saw her house, it doors open to the sea, welcoming, beckoning for more. She saw Bubba, sitting like a question among the green squash he refused to cook, to share, and staring out at the sea. The coconut trees stood lighter and taller. Their fruits lay on the beach like embedded beads.

* 

Raisin returned to an empty house. It was half a house. It was half a kitchen.
The back of the house, which faced the sea, was gone. The wooden table splattered with cake batter was gone. The cake was gone. The brick oven was gone.

Cocoa was gone. Raisin knew; she was gone. She smelled the sea.

Bubba sat on his wet cemented patio. The red windows of his house were open. The green squash groveled in the wet sand. Their sandy roots stuck out.

Bubba motioned for Raisin to join him on his wet cement patio. She sat beside him. He looked up. Raisin looked up. The sky was clear blue, bright white puffy clouds as light as powdered air skimmed the sky, some like orphans, others not. The sky rained light as powdered air, soft brown feathers.

Raisin knew Cocoa would come back.

Raisin smiled. She waited.

They waited.

***
“One, two, three.”

Rathin counted his three dips into the cool waters of the Hoogly just as the eastern horizon turned a deep orange. His timing was perfect.

The Hoogly is a tributary of the Ganges and hence considered holy enough, holy by virtue of association. It was always three dips in the river for Rathin. He uttered the *Surya Mantra* loud enough for only him, while the sun rose from its leisurely soak into the cool waters of the Ganges that did nothing to cool it.

He navigated the slippery algae green steps on a tiptoe and came up near Buri Ma, the old lady who watched over his clothes while he took his dips. For the past twenty years her blind eyes had looked over his clothes. For the past twenty years he had tipped her a rupee every morning. Inflation had turned a generous tip into one that was stingy.

“How much did it cost this time?” she asked.

“Buri Ma,” he said softly. The old lady opened her blind eyes. Rathin put a rupee in her calloused dry palm. She crumpled the note and closed her eyes again. It wasn’t morning yet for her.

It took him fifteen minutes to get to the river *ghat* every morning from his apartment on Royd Street, another fifteen or twenty to return, ten minutes for his dips and an additional ten for Poltu to finish his tea.

He should have fired his driver Poltu a long time ago. He could have. But no one handled his 1978 Fiat, a paternal inheritance, better. So Rathin allowed Poltu his leisurely morning tea while he waited in his car.

Most days were okay. The smell of the tea didn’t bother him as much. But some mornings, strong breezy mornings, things got difficult to handle. The subtle aroma of the dried
leaves that also smelled like the mountains and water of the Himalayas, on breezy days made him want to run back to the river and dip his nose under the water till his nostrils got cleansed of the sinful smell. Rathin didn’t drink tea.

He had not drunk any tea for a very long time. He had not sipped any tea in the last twenty years.

He looked at his watch. It said seven thirty. He fidgeted a while with his cell phone before putting it down. Outside the car, he could hear Poltu’s boisterous voice. He was in one of his early morning story telling moods. He had his audience absolutely engrossed in his narrative. Rathin picked up his cell phone again and dialed a number.

“Mr. Lahiri? Rathin this side…I woke up long ago…So the papers are final…And does it say last will and testament…No. No. I have no intention of committing suicide. Just in case…Okay then I’ll come over this afternoon.” Most people who knew Rathin would agree that he loved order, worshipped predictability, and as a fitting complement loathed surprises.

Poltu drove the 1978 Fiat car back to 36/1 Royd Street. He parked the car outside the ancient red brick mansion, in front of a tiny wicket gate. Rathin went through the entrance while Poltu parked the car on Royd Street.

* 

Miss Angela stood by the dry water fountain in the middle of the huge courtyard, inside the huge mansion. The mansion was less red and greener on the inside, green plants flecked with white painted walls and shiny old iron grills. It looked like a ‘Limited Edition Jungle Theme’ chessboard.

“How can I keep the fountain on and running with the amount of water the corporation allots us?” Miss Angela complained to the mechanic, who as it seemed was trying to get the
fountain to guzzle and gush water again. Miss Angela hovered over him in her baby pink pinafore.

“Here, ask Mr. Rathin,” she turned to Rathin. “Tell him how often you have to go to work without a bath in the mornings.”

Rathin nodded his head. He ran his fingers through his wet hair.

“See. What did I tell you? Miss Angela went on, “and he has to go to the University. To teach.”

“Miss Angela I will send you this month’s rent.” Rathin said and turned to leave.

“Don’t worry. I’ll come and get it from you Mr. Rathin. And I’ll also bring you some cake. It’s lemon this time with soufflé filling. And a cherry topping.” She added.

*

“Do you remember the day you moved in to this apartment, Mr. Rathin?” Miss Angela asked as she set the silver rimmed white china plate on the table by the foyer. A pale yellow triangle with neat lemon yellow fillings rested on the plate. A bright red cherry, seeping in red syrup that ran down the cake’s sides, sat in its center. The plate tinkled like a chime. Miss Angela noticed her name neatly printed on a check, lying there all by itself on one corner of the foyer. Shadows of the table’s elegant carvings fell on the check. She left it there.

“It was June. Sweltering heat. Power cut. General strike. I was amazed that you could make it.”

“It doesn’t take much to carry a suitcase and some boxes of books. I convinced a Rickshaw,” said Rathin. “And Royd Street was too far from my fathers house.”

“Yes. I remember. You had just got a job teaching at the University. And your father had passed away.”
Rathin swallowed. He had just graduated from the Calcutta University and his father had passed away while he was on a vacation in Darjeeling with his classmates.

“Yes,” he whispered.

The horizon was dusky orange; the sky dusty gray sky blue. No one talked.

“I will go now. It’s late.” She said. “And a fine gentleman like you shouldn’t receive me after dark,” she added mockingly.

Miss Angela strained her eyes to catch anything that might seem like a faint smile across Rathin’s face. She spotted nothing. She looked around her. “It’s been twenty years Mr. Rathin. Your apartment is as clean and spotless as the day you moved in.” She stopped. “It’s empty. It’s time to let go.” She picked up the check on her way out.

“Don’t forget the cake. It has a cherry on top.” She added.

“It was July, Miss Angela.” Rathin walked up to the foyer and picked up the silver-trim-white-china plate. He took it to the kitchen and dumped the cake in to the trash. He washed the plate, wiped it dry and left in on the beautiful table by the foyer. Miss Angela had spare keys.

*

36/1 Royd Street took the corner plot on the street before it broadened in width and became Eliot Road. It was a big L shaped, five storey British Colonial red brick mansion, standing tall and resolute among its more modern mocking skyscraping peers. The annual monsoon left behind marks of its heavy-handedness on the buildings exterior every year. The first showers washed down summer debris from the rooftops and bleached the bright red paint into a faded smear. It would be repainted before the next monsoonal lash and then painted again, like every other year and after. The rickety old rusting drainpipes some how managed to hold
their heads up high and continued to substantially add to the flooded streets. Parisian looking
dainty balconies with discolored grills, layered with years of collected dust and automobile
exhaust overlooked the street. If one had the time, one could still appreciate the beautiful details
that were curved on their concrete supports. Many years back, the buildings around were not as
tall and the few passing cars would envy the sophistication of the men and women who sat on
those balconies sipping their evening teas and watching Calcutta come alive at twilight. No one
saw anyone standing on the balconies anymore.

Time rushed by down on the streets while the mansion stood there, quiet and somber with
no outward appearance of life. The prospering salesman who visited twice a month to sell
household cleaning products, and the vegetable vendor with his hand pushed cart who came
every other day, knew this to be not true. The trick was to find the entrance to the mansion,
which one could if he didn’t look for it or if he knew it.

There was no magic in the secret, simply a matter of perspective.

Miss Angela was the landlady to the fifteen tenants who lived there; some had watched
Miss Angela morphing from a middle-aged woman to a menopausal one- still shiny and bright,
albeit under the hormonal control. Others were newer.

The mansion, as a lot of people believed with conviction, was her inheritance from the
madam she had trained under. The believers, a group that included Mr. Murtaza, owner of
Jewish Bakery, Roshan Lal Panwalla of Real Benarasi Paan Melts In Your Mouth and Jatin of
Rakhaal Babu's Indian Sweet Shop, were all as old as redwood tree inhabitants of Royd Street.
They all agreed that Miss Angela was not her real name.

*
Rathin knew that he had to somehow come up with something ingenious. He simply must not go to Darjeeling. He could not. He had managed to dodge the department head on previous accounts but this time he was absolutely insistent that Rathin must accompany the students on their Annual Biodiversity Educational Tour and Excursion.

“Educational tour? Bull,” said Rathin out loud for all to hear. “The only thing those sheep want to do are smoke, drink and collect panties as souvenirs.”

“Now, that is a very strong statement Rathin da,” said Gautam, the new reader of the department. “Surely, you don’t think that our students are that crass.”

Rathin glanced at the figure sitting on the wheel chair. A clean-shaven face with only a goatie for facial hair, (eyebrows too), his left leg in what was once chalk white plaster and now riddled with well wishes from well-wishers, gleamed at him.

“I’ve never heard such strong comments from you in all the months that I’ve been here.” Gautam wheeled his chair closer to Rathin.

“You haven’t been around for long.” Rathin turned away from Gautam. He touched his ears. They felt warm.

“True. But you don’t strike like a person who’d say something like that.”

“Easy for you to say. You are the one who is not going to Darjeeling.” Rathin turned towards Gautam. His eyes shone like eyes about to cry. He did not cry.

“Rathin da, you know I’d have loved to go. But my wife is driving me around town, dropping me at and picking up from work. And she hates it.” Gautam reached for his walking stick and stood up on his good left leg. “Trust me.” He stretched his hands and arched his back. “There’s nothing better I’d like than to get out of this invalid chair.”
“Why do sane minded people like you play football? Why can’t you stay home and watch some good old Bengali movies?” Rathin picked up his portfolio bag; the day’s assignments stuck out like white peaks, and walked out of the staff room. He had packing to do. The train left in five hours.

“If we did, people like you would never go to Darjeeling Rathin da.” Gautam shouted as Rathin closed the grilled elevator gates.

* 

It was not easy for Rathin to relax outside the confines of his bedroom. It was not as much a matter of comfort as a case of domesticated bachelorhood, or undomesticated. On the train, he was at the mercy of a larger mass. And without the protection and security of the heavy curtains that hung in his bedroom and absorbed the chaos around him, he felt naked.

Sleep, he had imagined, recreating a long past experience, would be easy to come. He soon realized that the constant cradling and the consistent koo-jhik-jhik of the train were inconsistent when it came to their effects on people, or on the same people. The rocking motion that soothed toddlers and elderly to sleep only seemed to heighten excitement among the twenty some things of his field trip group. No amount of sleepy grunts from disgruntled fellow passengers could appeal to their inconsiderate selves, as they went on with their nightlong card games and caffeinated revelry.

Rathin was probably the first passenger in their compartment to notice the few clouds that free floated in the sky, changed their shapes, detached from each other and resized, all the while absorbing and reflecting the different shades of the red dawn. In a few hours, the clouds would dissipate and disappear, the red sky would turn into a smoky bleached blue and Rathin and his
group would finally arrive at New Jalpaiguri Station. After that Darjeeling would only be a few hours drive away. Rathin shivered at the thought.

The bus that took the educational group up the meandering road, up to the mountains, nearer to heaven, was a retired video luxury coach. It had no video or TV and had a big rectangular emptiness in place of an air conditioner. What it did have, were carefully embedded remnants from the bus’s previous passengers, a few head strong peanut shells stuck forever in the patchwork leather upholstery, almost dry orange peel, a passenger provoking bad sound system and a driver mercifully dressed, in only khaki trousers, and unlaced boots. However, the driver turned out to be one of the less sociable ones and he chose to play a local station that had on an infinite loop a mournful classical piece. None of the sleep deprived passengers minded the arrangement very much and promptly went of to sleep.

* 

Rathin stayed in his room for the next two days. “Accompanying doesn’t mean fooling around,” he told himself, “they can do that with the Sharma, the other accompanying professor.” No one missed him, he thought and closed his eyes.

“Sir. Football.” He had not locked his door and before he knew it he had been shoulder lifted outside his small hotel room, onto the huge football field in front.

The excited cacophony of students, who wanted nothing more than to play football, drowned his protests and before he knew it he was at the center field, staring at a black and white checkered ball. He hadn’t kicked at a ball for twenty years. He looked around- Sharma stood at the little tea stall by the edge of the field. He sipped tea from a Kulhar. Girls, some he recognized as his students, giggled. Their glass bangles made music out of the noise. Sharma, had finished
his tea, crushed the helpless little clay pot under his heavy boots and was now coming towards
him. His gait meant business.

“Some football Rathin.” His breath smelled of tea.

“I don’t play.”

“You don’t drink tea either. There’s always a first time.”

*

Rathin had not realized how fast he had been running. He nearly fainted when he stopped
near the Rhododendron. The tree was in full bloom. It was all pink and no green. He didn’t want
to be there. He wanted to get away from it all. He sat under the tree.

He had not meant to kick the ball. He did not think that it was going to be so powerful a
shot that it would go right through the goal post. It was just a soft kick. “Why did that stupid
Sharma keep talking to him about tea; after all these years?”

A little twig landed on his head.

He stood up and faced the tree. “I do not play football. I do not drink tea. I do not stay
back an extra day after an excursion and I do not look at girls. And my father is dead. All by
himself.” He told the tree. “So don’t drop twigs on my head.”

His looked down. He got up and hugged the tree. He patted the thick bark paternally. He
put his arms around the thick bark and he cried.

*

It was the last day of the field trip. He had survived the last four days and in a few hours.
it would be over. No one spoke about the football match where Rathin had scored a goal for the
opponents or mentioned how they found him sleeping under a rhododendron tree. Soon, he
would be free to go back to the surprise-less routine he had lived for the past twenty years, to the
peaceful predictability of finding his apartment cleaned every evening and all the dishes stacked up on top of the other. A fresh set of dinnerware for one would be set on the small dining table for two with his staple of rice, lentils, curried vegetables and fish. Served and covered, yet appetizingly warm. The stainless steel tumbler washed and dried would be beside his bed on the nightstand along with a bottle of boiled and distilled water. He hated the taste of boiled water, but he had a delicate stomach. Miss Angela never took this seriously. She always insisted that neither of them were old enough to have a fragile stomach. She definitely did not intend for any time in the near future to drink boiled water or cut back on chicken or lamb. She had a good many years ahead of her just as he had. The secret she said was in her daily cup of tea, good old antioxidant rich Darjeeling tea. The drink of the good old “Queeny” herself, she liked to announce loudly. He found it interesting that he thought of Miss Angela at a time like this.

*  

Rathin was not particularly fond of tea. But when you are among the tea gardens of Darjeeling, the aroma hits you around every corner, from every small and big tea nook and restaurant. You start living the leaves or stop living. He had kept up a sturdy front with the aroma wafting around him for the past six days. But now he felt helpless. The amber tannin teased him and the mountain air beaconed him. He needed to do just one little thing before he could free himself of his misery. He had to see her again more and declare his love for her once more. She had to know that all these years he had not thought of any other woman and preserved her in his memory, just the way he saw her last, pouring tea in his cup as the red and green glass bangles tinkled around her wrists. He wanted to believe that she had waited for him; that her eyes had spoken of deep love for him even when her lips had refused him on that last day, the extra day. He knew exactly which way to go.
The tea stall was no longer the small shack. It was a bigger shack. The roof was no longer thatched. It had fancy red tiles. The walls had a coat of tacky green. Maybe someone had wanted to the shack to be a part of its natural green surroundings and had failed miserably. But they were protective. Rathin was somehow sure that he would not feel cold inside those walls.

He stood in front of the green door and waited. There were more tea shacks and stalls around his tea shack. There were even more souvenir stalls, cheap souvenirs. He hesitated for a moment. Then he looked up and saw the overhanging cliff, threatening and protecting. It was the right tea shack.

The heat from the hearth warmed him as he entered through the green door. A large aluminum kettle, old, very old, hung over red-hot coals of the clay stove in the middle of the room. The bottom of the kettle had a coating of irreversible blackness. Several groups of tourists sat cozily in the warm nooks and corners of the room, while a polite looking young man poured and served them tea from the big kettle.

Rathin spotted the two red plastic chairs in the farthest corner of the shack. They were the only empty available seats.

He ordered “Hot Darjeeling Limon Tea” from the small wrinkly laminated “Drinksh kard.” The polite looking young man did not pour his tea from the central kettle but took his order outside, through the back door. As the door opened, Rathin heard a voice, an unfinished word rushed in like a gust of wind. He remembered a tanned oval face with perfect dark eyes. That was all he remembered.

That was all that he could remember.
He did not wait for his tea. He didn’t run. He walked out of the shack and walked back to his hotel. In the distant background, the snow-covered peaks of the Kanchenjunga glittered in the setting sun.

The next morning Rathin woke up very hungry. He mumbled something about fresh mountain air and appetite. He spooned out a spoonful of dark green tea leaves on to his palm from a silver teapot on the buffet table. It sounded like crisp lettuce when he crushed them. His hands smelled like tea. He thought about the wrought iron table with the rent receipt and the slice of Miss Angela’s Layer cake. It was the 26th of the month and there were four more days before rent day. He had never thanked Miss Angela for her layer cakes. And the cherries that she topped them with, always. He had never tasted them.

He wanted to taste them.

He imagined the generous slice of cake in front of him on his dining table: three layers of cake, two layers of cream, alternating layers of lemon soufflé and lemon cake, clean smooth cut, a perfect triangle, a cherry on the top, red, glossy, sweet, slippery, the sweet syrup drizzling down the yellow perfection. The long, slim fork tips nudging at the different layers gently separating the cream from the cake with a gentle nudge of the fork trident. And then bits of cream, like small pearls on the fork tips, one at a time touching his lips and melting on his tongue. A shiver ran down his body.

***
Alok watched Miss Angela as she supervised the scrubbing of the sides of the fountain. The thick foliage provided a good screen for him to watch and not be seen. He debated between greeting Miss Angela and quietly heading toward the staircase to his apartment. He felt comfortable behind the dark green leaves. But he also wanted to stand a while by the fountain. It had become a daily ritual he looked forward to.

He had fallen in love with the fountain the first time he had seen it, about a couple of months ago. It was their, Alok and Sumi Sen, first time at 36/1 Royd Street.

The fountain stood in the middle of the large courtyard under the roofless atrium. It had curved edges with ledges where years of grime had solidified into concrete dirt. It had a two-tiered birdbath at its center. Water spouted out of the brass lotus flower. It looked out of sync with the rest, standing by itself on the top, water spilling down its sides, down to the two birdbaths. There were never any birds, though. Perhaps they didn’t know.

“It’s okay to not hide, Alok?”

“Hello, Miss Angela.” The suddenness of Miss Angela’s voice embarrassed Alok.

“Is the fountain going to be on tonight, Miss Angela?”

Miss Angela looked at Alok. She had questions.

“Oh, nothing much,” said Alok, still embarrassed, “just that I am having a small dinner party at my place tonight; the boss, several bosses actually.” He added, “I think they will be impressed.”

*
“It is useless. No matter how hard I try to get this plant to grow, it simply refuses. Plant food, indirect sunlight, singing, talking, I’d try seducing if it worked, but nothing works. Do something about it Alok,” Sumi pleaded.

Alok stared at the unsightly faded spiky brown leaves of the plant that Sumi had removed to a hidden corner, just to save them all the embarrassment of each other’s being.

“Well, can you blame anyone for it?” said Alok, a statement like a question, as he walked to the kitchen.

“Let’s not play the blame game.”

“There is no ‘let’s’ in it. You are in it all by yourself,” replied Alok. He set down the tray of cut glasses on the dining table.

“You know very well that I didn’t do it on purpose. It was an accident.”

“But it still got the leaves burnt.”

“I know, I shouldn’t have put it out under direct sunlight. But that was a year ago and only once.” Sumi almost cried. “It wasn’t doing any better before that. Why do you think I put it out in the sun?”

“Haven’t you done everything already?” Alok asked slowly. The words rose and fell rhythmically, matching the slow, strong and delicate movement with which he wiped the unseen specks off the cut glass highball. The hand made glasses had cost him a fortune. He had no intention of letting dust particles nestle in its intricate crevices. “Maybe, you should just let it go. Give it to Miss Angela. She seems to have a thing.

“She takes care of plants because she can’t take care of him.”

Alok didn’t look up. Multiple creases had appeared on his plane forehead. “What do you…? Miss Angela and…?”
“Rathin. It’s a 36/1 Royd Street joke. Everyone knows, no one talks.”

“I didn’t know that,” Alok sounded both indifferent and indignant, at the same time.

“And besides, green thumb or not, she definitely has a Vanilla Cream thumb.”

“I agree. Maybe we should have requested Miss Angela to make the cake for our party.”

Sumi glanced at the big white mass of cake that rested on the table. It looked pretty in white. “I wonder how this tastes like.”

“Has to be good. Paid a heck lot than I ought to.” A single speck on a highball glass, unseen from Sumi’s point of view was bothering Alok. His arched fingers worked the soft fabric of the wiper repeatedly. He raised it above his head, towards the light and said, “Finally.”

“Are we,” she faltered, “you going to serve whisky tonight?”

“Scotch. The best. A promotion this big deserves nothing else.” Alok held up another highball up to the light for closer inspection.

“Already working on the next one, then,” she added. Carelessly.

Alok got up from the table and walked toward Sumi, who was snipping off dead leaves from the indoor foliage. He turned her around and kneeled in front of her, like a medieval knight.

“Your highness. Thy servant wishes no more than to build thee thine own castle. Can you blame me for that?”

The way to deal with cynicism, Alok knew, was not to admit that it existed.

Sumi raised her scissors like a scepter and gently tapped Alok’s shoulders, “Rise ‘o’ brave knight. Let thy wishes come true.” Sumi closed her eyes like the princess before she asked for her third wish. “And don’t ever do this again when I have scissors in my hands.”

*
There was still some time before the guests were scheduled to arrive, and some more. The general rule to follow was that if you wanted your guests to arrive at 7 PM, your invitation had to say 6 PM. It was a mild evening, a quiet one. The silence disturbed only by the droning of the air conditioner.

Sumi ran her eyes over the dining table. “Table cloth, small plates, large plates, forks, spoons, bowls, glasses, paper napkins.” She picked up the neat stack of paper napkins and examined them closely, as if they had stains on them. “We never had paper napkins in our house. I bet neither did you. We were taught to wash our hands before and after eating.”

“Would you like it if they suddenly asked for some paper napkins and you couldn’t give any?” Alok was still working on his dear cut glasses. There were two left. “Will you take care of this one glass? Then I can finish with the last one.”

“That’s not the point.” Sumi picked up the glass and began to wipe it with a paper napkin.

“That is the point. They are the guests. Remember?”

“Exactly. If they are the guests aren’t they supposed to make themselves comfortable with whatever we can offer them.” She put down her glass, her share of wiping done.

“That’s not how it works. And we have already had this conversation Sumi. And by the way the guest is God and that’s straight from your scriptures.” All the glasses had been wiped. Alok picked up the tray and placed it on the little side table along with the two Johnny Walkers.

“They are not my scriptures.” She added calmly. She knew her real feelings for the scriptures would remain a secret, just as the amber bottles and glasses would when Alok’s mother visited. “And bottled waters too?” She looked at the several bottles of water that Alok
had placed in the icebox. She sprayed water from the small spray bottle on to the large leaves of the money plant. “We drink tap water everyday.”

“It is just convenient and…”

“And what?” asked Sumi.

“When you travel outside India, you too will pick up bottled-water habits. Wait till I get the next promotion.”

“So I go out of the country for a while and when I return, I am no longer an Indian.” Sumi’s raised eyebrows made Alok laugh.

“You are exaggerating,” he said.

She continued, “When I was in the ninth grade, we had an American student who had volunteered to teach English at our school for a year. His name was Robert McPherson but he came to class and introduced himself as Bob. For a while we thought that he was a substitute for Robert McPherson. But later we realized that Bob was Robert. We had a hard time figuring out how Robert became Bob.

“So how did your Bob look like?” asked Alok.

“Umm.” She stopped spraying the plants and stopped to think, really hard. “Imagine Colin Firth with a Nicholas Cage accent,” she smiled at the accuracy of her description, “that was Robert McPherson.”

“Hmm. Were you able to follow his accent?” Alok sad down on the couch and undid the buttons of his T-shirt.

“No. We thought that he swallowed some of the words. But thankfully Sister Lucious attended one of his classes and soon he was speaking like Jack Nicholson. But that is not what I am taking about.” She pulled out a chair and sat down at the table her arms crossed. Alok read
that as fight to convince. Usually under such circumstances, Alok would join her and they would argue till the matter was successfully resolved in his favor, but not today. “Bob,” continued Sumi, “he ate with his fingers just as we all did and then washed his fingers with water.”

“So you think your Bob still uses his fingers to eat and washes them with tap water?”

“No. But that’s the point.”

The bell rang.

* *

The Das’s were the first to arrive.

“Hi. I am Kankana, Call me Kenny.” Mrs. Das extended her hand.

A split second’s delay later, Sumi returned her gesture and said, “I am Sumi. You can call me Sumi.”

“This is Mr. Das,” Alok introduced.

“Simply Das, Madam.” Mr. Das added. He smiled like what looked like a genuine smile and followed his wife into the apartment.

“Nice,” said Mrs. Das as she ran her mascara heavy eyes all over the place. “Must have taken you quite a while to get all the decorations done.”

“Actually, we moved in just a month ago.” Sumi looked around at her bare walls.

“All this in only a month?”

“So where were you before you moved in here?” Mr. Das asked Alok.

“We lived in Jadavpur. It was a much more spacious flat, but it was quite a bit distant from the main city.”

“So you moved in just after your promotion?” grinned Mr. Das
“I had to leave some of my plants behind. We had the ground floor flat and some of my pots were outside. When I went to move them, I found that they had taken root. It made me very sad to leave them there, but better than uprooting them,” Sumi added, as she poured water into two glasses.

“Oh, don’t bother with water. Let the Gargari’s come, then we can straightaway hit the bottle. What do you say Alok?” Das looked at Alok.

He nodded.

The Gargari’s arrived at 7:30 pm, half an hour after the Das’s.

“Namaskar madam. You must be Mrs. Alok Sen. I am Mahim Gargari, Alok’s boss.” Mr. Gargari had round eyes, which accentuated his perfect round face. A half –moon opening on the friendly silvery gray face revealed a well-set row of shiny teeth.

“And this is my wife Gopa.”

“Gopa Roy, Mrs. Sen.” She replied in an exotic tone, stretching and detaching the two lonesome syllables of her name farther into two words. “I use my maiden name. Gargari is so…Hookah-ish. You know like garr garr garr garr at a shisha bar.”

Sumi was not sure how to respond. She looked at Alok for help. Instead Mahim Gargari came to the rescue. “That’s okay madam. I have heard this statement before. In fact she agreed to marry me only if I let her use her maiden name.” He looked at his wife. “And it’s funny. So you are allowed to laugh.” He said without losing the crescent on his face.

“Bring on the Loch Lomond. Captain Haddock is here,” shouted Mr. Das jovially.

“I am sorry Captain. I didn’t get hold of any Loch Lomond but can I interest you with some Johnny Walker?” Alok unscrewed the first bottle.

*
Two drinks each for Mr. Mahim Gargari and Mr. Das, two platters of golden brown deep fired onion and shredded cabbage dipped in a batter, and half and hour later Mr. Mahim Gargari noticed Alok without a glass.

“What happened to your drink?”

“I don’t drink,” replied Alok.

“You mean all this time you were not drinking?”

“Why don’t you drink? Are you pregnant?” asked Mr. Das. He began to laugh. The others joined him.

Sumi looked at Alok, then at the wall clock and finally at her wristwatch. She went to the kitchen. The chicken curry had been heated through. It was steaming. She turned off the gas.

She went back to join the group in the living room. They were on to their third drink.

“Mrs. Sen, the onion pakodas are just too good,” began Mr. Mahim Gargari, “they reminded me of my mother and our small village.”

“You lived in a village?” asked Mr. Das.

“And I was poor. Rather we all were. My mother worked at the Communist Party office. She made tea and cleaned cups and plates. That was the only job the party could offer her after my father’s death.” Mr. Gargari bit into the cut glass. His teeth clinked against the crystal clear surface. “My father was martyred, they said. The owed us at least that much. Most days,” he continued, “we starved, we were five brothers and sisters, except for the little rice my mother could bring home from the other houses she worked for. She starved everyday. She called it fasting.” Mr. Mahim Gargari took a deep breath. “But she made the best onion pakodas. They were an occasional treat for us.”
“She never really got over her fasting habit. I remember the first time I visited his mother at their village.” Gopa Roy nibbled at an Onion Pakoda. “She was absolutely insistent that I fast on account of it being a Tuesday.” Gopa went on, “I relented at first, but soon I was asked to fast on the Thursday and then again on the Saturday. I packed my bags and came back to town the next day. Mahim followed a day later.”

“Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form. Know who said that?” asked Mr. Das.

“You know she was sorry for that,” said Mahim, his eyes fixed on the fiery amber liquid in the cut glass, “and in spite of all her entreaties, you never went back. Not even when you knew that you’d never see her again.”

“Too late for that, and don’t you dare insinuate that I was responsible for your mother’s untimely death.” She took a small sip from her glass. It was still her first drink. “If your father had not been the over zealous communist party comrade and had not left your mother in the sorry state that she was, you all were, then this would not have happened.” She got up and walked toward the kitchen, “It’s a miracle that you….”

“Let’s not talk about my father.” Mr. Mahim Gargari looked down into the contents of his glass, trying to fathom, trying to measure.

“Why not? He was an educated man. Wasn’t he? Going off and dying for the party.” Gopa continued from the kitchen, “What did all that get you to?”

“That’s enough Gopa. I don’t expect a thick skinned capitalist like you to understand my father or my mother.” Mr. Mahim Gargari got up and walked toward the restroom.

“It was Marx who said that. Don’t you people know anything?” shouted Mr. Das.
“That’s alright, we all hear you. You don’t have to shout.” Mrs. Das put down her glass and began to walk toward the kitchen to join the women.

“What do you mean by that?” Das glared at his wife.

“I think you have had too much too drink and that this should be your last drink of the evening.” She turned only long enough to speak to her husband with finality in her voice. She joined Gopa and Sumi in the kitchen to help arrange dinner.

“Shall we start dinner then? It’s ready” Alok interjected. It was sudden, a result of Sumi’s inconspicuous pinch a minute earlier. He had not noticed her come and stand quietly beside him nor did he feel her gentle nudge. She had to resort to pain after several gentle nudges failed to get his attention.

“One more drink, Alok,” announced Mr. Das.

“Mr. Das, why don’t we start dinner now?”

“Why? Have you already run out of Loch Lomond? Hey Mahim, what was the name of the butler in Tintin?” Mr. Das asked.

“Nestor.” Mr. Mahim Gargari had returned from the restroom. He looked refreshed.

“Yes. Yes. Nestor,” he shouted, “Nestor bring us more Loch Lomond. Have you run out of it?”

“No sir. I have not run out of whisky and I am not your butler.” The acrid tone in Alok’s voice was hard to miss, “and I really think that it is time for dinner.”

Neither seemed to have noticed it. Alok felt relieved.

*

“That was a good dinner, Alok.” Mr. Das said in between his small sips of water from a bottle. “That was a good dinner.”
Mr. Mahim Gargari picked his tooth with a mint-flavored pick. He stared at the TV. It was turned off.

“Alok,” began Das, “don’t let the evening ruin your impression of me.” He continued without looking up.

“But it was a great evening, no doubt,” added Mahim. “Very refreshing. We should promote you more often. What do you say Das?” He stared at the TV.

Das nodded.

“Well, I won’t let you down. I promise you I will live up to your expectations and respect your trust.” Alok glanced at Sumi. She seemed engrossed in a conversation about some new boutique. “In fact if I get on the project based in Scotland, there will be more Loch Lomond for you. You know that don’t you?” He added quietly.

*

Sumi walked out of her apartment on the third floor quietly and walked down to the roofless atrium. The water tingled as it spouted out of the shiny brass lotus, and down the two tiers of the birdbath. She looked at her apartment on the third floor. It looked distant; a little light filtered out through the green by the day, dark by night foliage.

Years of green algae had left behind their faint stains on the once spotless fountain. The stains were not visible in the darkness, but they existed.

“It used to be a marble fountain once. But I had to replace it.”

“I am sorry Miss Angela. I did not see you.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t trying to get seen, anyway.” Miss Angela emerged from her hiding place.

“So how do you like your apartment,” continued Miss Angela. “Is it being good to you?”
“I like it.”

“My apartments treat their inhabitants well. That is why no one ever wants to leave. It was because Mr. Sehgal got transferred that he had to leave.”

“Mr. Sehgal?” asked Sumi.

“He had the apartment before you. He and his wife had moved in over fifteen years ago. They had both their children after they moved in here, two very beautiful daughters.”

“Was he happy?” Sumi asked.

A train of racket came up outside and stopped in front of 36/1 Royd Street.

“That is Rathin’s old fiat,” said Miss Angela.

He came in to the courtyard, nodded briefly to the two women and went up the stairs.

“Well I must get going. Don’t stay out too long. You might catch a cold.” Miss Angela went back to her ground floor apartment.

Sumi balanced her slim frame on the curved edges of the fountain. It proved difficult. She went and sat near where Miss Angela stood unseen a while ago.

She waited in the shadows and watched Miss Angela carry what seemed like a piece of cake on a plate up to Rathin’s apartment. She waited long enough for Miss Angela to knock on Rathin’s second floor apartment. Then she walked back to the third floor.

*

Sumi’s fingertips touched the mole on Alok’s right shoulder. She kissed it.

Alok retired Iacocca for the night and turned to Sumi.

“You smell like neem,” Sumi whispered.

“How did you like them?”
Sumi played with his right nipple. She seemed engrossed with its size, color, and texture. “Rathin Uncle returned today. Do you know that this was his first trip in almost over ten or fifteen years.” She squeezed the nipple. “Miss Angela took cake up to his apartment.”

“Why didn’t you ask her for a taste?” Alok laughed. “When did you see all this?” Alok looked quizzically at Sumi.

“I have thought of some interesting names for your friends,” said Sumi as she lay on his arms.

“Like what?”

“Das Capitalist, Gargari Communist.”

“That’s funny.” Alok stroked her forehead. “Just one change, make that Das Capital in place of Capitalist.”

Sumi tasted his nipples.

“What about me then?” Alok asked softly as he pulled Sumi close to him. He closed his eyes.

***
Baboo thinks he deserves it.

_I don’t._

It has been a year since her death and before that it had been thirty years. He had vowed to take care of her and her needs. And he had done so.

At least he thought so. Thoughts keep people alive. Thoughts make people less conscious of their guilt. They help keep afloat. Bloated. Sleepless.

He had kept her pantry full, taken her out to New Market for her yearly shopping trip when they bought clothes for their two daughters- Sonal and Minal. He accommodated her frequent visits to the temple.

_Frequent? Once a month. That’s the least he could do._

He came back home every night instead of going to the clubhouse to play cards like Patel and Ghosh, bought her a black and white television set, a refrigerator and also an air conditioner. And never looked at Miss Angela again.

_Never looked at her again? I am not sure I want him to be perfect. That is not what this story is about. But I don’t know if he actually did not. Should I vindicate him just because I don’t like him? Why not?_

Miss Angela and Lata had become best friends. Miss Angela taught Lata many of her dainty ways.

_Dainty?_

She was an enthusiastic but a poor learner, a point that Baboo never failed to highlight and ridicule her for.

_The bastard!_
But a year has passed and that means mourning is officially over. He can go back to his normal life, stop wearing whites and resume efforts to cover his shiny baldness and continue eating fish but without guilt.

Sonal and Minal, both married with two kids each, had not mourned more than a month. It was not convenient.

It’s time to end his mourning and finally wear his blue suit. He has not seen the suit for thirty years, thirty-one years.

*

He tugs and pulls the trunk. It complains loudly. It has sat there in its obscure corner under the bed, undisturbed for so long.

*He thinks so.*

“It looks very clean,” he says.

The trunk does not have a lock. He had meant to lock it thirty, thirty-one years ago, but had not found a lock in time. He just about had enough time to shove his cobalt-blue-pinstripe-still-in-its-store-packaging-suit in to the trunk and push it back to the farthest corner under his bed, before the next thirty, thirty-one years happened.

He raises the curved iron latch of the trunk and it opens with a crunch, which is more characteristic of a Poe-esque hidden vault than an aluminum trunk hidden under a bed in a red-bricked-falling-apart mansion on Royd Street.

The trunk lets out the enclosed smell of dying naphthalene balls. The package lies in a corner. It is still packed in the English daily. The date on the fading-crumbling-sepia newspaper
reads January 14th, 1978. His late grandfather’s brass spittoon lies heavy on the package. The brass spittoon reflected light from the overhead 100W bulb. It had one very bright spot that glared.

*It has been placed there to preserve the folds of the suit, for it to resist wrinkles.* Baboo had taken the spittoon from his widowed grandmother amidst emotionally Charged protests. The protests had no effect on Baboo. The poor woman did not live long after her bout of strong protestation. It tired her. She died soon after.

“It is a miracle that it has survived all these years,” Baboo says aloud to no one.

He sets the spittoon aside and touches the faded newspaper. His fingers tremble like a virgin lover. His fingers feel nothing. Years of practiced Paan making has left little sensation in his calloused and cracked fingertips If only the recipe for the perfect Paan didn’t call for a dash of limestone paste along with the Betel leaf and other sweet or not sweet condiments. He has spent the last thirty, thirty-one years of his life making Paan, twenty-four seven.

*Paan in the morning, Paan in the noon time, Paaaaaan….Paaaaaan…Paan when the sun goes down. People never stop chewing Paan, and spitting out the putrid red juices as by-products and throwing away the pulp after every ounce of juice had been extracted and spitted with carefully calculated projectiles. Why pay for something you neither swallow nor digest. But that’s just me. If Baboo began thinking like me he would become the author and not be stuck at the point in time where he still has his fingers on the package like it was not some newspaper wrapped packet but a bra hiding secrets from a teenager.*

His fingers make a dent on the decaying paper. It crumbles under the weight of his touch. He lifts the bundle and places it gently on the bed. It is his most precious possession.

*It probably feels like a boneless leg of New Zealand Lamb.*
I am not a vegetarian. Which is a fallacy when you think about it because I do eat vegetables.

All non-vegetarians eat vegetables.

He stares at the newspaper that has for so many years covered and protected his secret, his only secret.

*A legless leg of New Zealand lamb.*

Streaks of blue peek out from under the sepia toned newspaper.

For so long the suit has just sat there, unseen and uncared for in the corner of his trunk.

“No one has ever bothered to take out the suit in all those years. How suffocating it must have been!” Baboo lets out a deep sigh that almost threatens to blow away the sad newspaper and leave his suit uncovered and unprotected.

The old dresser stands beside the bed. Dust has accumulated in its ornate carvings. But the wood has withstood years, thirty, thirty-one years. It came with his wife. A wedding present for the newly weds from his late father-in-law. It still has pink bills from the Harry Changs Dry Cleaners stuck to its corners. A bill maybe of some expensive sari that Lata had dropped for a dry wash before her death hoping that she would live to wear it but never did. He has not bothered to pick it up afterwards. He doesn’t like those cleaners. It occupies a prime spot, a spot, which he once coveted but couldn’t afford. Also, it smells funny, of jasmine. And what kind of people use pink colored paper for bills? He walks up to the dresser and looks at himself.

He had begun to lose his hair in his mid twenties. By his thirtieth birthday, he was completely bald.

*Genes.*

But he never gave up hope. By forty-nine, he had bags under his eyes. The doctor said cholesterol.
“At this age you need to be careful. A cardiac failure might prove to be fatal.”

“Kar..di what?”

“That’s when your heart gives up on you. Your heart fails and you go there,” the doctor pointed at the sky.

“Quack,” Baboo had muttered under his breath. He felt fine, cholesterol or not. Besides it was Lata who was dead, not he. And she never had an ounce of fat on her. She was as lean as can be. “She still had a ‘hartphail’,” he had thought and not spoken aloud.

*Now we know how Lata die. But it is really not that important.*

He goes back to the bed. His fingers tremble again as he touches the newspaper.

*It is just his age this time, not the earlier virginal lover and bra thing.*

Baboo unwraps the package. The newspaper falls away in small dusty bits. It has done its part. He takes up the coat by the shoulders and releases the folds. It feels delicate in his hands. He looks at the coat and then at himself. He walks up to the mirror. He hugs the coat and tries to fit into its reflection.

*I don’t want him to wear it right now. I don’t want him to wear it at all. Isn’t that why I am writing this down?*

*

He had worn it just once before. During its fitting.

His shoulders felt tight and concave under the fabric, like something was pulling them back and steadying them without his wanting to do so.

*Wait. Or is it convex?*

“That’s a perfect fit,” said Saifuddin Tailormaster.
“It feels a little tight around the shoulders. I can’t bend,” said Baboo. He was then a much younger version of his present self and had a head full of hair.

*Early twenties.*

“That ish the way it ish shupposhed to be,” snapped Saiffuddin, “The English Babu’sh have it made thish way, good body poshture, ishraight body in front of female lady.”

“You are good. That is why I came to you. It feels tight.”

*Why is Baboo’s English better than Saifuddin Tailormaster?*

“Lishen boy, it’sh not tight,” he coughs, “It’sh perfect. No shpreading rumorsh about my work and me. I am the besht in this area. Go shee Jamesh Bond. You will know how English Babu’sh dresh.”

*At this point let’s have Saifuddin spit out a big blob of phlegm, which has long since solidified and dispersed itself into the wind, since that is obviously what’s bothering him and making him add unnecessary and way too many ‘s’s and ‘h’s to his words.*

So that’s how the suit fitted once upon a time-thirty, thirty-one years ago. He had Saifuddin Tailormaster’s word for it.

*More like threat.*

But the story is not about Saifuddin Tailormaster. It is about Baboo’s cobalt-blue-pin-stripe-stilt-under-the-shoulders-beautifully-fitting-suit, which he was going to wear to St.Pauls Cathedral to wait for Miss Angela in her blue chiffon Sunday dress. The Sunday service would end and she would be the last person out. He would happen to be there in his best dress and she would smile demurely. He would smile, blush and hide his face in to some thing and then he would walk her back to 36/1 Royd Street.

*Now that is not my story.*
And to continue the story, the Sunday never happened.

Baboo’s father had a best friend. He too was a Paan maker. They were both from Benaras. It was the subtle art of Paan making that had mortared the bond between them. No.

No?

They were diaper friends. Wait.

What is a diaper friend? Did they share diapers? They knew each other since they were in diapers. Did they have diapers those days? Never mind. And why the hell does everyone have to be a Paan maker? What happened to cigarettes?

Baboo’s father-in-law was a beedi maker. He rolled up finely shredded tobacco in tendu leaves and sold bundles of twenty beedies for a rupee. He was a good beedi maker. He also made paan. But his paans were not as good. His fingers smelled of tobacco and tendu. That spoiled his paan business and he finally gave up making paan altogether.

Maybe if he was successful in both beedi and paan making, he would have more money than Baboo’s father and then he would not marry off his daughter, Lata to Baboo.

So the story was that Baboo had been promised to Baboo’s father’s friend’s daughter before Baboo and his father moved to Calcutta.

Miss Angela was Baboo’s crush, his unfulfilled love. That explains the blue suit. Pretty romantic, huh?

In a heart breaking letter written by a dying man, who then went on to live for another ten years, ten long years, Baboo’s father’s friend reminded him of their promise and that was all it took for Baboo’s dream of a Sunday in Blue to shatter in to infinitesimal pieces, that he could never pick up.

Must have been hard for him. Good for him.
It was a Saturday, the day before his planned blue Sunday. He had just paid two crispy Hundred Rupee notes, four months of accumulated earnings, to Saifuddin Tailormaster and picked up his blue suit. His best friend Gopal, the barber, had promised to give him an ‘ishpeshal’ shave that evening; his small way of helping his friend win his ladylove. But that shave never happened. Baboo’s flock of little black facial hairs never got their promised special treatment. His father packed him and some clothes and sent them off on the Doon Express that evening. They, Baboo, clothes, and the train arrived in Beneras the next morning—Sunday morning. Baboo and Lata were married on the next Sunday, in a temple by the holy Ganges that had a Goddess with ten arms riding a tiger.

_ Talk about women’s lib._

Thus Baboo and Lata were married. And had remained married for the next thirty, thirty-one years. And one fine day, she died.

_Why a fine day? Why not a rainy day or cloudy day, a day in tune with the mood in a Thomas Hardy-ish way? Whose mood are we talking about here?_

*

Lata is dead and there is nothing Baboo can do about it. He knows that and that’s not what he is thinking about standing with his thirty, thirty-one year old blue suit in front of the mirror.

_Is he?_

The suit is so clean. He presses it to his nose and smells the fresh smell of the naphthalene and something else, a very familiar something else.

“Old newspapers and talcum powder,” he thinks aloud, “jasmine.”
Baboo unbuttons the shiny old brass buttons and wriggles his left hand through one of the sleeves. It goes through. He tries the other hand. It goes through, up to a quarter of the way and then stops. Baboo tries hard to push the sleeve pass the quarter mark. He’s not able to do it. Relieved from the weight of hair, his shoulders had taken it upon themselves to grow in size. He is too big for his suit. He takes it off. He hides his face in it. He cries. He will not be wearing it.

“It smells like the drycleaners,’ he thinks aloud.

He puts his hand in one of the pockets.

*He can do that if he wants to. He doesn’t need a reason. It’s his coat.*

He takes out a pink slip of paper. He presses it to his face and smells the Jasmine.

The bill has a date, some day from the past thirty, thirty-one years.

He stares at the bill. His eyes stay transfixed on the date from about a year and a half ago.

*It is a Sunday tomorrow. Like all fifty-one, fifty-two Sundays of the last thirty, thirty-one years Miss Angela will go to the Sunday service. She will wear her hair in a French knot and wear her chiffon blue and white floral printed Sunday frock and take a rickshaw from Royd Street to Ho Chi Minh Street. The rickshaw puller will ask for twenty-five rupees. She will negotiate it down to twenty. She will walk the remaining half a mile past the planetarium to St. Paul’s Cathedral. Service will continue till noon. Miss Angela will place a fifty-rupee note in the offerings box and offer a quiet prayer at the Lord’s feet for no one in particular. Then she will walk out alone, one of the last ones. She will walk back the way she came, past the planetarium to Ho Chi Minh Road and then on a rickshaw back to Royd Street.*
Baboo will be at his Paan shop wrapping nuts, fennel, cardamom and sweet rose petals in a dark green Betel leaf with a dash of limestone paste. He will not be rolling beedies. He does not make beedies. Like the past thirty, thirty-one and many more years before that, Miss Angela will climb down the rickshaw and not look at Baboo and walk right in to 36/1 Royd Street.

*And Baboo will pretend not to see her.*

***
I love this bridge; its tarnished silver color, like aluminum, the cold rudeness of the enormous nuts and bolts of its structure, and its stark nudity. Its cones rise like humps that nudge the day and pierce the night. Its hustles start early, very early. The bamboo pushcarts are always the first to cross, like little rafts on prehistoric wheels, like the opening of Pandora’s crate, creaky-creak-creak. There used to be several pushcarts some years back. Now, there are just a few. The Calcutta Municipal Corporation’s orders- have to give more space to exhaust spewing automobiles; all out of the Pandora’s crate. And since it is difficult to build new and wider roads in an overburdened old city, the most fragile will have to be dispensed with.

But the bright side is, they will be forever immortalized in some post-post modern photographer’s lenses from France, maybe, and the monochromatic cityscape will show one of the derelict pieces forlorn in the background of some award winning piece of a dripping street tap; the tap being the focal element.

I wonder what they did with the pushcarts. Did they take them apart at the seams? What happened to the old overworked bamboos? Are they resting in neat bundles before they can be of use again? Or are they tied up against a building that is to be painted.

The city has changed. It changes everyday. I see it. The bridge sees it. I wonder if it keeps track of all the bicycles, taxis, cars, mini buses, buses and trucks that ply on it daily. And all the pedestrians, do they ever stop to count their footsteps on the bridge. It endures. Late at night, really late at night, signs of life disappear from the bridge. Really. Footfalls hush up; and sometimes a lost and lonely bus, rush through the empty artery, scared and stricken.

This is the most magical time of the day for the bridge, the only time when it appears to rest. The neon lights glimmer steadily, unshaken like tin soldiers. The lights flood the quite lanes
on the bridge, the narrow sidewalk and then have just about enough left to spill over the sides and light up a slice of the river below. Not much, just enough for the naked eye to discern the river below from the dark expanse of emptiness that seems to lay other wise.

The bridge bridges two cities, two worlds, two living organism, two lives.

I have spent many nights walking up and down the bridge’s sidewalk. Lights of all sorts-domestic, commercial, and traffic- lighten and enlighten the two metropolises on either side of the bridge. Signs, that they flourish even under the shroud of night - an act of vehement retaliation, maybe. And in between their neon prosperity, the dark and still abyss of the river waits, quietly. At times, the two big hubs of life experience power cuts; a common practice to allow even distribution of power; an antiquated belief that equalization of power can actually be achieved, fuels it. The neon lights go out in a split second and all that is left to look at are dark silhouettes under the starry skies; or just darkness as far as the eye can see.

I see a moonless-starless-hopeless night. I don’t mind it. The quiet darkness soothes me. The serenity of the emptiness pacifies me after a hard days work, a bad days work; every days work.

And it is at that precise moment of enlightened darkness that I truly see the two cities and feel the immense power and presence of the bridge.

I often wonder about the river below: heavy with filth and debris how it snakes on with a heavy belly, digesting and ruminating for eternity, uncomplaining as ever. Its complaints heard, unheard. Ignored?

Sometimes I see little specks of light float by below the bridge. They flicker, blink, and flicker as large hulls drag them on to some unknown destination. No one bothers to know if they want to.
I hear a train’s whistle. It comes from not too far away, just on the other side of the bridge. Not far from where I am. Not far from Nantu’s Tea stall at the end of the bridge. He makes the best tea in Calcutta. Actually in Howrah, since he is on Howrah’s side of the bridge. That is, his tea stall has its roots stuck into Howrah’s soil.

I live and work in Calcutta. I go to Howrah for my morning tea. And when I stand in the middle of the bridge, looking down at the endless dark abyss, as I do now- I am rootless. I am free to fall, float, drown.

Sometimes, when I am drinking my morning cup of tea, I see taxis, their trunks overstuffed, threatening to let go at any time, the excess baggage wanting nothing more than to relieve itself of all excesses and vanity. But they don’t. They hang on, allowing the little excesses that add up. Somehow the sweet tea, thick with milk, bursting with the smell of cardamom and ginger, makes it seem so right.

I have never been to the station. I never needed to. But on several nights I have almost crossed over to the other side, beyond Nantu’s tea stall just to catch a glimpse of the hubbub of life at the station. The station looks rooted to the soil. It has been that way as far as I can remember me. It scares me.

Today has been a particularly humid day. It hasn’t rained for a while in spite of all the heavy clouds that float and then disappear after a little tease, hope-tease. The night isn’t offering much respite either. I know. I was in the city a few hours ago. But here on the bridge, this late at night, with both land masses equidistant from where I stand, I feel a soft breeze caress me and wash away my senses, leaving behind a loving numbness. I wish I could spread my hands like wings, and float away like the clouds.
“Ho! Ho! What do you think you are doing? Don’t be scared. I mean no harm. Just take my hand and walk away from the edge.”

I open my eyes and take control of my heart that is palpitating vigorously on account of a prematurely broken reverie, before reaching out for the outstretched hand, so eager to reach out for me. I step away from the edge of the bridge. As I collect my thoughts, I stare at the figure in front of me as he goes on.

“What were you doing so close to the edge? Were you planning to jump in? Just a few inches more and you would have had it.”

He has stopped to take a breath and I realize that he had not stopped speaking since his first words to me, which ridiculously was “Ho! Ho!” One more “Ho!” and I would have jumped off the bridge laughing; accidentally, of course. He is looking at me with eyes that are about to pop out just as I finish thinking it. I must do something. Now.

“I was not going to jump.” I say, with some hesitation that surprises me. “I was just standing there.” He doesn’t believe me.

And shakes his head. His thoughts are suspended somewhere between incredulous misunderstanding and sympathetic understanding. I feel sorry for him, for his situation.

“You want me to believe that so late at night, you are out here on this bridge, at its center and standing near the edge just for some air?”

I am going to say yes.

But he doesn’t let me.

“Try that with some one else. I am calling the police.” He says all this without a pause, without stopping for a breath.
He turns away from me. Mistake. He realizes it and turns around to grip my fist. I would say he was as fast as lightning but that would be an exaggeration.

“You are coming with me.” He says with finality.

It’s amusing.

It is also annoying.

I want to tell him to leave.

I don’t.

“I am fine,” I say. Some how I don’t sound very convincing.

“Really?”

I hate his sarcastic tone.

Things are not looking so good. All these years and all those nights that I have spent on this bridge, not once have I had to explain my presence on the bridge. And never have I been threatened with the police.

“Please understand, that this is all a misunderstanding. I have no intention of jumping off the bridge. And I was simply enjoying the breeze and the view. I assure you.” I try my best to put on my most sincere and assuring look.

I fail.

Years ago, I was taught that human touch has the power to emanate positivity. So I grasp his hand and hold on to it. I wish I had checked if my hands felt cold or hot before I did so. Too late now. But I think it is working. He is relaxing his shoulders, although he is yet to let go of my wrist. But the grip has definitely lightened from the iron grip that it was. He still has the look of uncertainty in his eyes and he is looking around to find some thing, some one: a policeman on his round maybe. Maybe I should tell him, that there are no policemen posted on the bridge
today. Just as there weren’t any yesterday or the day before that or before that. There hasn’t been one ever.

I apply a slight pressure with my palms on his hands as I sit down on the bridge. He joins me. He continues to eye me suspiciously as I reach out to my shirt pocket to retrieve a pack of cigarettes. I offer him one. He refuses, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on me. It is as if he is breaking my actions into bits and bytes and making an exact mental note of them all, as they are happening, and storing them some where in his mind.

“No, I kicked that habit some years ago.” He refuses my peace offering. I tried.

He is still holding on to my wrist, my left wrist. I take out matches from the right pocket of my trouser to light my cigarette and motion for him to let go of my wrist. He lets it go. This time he does not hesitate.

Good man, understands when a man really needs his wrist to be let go off.

“I don’t live too far off and I like to spend time on the bridge. It’s a regular thing for me to come here most nights and spend some time.”

He still has that look of utter disbelief in his eyes. “Trust me. And if I really wanted to jump off the bridge, you wouldn’t know that I was gone.” I concentrate on my cigarette. I light it and take a deep puff. The little orange dot glows momentarily in the semi darkness of the bridge. I see some sparks fly off and then just like that its power diminishes and it is reduced to just a slow burning tip at the end of a cigarette.

I turn to take a closer look at him. He doesn’t look any different than the thousands of faces my eyes have brushed against today. And neither is he dressed to stand apart. Clean shaven except for the late night stubble, wears glasses, ordinary frame, a white shirt with rolled sleeves, sweaty dirty crease, a cheap ball point pen in his shirt pocket and black trousers, which could be
navy blue but there’s no way to tell in the little light the bridge offers. He is wearing thick-soled sturdy rubber boots. The boots look dirty as if dust and grime have not only accumulated but also participated in the propagation of their kind. He catches me staring at his shoes.

“What are you doing on the bridge?” I ask him only to make him uneasy- law of diversion. It works. He attempts to hide away his dusty boots, make them less conspicuous.

“I have an early morning train to catch. The station was hot. So I came out for a walk.”

“So we are not that different.” I don’t think he liked what I said.

“So we share the same reason.” I try to force a smile out of my smoke filled mouth.

“Where are you going?”

A regime of black ants, following each other religiously in a line, coming out of a crack in the concrete sidewalk, seems to have caught his eyes. Strange, I have been here before, but I never saw any ants.

I never sat down to smoke a cigarette with a man who thinks he has just saved my life.

“Blind ants!” He mutters under his breath. “Stupid ants.”

“You seem to have a strong thing for ants,” I say, just to say something.

It doesn’t seem like he is amused at my observation on his anti-ant feelings. He looks at me and then proceeds to squash them under his boots. Within seconds all that is left of the once strong barracks of the black marching martyrs are squashed blotches and a few deserters. I need to offer him a cigarette. Again. This time he takes one. I light his cigarette.

“So where are you going?” I ask him. For a moment, he looks like he’s lost his composure and doesn’t know what to say. I like it.

“I have to catch a train. Early today.”

“What time is your train?”
“Uh…I have to check the ticket. But I think its 5 am.”

“That’s not all that early. Why do you have to spend the night at the station? You could have come back in the morning?”

“I don’t live near the station.” His words don’t seem like they meant to punch me, but strangely they feel like it.

“I really must be going now. And thanks for saving my life.” I add.

“I hate ants. Creepy, crawly and blind. They don’t know where they are going. They just follow and eventually get crushed.”

They get crushed only when they are crushed. But I don’t say it. There is a hint of apology in his tone. Regret maybe.

“That’s how they were created. They don’t really have a choice. They work hard, store food for winter and live peacefully in a community. What’s wrong with that?” I say.

He is silent.

He is beginning to scare me.

“So you are going out of town for work?” I want him to talk.

“Yes.”

“Must be interesting. Wish I could travel once in a while.”

It is no more as dark as it was some time ago. It is too early for dawn, though. Isn’t it supposed to be the darkest just before dawn? Maybe it is dark. My eyes have probably gotten used to it. He can tell me. So I say:

“I am a receiving clerk at a clinic. I have a desk and a chair and all I do is receive goods from the suppliers and make entries in to the ledger. The suppliers are always in a hurry and they are always rushing me. But I take my time and ensure that I do not make mistakes. It really bugs
them. Maybe that’s why they never bring me any gifts. They always bring some for the doctors
and the front office girls. Silly giggly girls.” He has finished his cigarette. And is looking at me
as I speak. “So, I am a desk guy. No travel for me.”

A new line of ants has emerged from the same crack in the concrete. One by one they
stumble across their martyred comrades, and go on as before, apparently annoyed at the minor,
recurring blockades.

“They never give up do they.”

“No they don’t…” he says, “because they don’t see and don’t think.”

Please no more ant squishing.

“So what do you do?” I ask him to save some ants.

“I recover bad debts.”

“Hmm…that…”

“People take loans they can’t pay back and I make them pay.”

“Interesting. So that’s why you are going out of town, to get someone to pay.”

He sits quietly and stares at the ants. “We are not all that different from ants you know.
We follow all the time, with open eyes.”

He hits the side of his forehead with his palms. “And we don’t think. We were born into
servitude. And that is our destiny. No matter how hard we try, there is no getting out of it.”

“Maybe if we try hard enough…”

“You still won’t.”

“But there are people among us…”
“Among us? Look at you.” He looks at me. I am not comfortable. “You spend your time the whole day doing nothing but entering meaningless numbers in a ledger that can’t even say that your pen is hurting it. You are a good one to talk about trying hard.”

I do not answer. I never really had high aspirations and I took up the first job that came my way and that’s where I have been these past fifteen years. I don’t have too many complains. “I write softly on my ledger.”

He looks at me, and smiles. It is not a happy smile. His smiles like the suppliers who smirk when I check the numbers a third time. He smiles like the front office girls, who look at me through their lowered eyelids and discuss me in hushed tones. I don’t like that smile. I wish I had not given him my cigarettes. I will not offer him any more.

“Are you married?”

Why does he want to know that?

“It’s okay if you don’t want to answer.”

“No.”

“Why? Got scared?”

“Never got the chance.”

“You mean you never took a chance.”

What difference does it make, to me or to him? “You married?” He doesn’t answer.

He is busy poking the crack in the concrete with his ballpoint. He wants to get to the heart of the ants and destroy them for good. I don’t think that’s going to be easy. “Do you really have to do that? Why don’t you leave them alone?” He is getting on my nerves. “Just give me that pen.”

I snatch the pen out of his fingers. I am surprised. He is surprised.
I am shaking. He takes back his pen. He sits down beside me again and leans all the way back, his weight on the steel railings, between him and the dark river below.

“I was tired of my monotonous job and wanted to do something of my own.” He looks below and the dark waters stare back at him, as they stare back at me. “Can I have a cigarette?”

I offer him my last cigarette and throw the empty packet over the edge into the waiting waters below. I don’t see what happens to it.

“Roller coaster ideas, roller coaster rides. A friend stepped in and offered a viable business plan and he also offered to broker a loan to help me with my venture. I put in all my savings in it. But I was still short of funds. So I didn’t leave my job and I worked extra hard.”

He is staring at the unfinished cigarette in between his fingers. And then just like that he throws it into the darkness below. What a waste!

“Within a year it was clear that I was not cut out for business. I had lost all my investments and my savings at one go. I was penniless.”

“What about your job?”

“I still had that.”

“Were you working at the same job as you are now?”

“Yeah. That’s what got me here, in the first place.”

I look at him questioningly.

“Very soon my failed venture came to the notice my lenders as I became a defaulter. I talked them into giving me some more time. But I could no longer do my job. I could no longer demand money from people who didn’t have them. For the first time I understood what it meant to be called upon by a debt collector. Every time I was sent to recover, I came back and made up excuses. And then I got fired.”
He stops. He gets up and stands leaning over the edge of the bridge. I join him. The air feels cool and moist. And it isn’t dark anymore. Actually, it is still dark only less so.

“I looked for a different kind of job, but without references or qualification, I wasn’t getting anywhere. And that is when the calls started. My lenders sent recovery agents to my house. When I opened the door, I saw myself standing there, dressed as me and using the same bullying language that I had used in the past, often very effective. I spent more time outdoors as their visitations became frequent.”

“So is that why you are …”

“No. I went back to my old boss yesterday and asked for my old job. He said I could have it back if I recovered one of his huge losses. He said he’d cut out a percentage for me.”

“That’s good. It’s good you got your job back. Now you can work and repay your loan.”

He looks quizzically at me. It’s the kind of hard look that somehow sees right through you.

“Why do you think I was on the bridge?”

To get some fresh air? I think. I don’t ask.

He begins to laugh hysterically.

“Don’t worry, I am not suicidal. Take that look off your face.”

What look? Suicidal? Who said anything about suicide? Is he a madman?

“Almost time. Should get going.”

I can see a little light on the horizon. Just enough to make things a tad bit clearer.

“You know I have never been to the railway station.”

“You mean you have never crossed the bridge and been to the other side.”

“I have been to the other side for tea, but never to the station.”
“Would you like to come? You can see me off. Tea’s on me.”

“No. Some other time.”

“Some other time? When? Do you expect to see me again?”

I am not thinking of that. I am just being polite. “I think I will go back and try to get some sleep.”

“Yeah. You do that.” He turns back and begins to walk toward the left bank, towards Nantu’s tea. Nantu is turning on his stove. “And don’t forget to be kind to your ledger.” He turns around and adds.

I smile but he doesn’t see that.

The light on the horizon is getting brighter by the second. The sky is taking on an orange hue and the ripples on the water look serene. I still see him, his back turned to me on his way to the station. I am not thinking but I know that I am walking towards him and soon I will catch up with him, have some tea and see him off at the station to wherever he is going.

***
“So, how was it?” Cutie asked me as she settled down at her desk. We shared a cubicle.

“What was how?” I asked. It is always a good idea to not jump ahead of her. She is a big wagon to jump in front of.

But I knew.

“You know.” Her voice sounded indifferent. She didn’t really care. She didn’t have to. It wasn’t her problem. And she had problems of her own.

It wasn’t a problem.

She took out her humongous pink powder puff. It was the last phase of her everyday morning ritual. She had already let her hair down and arranged the highlighted sections of her hair the way where they caught the light from the overhead spotlight. She deftly, practiced deftness, slid her thumb under her deep V necked blue top and pulled up her bra straps. The slight tug and an adjustment of posture was all she needed. The real “Wonder Bra.” Now all that was left to do was use the puff to powder her bosom, stretch her blouse and reveal her golden Monarch butterfly. The translucent dust rose and fell in slow motion and rested as glitters on her peach hued skin. They shimmered as they landed on her soft bosom and like the magical spell of a sorceress brought the butterfly to life.

I watch her everyday. I like it.

“Did you guys do it last night?” asked Cutie.

It didn’t happen yesterday.

“Nothing happened last night. And it is none of your business. So stop asking.” This is what I should have told her, a long time ago, but never did. In stead, I’ll only give her a half-hearted smile, which she will interpret as a no.
But I didn’t get to smile today. Before I could answer, I spotted the vague impression of something round, but not quite, dark and bobbing coming towards us. Not coming like hurled, just gently swaying like a helium balloon tied around a toddler’s finger. A bobbing something could only mean Rajam, the boss: his head bobbed from side to side for all kinds of response, yes, no, don’t know and everything else. He had an ‘aura of unsure’ around him.

“Cootie,” he said as his eyes rested on Cutie’s peachy soft and smooth butterfly launch pad, “Can I have the purchase report from last May?”

All eyes came to rest on Cutie’s bosom and if most of them were allowed to have their ways there would be more than just eyes. It was no longer in the office grape vine.

“I don’t do purchase reports. You’ll have to ask Shanti.” Cutie answered and went back to rearranging her cosmetics.

“Yes. Yes.” He said hurriedly and looked down. “Shanty, give me the file.”

“Sure.” I took out the white folder, which said May 09 on its spine and gave it to the boss, or tried to give it to him. He missed and the folder fell on to the ash blue carpet. Apparently, he wasn’t sure if he wanted the folder or not.

He apologized profusely, to Cutie, and began picking up the fallen pages.

“Sir, it’s Shanti, not Shanty,” I added.

He bobbed his head and left. He was one of those head bobbers whose indeterminate head bobbing left the determined to be inquisitive onlooker not only perplexed but also extremely frustrated.

“The bastard!” Cutie’s typical response.

“Well you weren’t very helpful. Eight inches deep is not exactly office wear, you know.”
The golden wings of the Monarch butterfly seemed ready to take off from its peachy home turf. It was fluttering. Its wings sprinkled gold dust.

She had simply pulled down her top one day and showed me her butterfly. She was dating the hottest tattoo artist in Mumbai. She was wearing a black lacy under wire bra; *Victoria’s Secret*, a secret no more.

“That’s not… do you know?” Cutie lowered her voice to almost a whisper. I had to lean down towards her. It was never a good thing; “He is giving blow jobs to the CFO?”

“What?” I forgot I had to whisper.

“Hush. Do you want me to lose my job?”

But isn’t the CF,” I lowered my voice to a whisper again, “O married?”

“So what? Rajam has that highflying airhostess, he bangs. A blow job always feels good, no matter who is giving it.”

“So they are both…” I left it at that.

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I know and they know I know. That’s all that matters.”

“But is that a good thing. I mean what if they …”

“Well I still have a job and all the lights in my cubicle work. Don’t they?”

I looked at the three out of five spotlights that worked on my side of the cubicle. I didn’t have to scan the other cubicles; I knew. I nodded my head, but it decided to bob. I felt stupid. I am sure I looked it too.

“Let’s go out for lunch.”

“It’s only 10:30, Cutie.” And I felt like I wanted to throw up. Lunch at this point would mean a severe case of food poisoning caused by indigestion. Can indigestion do that?

“Okay, let’s go shopping first.”
I thought about the fewer traffic stops and congestions on a Thursday morning in Mumbai. I visualized myself spending time to pick a parking spot, the best spot. I thought about the stale Pau Bhaji at the mall, left over from the previous weekend stored in the overstuffed freezer of the Pau Bhaji Man’s decade old refrigerator. It was going to be good.

I thought about the big green coconuts they sold outside the mall, cool, sweet and salty, all at the same time. I remembered how it didn’t smell like stale coffee and rancid cookies near the Coconut Man.

I visualized Rajam, his head bobbing in an unknown rhythm, the CFO with his pants down. I smiled.

“Okay”, I said and that is how and when I decided to tell Cutie about Donny.

* 

“Daniel D’Souza is not an attractive man. But he dresses well.”

“You got to dress well in Mumbai, honey.” Cutie said. The way she mixes cynicism with matter of fact amazes me. Annoys me.

“He hates Mumbai traffic.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Donny hates soda, says it’s bad for his teeth.” Sam doesn’t care but he has good teeth and he brushes twice a day. I don’t. My teeth aren’t bad either.

“And you know about his toothbrush routine because. Or let me rephrase that, why am I being told about his dental regime. I don’t need to know if he flosses.”

“Cutie, do you want to know about him or not?”

“Of course I do. Just don’t tell me about his gingivitis. And anyway Shanti, you are having an affair with this guy. You think I care about his swollen gums?”
Punch.

She probably realized it too.

“Okay, how does he look?”

“Kind of okay, I think.”

Cutie gives me one of her looks. This one says, ‘really’ with a question mark, I think.

I am not very good at describing faces. Faces change and the whole exercise of describing something so volatile seems unnecessary and futile.

Sam has a thick moustache.

“Donny is clean shaven.”

“So you like Donny because he does not have a moustache?”

“I didn’t say anything about liking him.”

“Then why are we talking about him?”

The Bhaji had gotten cold on the plate. The carrots, bell peppers, potatoes and peas stared at me, begging for mercy. The butter on the Pau no longer glistened, it felt soggy; it tasted… tasteless.

It was a pretty busy day at the mall, in spite of a Thursday. I didn’t get to cherry pick my parking spot. A big crowd of about twenty mommies with their kids in school uniforms had walked in to the mall. It was the last day of school before the summer break, so the last bell rang at noon.

Sam was going to pick Rahul from school. Rahul had insisted on that. He wanted a celebration. It was his first summer break. When you are six, you celebrate everything, including the celebration of eating ice cream, with ice cream.
“Mommy never buys me ice cream,” I heard Rahul telling Sam last night when he put him to bed.

Mommy would have bought him some today if he had only asked.

“Do you want some ice cream Cutie? My treat.”

“Sure.”

“What flavor?”

“Butterscotch in a waffle with nuts. And some whipped cream.”

Rahul loves ambrosia. It surprises me that a six year old would have the palette to distinguish and develop a preference for a flavor such as ambrosia. Can he even spell it? Sam likes ambrosia.

I hate vanilla.

I ordered vanilla in a cup for me.

“So where did you meet Donny?” Cutie asked quietly. The ice cream seemed to have mellowed her down.

“At the Taj. Remember our Team Management training last December?”

“Oh, yeah. The time we went into the Avon Cosmetics Convention by mistake. Great food though. Remember the Hyderabadi Biriyani and the Roghanjosh?”

“With your appetite, I wonder how you keep slim.”

“It’s easy; eat during the day and workout at night.” She winked at me. “Do you know how hard I’ll have to work to night just to shed of your butterscotch treat?” She smiled. She didn’t have a boy friend now. She had broken off with the tattoo artist a while ago. “But don’t worry I am headed for The Oasis tonight.”

“The Oasis? On a weeknight.”
“Do you want me to keep slim or not?” She faked exasperation. “And come to think I think that is exactly why the Arab invaders had harems.”

What? “What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well you know the concept of having…”

“I know what a harem is Cutie. What has that got to do with Donny?”

“It’s not about Donny. I was just thinking that those guys ate a lot of food, great food but greasy. I mean all these world-renowned Indian dishes actually came with the *Arabs and Mughals*. So they had to keep a harem to work off the fat.”

I visualized helium balloons painted on with large Monarch butterflies tied down to a vinyl ribcage, sitting still behind bamboo curtains. The ribcage was just plastic, polymers, artificial, no meat or muscles. It had a peachy shade.

“So what happened?” She said, her mouth full of fast melting ice-cream. She sounded ice cream *-ish*.

“*To the Mughals*?”

“*Donny. Duffer.*”

“I was waiting at the lobby for Sam to pick me up. He asked me if I wanted to have coffee at the Coffee Shop.”

“And?”

“We had coffee.” I stared at my cup of melting Vanilla ice cream.

“Some random guy asks you to have coffee with him and you do? Shanti…no… Shanty, you are worse than Cootie,” Cutie said bobbing her head.

“Well, he looked decent, he was decent and I wanted some coffee.”
“Oh, yeah, sure.” Somehow the mockery in her voice didn’t bother me much. It felt soothing in a way. She looked at me quizzically. She wanted me to continue.

“That’s it.”

“What do you mean, “That’s it?” Why have we been talking about this guy for the past two hours, nibbling on stale Pau Bhaji while the Ann Taylor snob has taken the “60% off Till 1 pm” sign inside. You have to give me some more.” She sounded like she meant it.

“There’s not much more. We have met a couple of times after that, for coffee.”

“How many couple of times? Be specific.”

“Stop it Cutie.”

“Om Shanti.” Cutie drew in her breath like a meditating ascetic and closed her eyes. She would fly away, any moment, like the monarch butterfly.

“Shall we try Ann Taylor?” I asked.

“No. I feel above all material pleasures.” She opened her eyes. “So what did you guys talk about? Over your coffee?”

I didn’t like the way she said “your coffee”. It sounded dirty. I liked it. I could see the Pau Bhaji Man from where I sat. Cutie had moved into my seat when I got up to get the ice cream and now her back was to him.

“Maybe we should leave.” I told her and I looked at the Pau Bhaji man. He didn’t look very happy that we just sat there not contributing much to his business on a slow weekday. My guess was, he wanted more than just the view of Cutie’s butt to compensate for slow business. Cutie walked up to the service window and after a small conversation came back with a triumphant grin. I was right. I wonder if he saw the butterfly fluttering and getting ready to take off.
“He doesn’t mind. Please continue.”

“Well one time he held my hand and said that he liked the shade I was wearing. He said it
gave my hands a character.”

“Really. What kind?”

“Do you want me to go on or not?” I got up to leave.

“Sorry Shanti. No more interruptions, I promise.”

I sat down.

“He touched my cheek one day, with my permission of course. He said I felt younger
than I looked.”

“Did you like it when he touched you?”

I didn’t know if I liked his touch yet. May be I will know tomorrow. He has asked me to
meet him at the Taj.

Cutie waved to a kid from the big group of mommies and kiddies that had walked in
earlier. She didn’t know him. She didn’t know any other kid apart from Rahul. They adored each
other. She bought him ice cream.

“What does he do?”

“I don’t know,” I didn’t know, “Maybe he is a doctor. He asks me to drink lots of water.”

*  

Sameh Wadi or Sam, is my husband.

Rahul Wadi, my son, loves ice cream, in a waffle. His favorite flavor is ambrosia.
He likes the light peach color of the ice cream. I do too. Sam hates it. Not the flavor. Just the
color, I think. He does not hate the color; just that Rahul likes peach color. He is not so averse to
the color itself. He has peach cashmere; gift from his mother. I hate his peach cashmere. He hates
it that Rahul recognizes the shade. For a long time I thought that Sam was jealous of his son’s ability to discern color.

* 

Peach is a nice color. Cootie has a peachy bosom.

* 

Sam.

I fell in love with Sam because I could call him Sam. I liked saying Sam. I liked how the lower half of the mouth expanded in an affected manner and how the tongue expanded and laid low in the abyss. And how no air came out when you said it out loud. Like you were holding your breath. Short and sweet. Sam. Sam.

“It’s easier not to say anything at all. You can just grunt.”

“That’s boring,” I tried twirling my fingers around his salt and peppery hair. They kept slipping out of my fingers; they were short. “And don’t say grunt. You make me feel like a pig. And it’s important to be verbal. How else do you know it’s you and not someone else I am thinking about.”

“Do you?” His eyebrows were quizzically raised. “Don’t give me Gee-Orgy-K-luney. He’s become such a cliché.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Who then?”

He really wanted to know. “No one.” I didn’t tell him.

“Okay. Don’t tell.”

“I know. I am not.” Men can sound like women when they really want to know your secret. But sometimes there’s no secret and that can get annoying.
I liked listening to his beating heart: the dull thudding, the rhythm of repetition, the soft skin, the flat breasts, the small nipples, tightened, the slight bulge around the waist, the seventy-five-percent-cotton- twenty-five-percent-other-natural-fibers-boxers that slid off easily.

It was beautifully distracting. I never manicured my nails. I never left enough for the manicurist to work on after I had gone through them. I wondered if manicured nails would send more ripples down his side. I liked it when he abandoned himself, let go of himself, left himself in my hands, literally, closed his eyes.

Blind trust is arousing.

We had an aquarium in our bedroom. The water pump and the bubble machine worked non-stop. Falling water and ripples made soothing sounds. Two big fat orange, desexualized gold fish swam in the waters, in the tank, all night.

* 

“Let’s get another aquarium Sam.” I like my new hairbrush. It detangles easily and leaves my hair so soft and fluffy and shiny like that long legged model from the shampoo ad. “Rahul will like it.”

“Okay.”

“But we have to be careful this time. Not use those chemical cleaning agents anymore.”

“Okay.”

Sam is reading. He reads a lot nowadays.

“What are you reading?”

“The Jungle Book.”

“The Jungle Book?” I have to make sure. “Kipling?”

“Yeah.”
I want to ask “why?” but that’s not what I ask.

“How is it?” I need to make sure.

“Okay.”

I want to tell him that I am going to read the KamaSutra, but I am afraid he will only say, okay.

“Sam, will you drop me at The Taj tomorrow.” I wonder if he will ask. I want him to ask.

“I have a meeting at 10:30.”

“Okay.”

*

I haven’t shaved down there in a while. It’s a big hassle. Sam used to do it for me, once upon a time, in a land far away, during a time a long time ago. I wonder if Donny will like it shaved. But it’s a tedious job and not a nice one. And it’s best to keep expectations low.

“Good Coffee.” Donny is really into coffee.

“Yeah.” I hate coffee, especially during summer. Can we just get to it?

“Your skin looks dry. My mother says coconut water is very good for dehydrated skin.”

Are we going to drink coconut water now?

“Come let’s go.”

Finally. I just want to get it over with. Take that Sam.

“I want you to meet some friends.”


We walked into a big banquet hall with lipsticks the size of garden poles welcoming us. Pinks, reds, purples and oranges dazzled the senses while giant khol eyes and shimmering lips
stared back at me. A young girl, an embodiment of innocence wearing a white frock with light lavender prints, had her essence captured in an ornate bottle.

Big banners boasted about how all that was going to change a woman’s life.

Cootie’s life.

My life.

I said, “okay.”

*

I am Shanti Wadia.

If we still used pictograms to communicate my name would be a circle with an upturned Y. Upturned, down turned, doesn’t matter. It would take so little space to express oneself in pictograms. And lesser effort. The world would be a much simpler place to understand and live in. You know like draw a small circle with a mound could be food or feed me, a box with an antenna would be lets watch TV. A V could be a vagina. I wonder if Sam would understand if I drew a V and a G together. You know like the G is inside the V, a big G. And then closed eyes could be sleep or I am sleepy or I want to sleep or I am asleep. Sam always has his eyes closed when I get to bed.

The thing about pictograms is one has to have their eyes open to see them, understand them. No matter how many V’s or G’s you draw, closed eyes make no meaning.

I am going to shave again. This time I am going to be more thorough with it. You know what I mean, get closer to the skin, get as much out as possible. And while I am at it I will get to my armpits and the legs, and maybe the hands too, if there is enough time. If the razor is still sharp enough.

I will probably take a quick shower.
I will take a long shower.

I will only slightly blow dry my hair.

I will not put on anything.

I will use kohl to outline my V with a V.

If I have enough kohl left I will try a G inside the V.

Then I will go and stand in front of Sam.

I will wake him up from his sleep.

I will ask Kipling to excuse us.

He has to open his eyes.

But first, I have to go engrave a bright orange with black spots, Monarch butterfly on my bosom. It will glitter and glisten in the dark.

***
“I love winter mornings.” The two dents on her cheeks became faint as she inhaled in the crispy-crunchy morning air. She closed her eyes to taste the air. The hollows emptied out as she exhaled. Her hazel eyes sparkled again.

“Uhh!” Mr. Gargori grunted.

“You didn’t have to come out in the cold. I didn’t ask you to.”

“Well, I did come here to die. So I might as well catch a cold,” said Mr. Gargori as he turned to the stack of unopened mail that lay beside him on the wicker table. The glass top had cracks. It looked frosty. It stood out, in spite of itself, against the dull walls of the log cabin. They all stood out.

“It’s the cold, the cold, that will kill you. Not a cold.” Mrs. Gargori sat on the other empty wicker chaise. “And why bother opening mails. Seems like a futile exercise to me.”

“There, you see.” He shoved an unopened envelope towards her. “The fools!”

Mrs. Gargori took the envelope from her husband’s hand; there was no way to avoid it. It said Ms. Tarun Gorgori on the address line, and it begged for their loyal customer to come back and avail of their new, improved and discounted services, and all of that with a singularly unimpressive sentence. Impressive.

It was one of those mails one didn’t have to open to know what was inside.

“I am going to call them again,” said Mr. Tarun Gargori. “Not only do they have my last name wrong, they have changed my sex.

“Let it go.” Mrs. Gargori tore the envelope in to two. “Why did you have to carry the mail all the way up here?”
“Don’t tear it. I need it to call them up.” He took the two torn pieces from her hand.

“There’s nothing to do up here except read books, the same books. So I brought the mail along.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said calmly, “I am sure you have their number memorized.”

Mr. Gargori ignored Mrs. Gargori’s calm sarcasm and went on to open the remainder of the mail.

“Are you going to read all of them?”

“Yes. And make all the much-needed calls to the toll free numbers before I miss all the deadlines. Thank God for cell phones.”

“You have already called them before. How many times? Four? Maybe more. Nothing changed.”

“And I’ll call them again. They have no business misspelling my name,” he announced with vehemence. “And just in case I die, they will send condolence offers with my name spelled wrong.”

Mrs. Gargori went up to her husband and squeezed his shoulders. The back rub calmed him.

“Let it go,” she whispered in to his ears. “Let’s just die in peace. And, besides, this is not the first time your name has been misspelled.” Mrs. Gargori smiled. She ran fingers on Mr. Gargori’s neck. He closed his eyes, for a moment.

“You got lucky that time. She was probably a very lenient immigration officer,” he said.

“And also because I was bawling and saying how much I loved you and wanted to be with you.” Mrs. Gargori felt her husband’s cheek with hers. They felt cold.

Mr. Tarun Gargori adjusted the woolen cap that sat loosely on his head, to cover his ears.
“Of all my woolen caps,” Mr. Gargori asked Mrs. Gargori, “why did you have to bring the one that does not fit.”

“So that you catch a cold. They smiled.

“The cold,” she added quietly.

“How could you have misspelled my name? Your last name,” asked Mr. Gargori.

“I wasn’t using it at that time. Remember? My passport still had my maiden name. And I didn’t think an A in place of an O would be such a problem.”

“An O in place of an A,” corrected Mr. Gargori.

“Yes. Yes. Mr. Tarun Gargori with an A and an O, not two Os.”

The fog was clearing away. Mrs. Gargori rounded her lips and breathed out cold, moist smoke. The faint outline of their Subaru could be seen in the distance.

“You know that nice immigration officer asked me to go back to India that day.”

Mr. Gargori looked at his wife. His forehead filled with question lines up to the tight skin of his ball head under the woolen cap.

“She said that you were only a poor student and would not be able to feed me and that I should go back to my family, or at least stay with them till you got a job.”

Mr. Gargori muttered under his breath. It sounded like a curse.

“She is probably dead by now. Leave her alone, Tarun.”

Mr. Gargori looked at the gradually fading from sight ponderosa pines.

“I told her you were my family.”

A fresh blanket of fog swam calmly towards them. The snow on the ground looked sad and dull. The ponderosa pines looked like distant pillars in the fog. The Subaru disappeared again.
“It was the students housing. They didn’t make them big.” Mr. Gargori took off his glasses and cleared the misty lenses. “We were lucky to have gotten the corner unit, with an empty unit beside us.”

“I loved J17 Tarun. It was my first home. My very own kitchen, a pantry for your bike, the little black dining table at the corner of the living, where you typed out your thesis, and the hand sketched Eiffel Tower. Even a linen closet for your books.” Mrs. Gargori kissed her husband on the cheek. “And our first bedroom.”

Mr. Gargori touched his wife’s cheek and counted all the liver spots on her face, motionless except the breathing just inches away. Feet of several birds were edged around her shiny eyes; a single dimple appeared on her left cheek when she smiled. She closed her eyes.

“I had picked up the frame from the trash. The mattress was from a thrift store.”

“And your adviser was on his sabbatical in Europe.”

“Well, it was convenient. Don’t you think?” Mr. Gargori winked at his wife.

“I wish we could have spent more time there. I still miss New England fall.”

“You know, I thought about going back to Vermont to die. But then I thought, that, maybe.” Mr. Gargori’s voice trailed off. The mist surrounded the log cabin like a thick wall.

“This seemed more appropriate.”

Mrs. Gargori took a step forward towards the fog. She reached out to it, letting her fingers and hands dig deep into its coolness. She caught a handful in to her two palms and washed her face with it. She held her breath.

“This place seemed so much more closer to heart. Remember how excited the kids were on our first trip? Nimisha had a name for all the pines as soon as we had gotten here. And Nimit
would not stop running from the dirt main road to the cabin.” Mr. Gargori stopped and pointed to where the old family Subaru was parked, in the distance.

“Do you want some tea, Tarun?”

“Later.”

“I am going to make some.”

Mrs. Gargori walked back in to the vacation log cabin of the Gargori family.

* 

The tree had survived isolation. It was probably designed that way.

Mrs. Gargori touched the several columns of notches on the tree. The cabin had been built around the tree. The tree looked dead. She counted fifteen carefully engraved cuts on the trees dark brown bark, fifteen notches for fifteen years. Fifteen notches for fifteen summers. Fifteen notches for the fifteen summers Nimisha had seen. Beside the fifteen, there were thirteen notches. Thirteen Nimit notches.

She ran her fingers gently on the cuts, and then pressed her fingers, and like a healer, closed her eyes.

Mr. Gargori coughed behind her. “I am going to get the firewood from the trunk.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

He stopped and paused for a while near the solid wooden door to the cabin. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Torch?” she asked.

“No. I’ll manage.”

“Do you want Earl Grey or green?”

“Green.”
“Don’t have any. I’ll make you some Earl.”

The kitchen, like the rest of the cabin was clean. Spotless. She looked around. She picked up the steel kettle from the corner and glanced at her reflection. Her face looked like an ostrich’s egg, eyes looked like buttons. She smiled. Specks of red rust from beneath the shiny kettle freckled her left palm. She smiled. Again. She filled the kettle and turned on the gas.

The pantry looked well stocked: Sugar Free Oreos, Sugar Free Jello, Quaker Instant, Sunmaid Raisins, Sunmaid Prunes, Celestial Green, Celestial Earl, Bumblebee Tuna and Sardines, brown rice, Folgers Coffee, Coffee Mate, sugar, salt and Bertolli’s Extra Virgin, Asthalin inhalers; all of them beside each other, like toy soldiers on a mission. Mrs. Gargori took them out, one by one.

“Didn’t the cleaners arrange all that stuff?” Mr. Gargori walked in with an armload of firewood. He put down the bundle near the fireplace.

“They did a fine job.” Mrs. Gargori placed some Oreos on a plate. “I think I’ll even recommend them.”

The kettle whistled.

“Yes. We were lucky to have someone come up here to clean up this place.”

“Tea will be ready in a few minutes,” she said.

“I’ll see if I can start the fire by then.”

“It takes longer than that to light the fire. And Nimit does it better.”

“He is not here. Is he?”

She put aside the Earl Grey tea bags and put the kettle back on the gas. “I’ll wait. Make your fire,” she said quietly.

“Riddhi. Please.” He went to her and turned her towards him. “I did not want to say that.”
Mrs. Gargori hid her face in her husband’s parka. The parka was beaded with minute drops of water that shimmered under the kitchen spotlights. Under the parka, she felt his heart beat fast. “I have not heard from him for a very long time. I spoke to Sara, last week.” She dabbed her eyes with the corner of her shawl. The kettle whistled again. “She said that they wouldn’t be coming home for Thanksgiving. Nimit has a conference in Hawaii. Sara and the kids are going with him.”

“Good. I am tired of that sham, celebration of genocide.”

“Don’t say that Tarun. It’s time for families.”

“It’s time for nightmarish air travel.”

“Yeah. When was the last time you flew? You always expect people to come to you.”

“And why wouldn’t I? I am his father. Their father.”

“Doesn’t matter Tarun. We came up here to die.”

Mr. Tarun Gargori looked at his wife. She looked away.

“Would it hurt you to call him? Just once?” She asked.

“When was the last time he called?”

“You know when.”

“Yes, I know.” He went back to shoving the big wood pieces in to the sooty fireplace. The cleaners had either forgotten or completely ignored it. “He calls up every year on his sisters death anniversary. He speaks to you.” He placed a little pilot flame under the pile and waited. “I have heard the two of you talking on the phone.” The flame seemed to struggle. “You cry and do not speak to me on that day.” He watched the pilot grow faint. “I feel the pain too. But what hurts me most is how you all make me feel.” The flame went out.

“The only reason.”
“Don’t tell me what reason. I’ll not believe you.” He restarted the pilot flame. It was not faint this time. “It was my fault that I forgot to pack Nimisha’s inhaler. But it was a mistake.” He breathed harder. “And you all know that, but you blame me for Nimisha’s death.”

*

“Nimit has not looked me in the eye all these years. He thinks I don’t notice.” Mr. Gargori sat on the bisque leather couch. The fire reflected off the tame surface. It looked tired. “The only reason he spoke to me after Nimisha’s death was because he needed me to pay for college.”

Mr. Gargori motioned for Mrs. Gargori to sit beside him.

“They didn’t have so many cell phone towers then. We still don’t have a landline.”

“I will bring the tea,” she said. She poured the steaming amber tea into two mugs. One of the mugs said, to the worlds greatest Dad on one side. The other side said Disney Land. The other mug was white.

“If only I had not. If only you had reminded me once, Riddhi.” Mr. Gargori picked up the Disney Land mug, felt around its rim, and put it down. He picked up the white mug and took a sip.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Gargori, “if only.”

“I saw her struggling for every single breath. Right here on this couch. Her head was on my lap. I saw her die.”

“I did too.” Mrs. Gargori sipped quietly from the plain white mug.

Mr. Gargori took a deep breath. He took two short breaths.

“Calm down, Tarun. Do you have your inhaler with you?” Asked Mrs. Gargori.

“No, they are all in the car.”
“You should go get it.”

They sat there in the silence of the fireplace. Mrs. Gargori hummed an old song from somewhere in the past, from some other place.

“I think it’s time to let go, Riddhi. Nimisha would want that,” Mr. Gargori said. “I know you love me and that you don’t blame me, but we must start living again.” Mr. Gargori kissed his wife’s palms and hid his face in them. “Let’s live Riddhi. Let’s go to Vermont, like you always wanted. We always wanted.”

Mrs. Gargori shivered in front of the fireplace. “Yes. It’s time,” she said, “to not die.” Her shawl felt loose around her. She pulled it closer. She picked up Mr. Gargori’s cup, still half filled and walked back to the kitchen. She took out a pairing knife from the lone drawer in the kitchen. It looked old. It looked sad. She ran her fingers along its blunt edges. It didn’t cut her.

She walked up to the central pillar of the cabin. She counted the notches again. She carved fifteen new notches beside the fifteen old ones. Light and dark splinters littered the center of the house.

“For the last fifteen summers we have not come back.”

And then three more.

“That’s for how long I have not seen Nimit.”

And another thirty-five. It took forever.

“What’s that for?” asked Mr. Gargori. He stood behind his wife, watching her silently.

“For the number of years I’ve been married to you.”

*

Mrs. Riddhi Gargori picked up the little stuffed Yorkie with round black begging eyes from among all the stuffed toys in the hidden compartment of the bisque ottoman. It had a red
doggy bone tag. It said Bow Wow Doggie in white. On the back it read popety of nimisha gorgari in black. Mrs. Gargori smiled. She placed it close to her face and inhaled deeply.

“You say married, not loved.”

“What’s the difference?” replied Mrs. Gargori carelessly. The tired knife lay still on the coffee table. She ran her fingers on the blade of the knife. It did not cut her. It was still blunt.

“Stop blaming yourself, Ridhi. It was not your fault. It was not my fault.” Mr. Gargori turned towards the fireplace. The fire blazed. “I am going out to get more wood.”

“I don’t blame myself,” Mrs. Gargori muttered.

She walked back to the kitchen and rearranged the boxes and the cans and the jars and the inhalers.

*

She clutched the yorkie close to her and went outside. The snow fell like curtains.

“Maybe, he’s lost,” she cooed in to the Yorkie’s ear. She stroked and twisted her fingers gently around its ears. Mr. Gargori had not returned yet. She inhaled the pine trees in the snow, like vanilla, like lemon, like wet, wet lavender. “I will make you a snowman.” She promised the still yorkie. She stepped down, outside the patio, in to the falling snow. She held out her shawl and collected.

Out of the shadows of the dense snow, Mr. Gargori emerged staggering with a pile of wood. The wood fell off the pile and scattered near his feet as he tried to reach the cabin.

“I am going to make us a snowman,” she said, “a large one, like Nimisha used to make.” She began collecting the white powder, again.

Mr. Tarun Gargori staggered to the steps of the cabin.
Mrs. Gargori carried her first snow harvest up to the patio stairs, where Mr. Gargori sat.

“Are you feeling okay, Tarun?” she asked, “I think this much will make a good sized head. What do you think?”

Mr. Gargori did not answer. He climbed up the two steps to the patio and collapsed on the chaise, which had collected some snow. He breathing was hard. His face was white, like the falling snow, like the fog before it.

“Inhaler,” he whispered, “Riddhi.”

“It’s in the car Tarun.” She cradled a snowball in her hand, the size of an infant’s head.

“Is it big enough?”

“No.”

“No? Okay, I’ll make it bigger.”

“Inhaler,” he gasped, “it’s inside. Please.”

“No. It’s in the car.”

“You know it is not. It’s in the kitchen.”

“Go get it then.”

Mr. Tarun Gargori, fell before he picked himself up again and staggered in to the cabin.

Outside, Mrs. Gargori added more snow to her infant snowball. Small whispers, raspy and heavy, floated out to her on the patio. She listened intently and walked back into the cabin.

The fire had gone out. Mr. Gargori lay on the worn out rug, near the cold fireplace.

“What is wrong Tarun? Are you dying?” She asked. She turned to the yorkie under her arms. “He is dying, isn’t he?” She asked. The yorkie stared at nothing with its puppy eyes.

Mr. Gargori closed his eyes.
“I will not watch you die, Tarun. I cannot. I love you too much.” Mrs. Gargori bent down and pressed her lips on to Mr. Gargori’s forehead. She lingered for a while. She wiped off the few beads of perspiration off his skin. She picked up the stuffed yorkie and pressed it to her heart. She went out to the patio.

*

Mrs. Riddhi Gargori sat out on the patio with Nimisha’s stuffed yorkie clutched close to her heart. An empty chaise sat beside her. It was covered with snow.

Silent snow fell around the cabin. It covered everything. It hid all ugliness. It silenced. It was quiet.

“Let’s go inside and make a call,” she said to the helpless little dog that sat motionless on her lap. “They have misspelled his name again.”

***
KABIR AND THE ROSES

Kabir stood facing the wall, as if hypnotized by the lifeless image that stared back at him. It was the sixth time that day and nothing had changed on the calendar. A single square box was allocated for each day of the week. Four equal sides not only captured the date on the right corner but also enclosed the expansive emptiness of the days; like the four walls that enclose the lives and memories of people that live within them. Lived.

Komaal had liked to fill in the boxes in her bad handwriting with her favorite pen. It was a fountain pen, made in China. It had a rich satin maroon body, a gold nib and a shiny gold cover. Many years ago, it was Kabir’s Valentine’s Day gift to her. They were in high school and that was all he could afford. He had stolen the pen from his Grandfather’s heirloom box. Whether the old man ever found out his loss or not, he didn’t live long to tell.

One glance was enough to see two cells, followed by twenty-eight more cells, arranged four rows by seven columns, all of them empty. But he still wanted to be sure. It was against his nature to write on a calendar, and he often complained about Komaal’s annoying tendency to fill in the blank squares, with ugly graffiti if not anything else.

Beside the calendar, hung his to-do list, a separate list for each room. It had taken him some time to list out the to-be taken actions for each room, but he was happy with the end result. He had spent the last few days checking and cross checking each item on the list, completing the tasks on the lists, doing, undoing, redoing. He wasn’t going to miss anything.

He was leaving the living room as it was: the couch, the love seat and the ottoman, the coffee table and Komaal’s rocking chair in the corner near the large window with purple blossoms on white lace curtains. He glanced dismally at the conglomeration of faded coffee stains on the table-intertwined interstellar elliptical paths connected as in the diagram of
experimental magnetic induction. The stains had been Komaals’ doing, the results of habitual non-usage of coasters, in spite of their easy accessibility and availability. Now they refused to leave.

The huge crystal rose vase sat empty and all by itself on the corner table. There were no fresh flowers in it; there hadn’t been any in them for a while now. Kabir hadn’t bothered to refill after the last bunch withered away petal by petal. They fell of the stems first. The dark red petals turned into dull magenta. Then brown. Dry brown. Dust. Nothing. They had had a big argument over the Rose vase; Kabir thought that it was obscenely big and Komaal was drawn to its showiness.

“I just love it.”

The argument ended when they read the fine print on the receipt,

*Items bought on sale cannot be returned or exchanged.*

The lush green creeper that once had a characteristic stature of its own in the living room had dwindled down to a bare skeleton of brown meandering stems and a few adamant yellow leaves. Kabir had tried to revive it to its former glory by carefully trimming off dead bits, a place in the shade and a generous allowance of water. But nothing seemed to work. He reached for the watering can. Again. Then put it back without watering the plant.

He went over the two neat stacks of CDs again: Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Ghalib’s Ghazal’s on one side and Nancy Azram, Bollywood Hits Vol. 1-10, and some “hip and popular” music CDs on the other. Over the years, it had not been often when Kabir had a strong say in what music was to be played. But now he had the system to himself, the time and the leisure. For
the first time in many years, he found himself engulfed by an envelope of silence, something for which he had often prayed in the past and mercifully never received.

It was a hot day, possibly one of the hottest and most humid of the season. He had emptied out the ice cube trays along with every other suspicious looking substance from the freezer about a week ago. All that remained were half a dozen eggs, a bottle of milk, some dark skinned bananas, a few slices of bread and no ice. Expendable. The bananas looked very unappetizing.

“You do not store bananas in the refrigerator. It darkens the skin and ruins it.”

The thought of milk reminded him to check whether he had asked the milkman to stop delivering milk. He went back to his to do list. Stop milk. Settle dues. Checked.

He was leaving behind most of the cutlery and cooking utensils to Seema, the cook. She had cooked every single meal: breakfast, lunch and dinner and brunch and evening tea and the occasional cravings, for Kabir and Komaal for the past several years now.

“About seven years.”

Not that Komaal never cooked. She liked to experiment with exotic new recipes now and then. She had discovered a tattered copy of *Hundred Years of British Colonial Cooking* in a used bookstore. The book had been published more than a quarter of a century ago.

“The book is antique and the recipes are authentic.”

Seema was her devoted cheerleader. Kabir often found himself at crossroads unable to decide if he preferred to come back to a home smelling of Seema’s ‘yet again burnt-flat-bread’ or to one of Komaal’s experimental dishes. But both his cooks had their good days too. Komaal made delicious, deep-fried *Fish Amritsari*, which always left him with a temporary fat induced coma.
“If it is deep-fried, it is good.”

And Seema made the best *Sukto*, a light medley of summer vegetables and bitter gourd.

“Ideal for sweltering summer.”

The two women shared a special bond that had been forged out of the fires of bad cooking and an understanding that transcended social and dialectic barriers.

He had not seen Seema for several days. She had just stopped coming. Maybe she had had a premonition. Maybe the women had a secret pact of silence. He had sent a note to Seema a few days ago, informing her of the cutlery inheritance. She had not come. He closed the kitchen windows, checked to see if the gas burners were turned off. Kabir ran his eyes once again over the squeaky clean kitchen, a rare experience when the two gossiping women were around, he thought.

He found the rocking chair rocking softly when he returned to the living room, a sign that Komaal had just been there. They kept a spare key under the potted palms, just outside their main entrance. It wasn’t safe to do so, and Kabir had never been comfortable with the idea, but it was convenient. To remove the key from its hidden lair was on the to-do list, one of the topmost, but somehow he had not been able to bring himself to do it. He liked the idea of Komaal popping in now and then, walking through the rooms inspecting his handiwork.

“Do it yourself or live with it.”

For the first time in many years, Kabir was finally showing off his organizational skills. They didn’t speak too much nowadays, not to each other, but that did not stop her from interjecting now and then. He sat on the couch and followed the soft rocking motion of the chair. Though she never mentioned it, he knew that she missed her rocking chair. He often thought about asking her if she missed living in the house, their life together, missed him. Something
always kept him back. And he knew that it was jealousy. He simply couldn’t bear the thought of her happier than him, without him.

Komaal came into the room and sat on her rocker. She looked lovely. Something wondrous had happened to her complexion. The age spots had vanished, as had the wrinkles. Even the wig didn’t look artificial. For the first time in several months, it fit her. It looked as real as her hair used to be. Even her eyes no longer had the sunken look. He wanted to feel the smooth, unwrinkled softness of her skin and look into her dark eyes once again.

He wished she would stop her visits, stop her tormenting. They were getting too frequent. It wasn’t like her to wait for an invitation. Not that he was going to. She simply dropped in one day, and came back whenever she wanted to.

“I have my rights.”

She loved to sit on her rocking chair and give him her panacea. Dreaded silence. She knew how much he hated it. She knew how to make the most out of it. He preferred shouting bouts to let off steam. But Komaal simply sat on her chair and rocked softly, staring vacantly at the empty Rose vase at the corner.

“A rose vase is for roses.”

It had never been empty with her around.

Since it was evident that Komaal was not going to speak to him, he returned to the bedroom and made himself busy with his list. Several shirts and trousers and other accessories lay folded in neat piles on their bed along with several sheets of linen. He had not slept on the bed for some time. A while. He hated the sight of the big empty bed. He hated himself alone on
its infinite vastness. The neatly stacked clothes eliminated the emptiness of the bed. Comforted him.

The dressing table stood near the window. Komaal liked this area to be particularly well lit and properly aired. The open windows not only brought ample light but a cavalcade of millions of dust particles. You could see them in the slanted rays that forced into the room, dancing and swinging, drunk with warmth. A solitary red bindi stuck to the lower right corner of the dusty mirror, a solitary dot on otherwise dusty emptiness. She had a fondness for them. Bindis. A small container, the size of a poker chip, that contained Komaal’s home made Kohl and flecks of vermilion were all that remained on the dresser. He had the sudden urge to sweep them all from the dusty surface and reveal the clean shiny surface under.

“Don’t touch my things. Leave them as they are.”

He wondered if Komaal still smeared her forehead with the red vermilion. He watched in silence as more dust particles danced their way through the warm rays, and onto the surface of the dresser. There they rested. He held his breath to not disturb their silent chaos.

A sparrow, with a twig twice its size, flew into the room and headed straight for the construction zone. It was that time of the year when sparrows built nests in nooks and corners or on top of tall armoires, and always near a vent. He didn’t remember when the first sparrow flew into their bedroom with a piece of twig in its small beak and built a nest on the top of their bedroom armoire that stood just under the ventilator. Then the partner moved in. Or did they build the nest together? Maybe they did. Mama bird laid eggs, hatched several ‘chirpies’, and taught them the ways of the world. Then the whole bunch flew away. It was probably not the same couple every year, but it was difficult to say. The fluttering wings broke Kabir’s reverie.
“Sparrows are the most sexually active of all birds.”

Kabir had often wanted to confirm the information but Komaal thought of it as a rude inquisition into the lives of their temporary tenants.

“What if someone enquired the same of us?”

He was lost in reverie when Komaal came into the room. She sat on the bed and swept her palm across its surface to sweep off the accumulated dust of disuse. Kabir clenched his fists in impotent bitterness as memories flashed by. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t right. Big, bold if only-s filled his head as he went to check the other bedroom. Their apartment had two bedrooms. After plans of bringing their progeny into the world failed, she had converted the other bedroom into Kabir’s workspace. Since he never brought work home, it soon became her library and then her storeroom. She had left the room filled with years of endless accumulations: romance novels, mostly Mills and Boon and Silhouettes, magazines that revealed the ‘50 Secrets of Tantric Sex’ or ‘Old is Not Over’, ‘Lets go Pink’ booklets, old newspapers and paper cuttings, unfinished water color paintings, color tubes with dried paint, brushes with dried paint on them and several empty canvases. She was a hoarder.

The room was empty now; the books were all gone.

He gave away some to the teenage girl with colored braces on her teeth. She lived across the street. She had come in a few days ago to return books that apparently Komaal had lent her. He asked her to keep them and browse for more books if she wanted anymore. She could keep them. She didn’t have to return them. She had taken most of the books, paintings and empty canvases. Apparently Komaal had also taught her how to paint. The rest went into the bonfire that he lit across the street near the garbage vat. The white pages would have burned down to a
fine black powder had it not been for the sudden shower that refused to let them. The room was empty but he had wished he didn’t have to burn all that was there in it. He wished she had taken them with her, all her hoardings and her memories; all traces of her existence.

The sun was setting. A withered array of nine ‘o clocks and two cane chairs were all that were there in the balcony. The cane table had not survived the previous year’s monsoon, but the glass top had. Kabir wondered where it was?

“Safely preserved.”

Komaal loved the view from their 4th floor apartment.

“I see the sun taking a bath.”

It was not actually a lake. It was a shrimp farm.

“Really?”

It was going to be hours before complete darkness. When it came to jumping to take one’s own life, the tenth floor was more assuring than the fourth floor and he’d have to be discreet. There was however one slight problem, which could take on a bigger shape. India was playing Pakistan in a Cricket match that evening. Firecracker burning fans would occupy the terrace or the top most floors of most buildings if it seemed that India might win or if she actually won. He wanted a cup of tea.

The teaspoon made a soft ringing music as it struck the walls of the porcelain teacup, like tourists trying out different dinner service bells in a souvenir shop. He sat on the couch and sipped his tea. The long and shallow sip sounded harsh, like the swishing of coarse silk.

“Don’t drink tea like a rickshaw-wala at a roadside tea stall.”
The streets were almost empty. And the remaining few were hurrying home to catch on with the game. Komaal sat staring at the empty rose vase. Dusk gave her skin an amazing golden glow, but it did nothing to hide the sad and dark emptiness of her eyes. It reminded him of when he swore he could see the reflection of the roses in her eyes. She turned away from the setting sun and looked at Kabir. Her empty eyes caught the reflection of the dusky orange sky. She looked straight at him. Then she turned her gaze to elsewhere. Kabir followed her gaze as it caught the rose vase in it. It reflected the empty rose vase. It entreated.

*

At the flower boutique he ordered a dozen red roses, and then he changed the order to include a dozen more. While the young girl bundled up the flowers, his eyes caught sight of the lush green leaves of a creeper that covered the back wall of the boutique. It reminded him of his dying creeper and how it could have been, should have. It was not difficult for the girl with the dimpled smile to sell him a conspicuous green bottle that said ‘One Month Miracle Plant Food’ on the outside.

The instructions read: **Mix half a teaspoon with a cup of water and spread the mixture evenly around the roots. (Do not pour directly on to the roots.) Do it twice daily for the first 7-10 days, depending upon your plants response. Reduce dosage by half and continue for the next twenty days. Do not overfeed. Large plants sustain themselves. If needed, repeat the process every 4-6 months.**

The girl’s attention had already retuned to the TV screen, which had on the live telecast of the cricket match. She looked tense. “Are we winning?” Kabir asked. “Can’t say sir, we lost some good wickets pretty early in the game. But it’s a one-day match, anything can happen till the last ball.”
Kabir was not a crying man. He had never cried before.

“You are emotionally constipated.”

He had not cried when Komaal’s favorite street-pet dog had been left lame by a freak accident with a cycle rickshaw. He refused to fast and spend a day of mourning every time India lost another cricket match with Pakistan. He had also refused to cry when the good daughter-in-law had been turned out the fifth time out of her home by the evil scheming mother-in-law from the longest running soap on primetime TV. He didn’t remember if he cried when his parents passed away, it was a long time ago. He didn’t remember the last time he had cried.

Kabir placed the neat package of roses on the floor in the living room and went to look for a pair of scissors. He heard fireworks outside. India was winning. He looked for the remote control to turn on the TV. He couldn’t find it. So he turned on the TV manually. The camera was panning on the ninety thousand cheering fans at the stadium. The commentators could not be heard. Kabir couldn’t find the scissors in its usual place. He went to the study to get his pencil knife.

When he returned, the camera was still on the crowd. He sat down with the big bunch of roses and the vase. The camera was now concentrating on the players. Pakistan was about to bowl their last three balls and India had to score six runs of them with one batsman to spare. Kabir, cut through the tight knot of the bunch and loosened the rose stems, spreading them apart. The stems were a little too big to fit into the vase.

“An inch off the end should suffice.”
“Woooo!” A sudden silence had fallen on the crowd. The batsman at the batting end had just narrowly missed being called out. It was six runs in just two balls. The two batsmen met halfway to boost each other’s spirits up. The bowling team’s captain came running to his bowler with several suggestions and a nice big pat on the back. The crowd held their breath as another ball was bowled and the batsmen were able to run a single run.

A little node on one of the rose stems caused Kabir some problem. His pencil knife was too feeble to cut through the hard outgrowth. It reminded him of Komaal’s cancerous lump that he was unable to cut away. He had failed her. He mustered all the strength that he had and jabbed the knife hard at the node with his right hand. His palms gripped the base too hard and it broke. But the blade cut through the stem and dug into his left palm.

The last ball had been bowled and a six had been hit. The batsmen had already begun to run back to their teammates in jubilation. Outside the night sky erupted with firecrackers, inside the TV boomed loud.

Kabir looked at the deep gash in his palm that was bleeding profusely and at the TV.

“India has won.”

Outside he heard several footsteps rushing to the terrace of the building to start their celebrations. They obviously were not eager to wait for the elevator. There wouldn’t be enough space for all in the elevators, not when all wanted to be there at the same time.

Kabir sat and cried quietly.

***
HIS KNOWN DURGAS

Durga

I am a Goddess.

Your needs and the impotency of Gods created me.

You couldn’t fight your demons. The God’s couldn’t either.

So you gave me ten hands and a third eye.

Funny thing, the demons that scared you so, were no more powerful then you or the Gods you worship.

You didn’t know that. They did.

You still don’t know.

So I killed the demons. That was what I was supposed to do.

You named your daughters Uma and Parvati.

They are my names.

You chant my name when you wake up in the morning

And after your bath to keep clean after.

Your wife mispronounces my name, your mother too.

They say Dugga Dugga and pray for your safe return home in the evening.

Your wife secretly wishes for you to bring a big fish dangling by a twine twirled around your index, its eyes garnet red and clear, its skin shiny smelling of sweet water.

The twine goes in its mouth comes out the jaw.

Your mother remembers your father. He is dead and she can’t eat fish.
You pray too.

You pray that you don’t miss the five o clock tram.

You pray that you don’t have to take the five-thirty tram.

You pray that you don’t have to be on the left side of the five-thirty tram.

You pray that you don’t have to see them through the square window on the left side of the tram.

But you do

The tram slows down on the Kaali Ghat Bridge and you see them.

Like a practiced tourist.

Not as figures but splashes of arousing reds, fertile oranges and magnificent magentas.

They all look the same.

They conduct their business in small dinghy shacks that look the same.

The shacks, like dirty mushrooms beside the river, you think.

Customers are not overcharged there. Standard rate for the hour. The union decides.

Same service for all customers. Consistency is the key.

They all look the same, before and after, the customers.

You pray that you don’t see her.

They don’t look like her.

You wish that you saw her.

You know you won’t see her.

She scares you.

You pray.
Your son hates you.

He hates that you work with muck.

It’s art you told him. It also paid for his cigarettes. You didn’t tell him.

He said you embarrassed him.

He left.

When he was a child you took him to the riverbanks.

He always spotted me before you.


Cost saving for the next year.

You rewarded him with a cheap toffee.

He shoved it in his mouth and smiled at you and then he grasped your finger tightly.

But you didn’t see him smile. Didn’t feel his tight grasp.

You slipped out of his small non-dexterous fingers and jumped into the water.

He slipped later.

He didn’t like your cheap toffees any more.

They stuck to his teeth.

Pity. He was good at finding my floating caricatures. Your thoughts.

You pull me out of the water.

You recreate me somehow out of the decay.

You pull away the rotting mess and reveal the wire mesh.

You reengineer the structure.

A new structure out of the old to work with every time.
How do you like that?

Do you even care?

The scorching sun to drive out the moisture.

More hay on hay.

Some more inside.

The mutilated hands; the footless foot.


Subtle bulge on the chest.

You need muck to mix with your mud.

Your hands shape me.

Flat belly. Perfect Navel. Rounded breasts.

Hail the Goddess!

Not yet.

I am faceless I am unworthy.

Their dirt completes me.

You must sit on the left side and not let the pimento flashes pass by

You must return as you always do.

Beg for that bit of dust from her doorstep to sanctify me.

The soot behind your bifocals will give me sight; give me life

Her dirt will complete me.

*
It had to be today. She was sure. He had to collect it today. And Durga knew that he would come to her door. There were other doors, many more doors whose doorsteps had the dust and were absolutely willing to part with a bit of dirt that they would scrape out from underneath the wet bricks in their backyards. The mossy and soggy wet bricks would not move. They had sat their too long. But their nails, long nails would do anything to scrape up that little bit of dirt from under the green bricks that gave shelter to scorpions, centipedes, millipedes and more.

But the old man would come to her door. She knew. And it had to be today.

The festival was less than a month away. Dirt from her doorstep had to be mixed with the mud for him to complete his Durga, to make it worship worthy for the blessing seeking mass. She wondered whose house would worship her dirt.

A hard slap landed on her face, broke her reverie.

It is not considered a business like behavior to not concentrate on the business at hand. But thoughts have copyrights. Or don’t.

“Bitch.”

He had been at it for some time.

“What are you thinking?”

It was getting difficult for him. He couldn’t do it anymore. She knew it. He didn’t.

“It’s your fault.”

It was not her fault.

“Whore.”

He hit her in the face.

“Whore.”
He hit her again.

“Scratch me.”

She couldn’t. Her nails broke when she dug out dirt from under the green bricks.

“What happened to your nails?”

They were dirty.

“Is this how you treat your customers?”

He got off her.

“I am not paying.”

He spit.

“I hate dirty fingers.”

He went to the washbasin at the corner of the room.

“All that sticky mud. Like shit.”

He scrubbed soap into his clean fingernails. The soap bits fell off like flakes from a scraped candle.

“I hate that smell.” He smelled his fingers and grimaced painfully.

He turned on the tap. There was no water. The Municipal Corporation didn’t really care.

They didn’t pay taxes anyway.

He opened a two-liter soda bottle and poured it on his hand scrubbing and cleaning them fiercely. He hoped the dirt would evaporate with the effervescence. He got dressed and like a surgeon about to perform the most demanding surgery of his life put his cleansed hands up in front of him and edged himself out of the room as if the room was filled with rotting furniture that only he could see.
Durga got up and straightened her clothes. Most day customers didn’t require clothes to be taken off. They were always in a hurry. She walked to the mirror by the washbasin and checked her face. Not too bad, she thought. A clean rag and ice-cold water would stop the bleeding from the corner of her mouth. Her forehead was a different story, however. It was the bruising she had to worry about.

Unblemished was important.

Outside he was arguing with Aunty. He was refusing to pay.

“Dirty bitch.”

“You still have to pay.”

“No.”

“Well then. I know how to take care of you.”

Aunty knew how to take care of people like him. That’s what made her a successful businessman.

Durga walked up to the lone small window in her room. She was lucky to have a window, and the fridge, and the washbasin. She was soon going to buy a television.

She saw him coming, the same unmistakable hunch, the mud stained whiteness of his shirt and trousers, the gray head and the bifocals with thick black frames kept together by tape that made the glasses hard to fit on his face. The old man looked as old as he always did.

He looked older than the year before. It worried her.

She went outside. She knew that he would never be able to bring himself to knock on her door.

The old man came and stood outside her room, in the courtyard.

“Do you want some water?”
He shook her head.

“I will add some ice.”

He refused again. She knew he would.

“Tea? Darjeeling tea. The best.”

He nodded again. He refused.

“Have you ever tasted tea as good as that?”

He didn’t answer.

“Your Goddess is incomplete without some dirt from my house. I don’t think she will mind if you drank a bit of my water.”

He stood there quietly. She had nothing more to offer him.

He extended his hands out to receive his alms.

Durga went inside and retrieved a small polythene packet from under her bed. She placed it in his empty hands.

He clutched it like and put it in the inside pocket of his dirty white shirt.

“My daughter is getting married,” he said without looking up at her.

She reached for the heavy gold chain that hung around her neck. It had been a gift- a rich man, a filthy man. She stopped. Its weight was for her alone to bear. She ran inside and came out with a pair of bangles. She held it out for him. The bangles looked dull in the palm of her hands.

He didn’t reach for the bangles.

“I only wanted to tell you.” He turned around and left.

“They were my mother’s. She was a good woman.” She whispered.

She looked at the lusterless bangles in her hands. Dirt had accumulated in their dents. It was old dirt, from the time when her mother worked as a field hand with her father. The floods
had swept her small family away from the fields into a big city, but had not washed away the soil. The peach and white cotton drape around her felt soft. The starchy threads had gone limp. There were just right for polishing.

*
**Uma and Parvati: The Daughters**

“I can’t do it like that.” Paro had mixed color pigments with purified clay and arranged them on her palette. She had washed all her brushes and the palette several times. She was going to decorate her sister’s face with her best motifs. “You have to lie down.”

Uma looked at the assortment of colors on her sisters color palette- red, blue, beige and white. “I told you I don’t like red. I want maroon.”

“They said it had to be red.”

“I don’t care what they want. I am the one getting married here.” Uma stood with her back to the window. A slight breeze blew in through window. It passed through her long hair and made the light around her shimmer and dance, like the dancing halo around the Goddesses head their father created every year for the Big house.

“Ma is going bald because of her vermillion,” Uma was indignant.

“She is not the only one who wants it to be red,” said Paro.

“The old hag has been a widow for years. She will only wear white and force red on everyone around her.” Uma was not very fond of her Grandma.

Uma was the pretty one in the house: long dark wavy hair, large eyes, face like a beetle leaf, and glossy skin.

Everyone said that she looked just like their father’s Durga’s.

Paro knew that the Durga’s looked like Uma.

Paro loved her sister because every body else did.

“Okay. I will tone down the red to less red. It will not be maroon, only less red.” Paro was the accidental artist. She had short stubby fingers and fingernails chewed down to the
She wore her hair in a puny ponytail and hid it under a cheap but big bun made of the hair of some unknown animal.

“Did you wash your face?” asked Paro.

“I told you I did.”

“Doesn’t look like it. Go wash it again.”

“Look, I am not the one who wanted to get married in hot and humid October. I wanted to wait till my school finals next year.”

Uma saw her elder brother hang large garlands made of paper flowers on the banana tree in their courtyard. The flowers were red, pink, orange, yellow, blue and white. The garlands refused to hang. He refused to drape them. It was just like him. It had to be his way. He kept going back to the hand pump to wash his hands and fingers. It was as if some tough dirt was stuck on his hands and he couldn’t get rid of it. The hand pump sucked out sweet water from the depths somewhere underneath their house. The well never failed to gush forth water even when their neighbors suffered.

Their brother had come home a couple of days back, his head in bandages. He said that it was small accident. He didn’t live with them anymore but often came home after accidents, with accidents.

“Your in-laws promised to let you go to school,” Paro said.

“There are not my in laws yet. To be, not yet.”

“Come lay down, face up towards me.” Paro wanted to get the job done. “I’ll get the chair and some ice.”

“From where?”

“The ice cream shop. I asked them to scrape some from around the freezer for me.”
“I don’t want ice from there. I hate that man. He always looks at me in a funny way.”

“Don’t be silly, Uma.”

“Please, Paro. Stay with me. I will go wash my face.”

Paro sat beside her sister. Uma rested her head on Paro’s shoulder.

“I have to start Uma.”

“Okay. But I am going to sit.”

Paro nodded in resignation.

She started with the cheap foundation that would bring the required wedding glow to her sister’s skin. It label on the small container said:

_for Satin Smooth Skin_

_Fair_

She dabbed a little on each of Uma’s cheek, under her eyes, on her forehead and on her chin. She used her thumb and index fingers to evenly apply it all over, under her chin, behind the ears, inside the ears, on the neck, and smudged into the hairline. Then came the translucent _For All Skin Types_ chalky white powder. Paro dusted Uma’s face with a thin coating. Her eyes were closed. She seemed to be sleeping. Her face looked peaceful.

“You should have been the one getting married today Paro. You are older than me.” Uma said without opening her eyes.

Paro traced the scar than ran on the left side of her face from the eyebrow to her chin. She had been told that the scar was the result of a small accident while she was a baby. She wondered what that accident was.

Paro dabbed a bit of pink rougé into her palm. She smudged the creamy pink richness of the rouge into Uma’s cheeks and saw them transform into blood-endorsed fertility.
The eyes were next.

They are always done last.

Paro dipped the thin eyeliner brush into the dark liquid in the small bottle. She drew the outline of her eyes from the inner corner to the outer edge where she added a strong upward slant. Her brush barely touched the root of her eyelashes. Her brush went back to the inside corner and once again began its course from the inner corner to the outer edge. Only this time it went far from the root of the eye lashes and joined the tip of the upward slant. Paro blew softly on to Uma’s eyes to hurry the liquid in to drying. It had a tickling effect on her, she squinted her eyes.

“No. Don’t squint your eyes,” Paro warned, “You’ll smudge the edges.” The liquid was almost dry. She had wanted to buy the quick drying liner. But she decided to go for a lipstick for herself in stead with the extra money. She kept it hidden in her little trunk under the bed. It was bright orange.

Her scar was almost invisible at dusk. The subdued orange sky hid all imperfections of the world around her, almost. Bright orange would hide all imperfections.

She applied pink eye shadow on to the remaining empty sections of the eyelid.

“My eyes feel heavy,” Uma complained. “I can barely open them.”

“You don’t have to open them now. I still have to do the decorations on your forehead and cheeks. You’ll get used to it in a while.”

Paro dipped her 00 paint brush in to the red color. A large red dot, the size of a pea went right between the eyebrows. It was red. Then small beige dots, the size of a pinhead, went all around it, enclosing, protecting its fiery redness. Paro glued a small glass bead below the red pea. It was for the just the right amount of shimmer to attract attention.
She began working the Goddesses feet next. They were like a small S that was the small God feet with their toes missing. She drew these along Uma’s forehead following the arch of her eyebrows, where they ended. Three small beige dots went underneath each S.

“Are you using the blue and the white?” asked Uma, her eyes still closed.

“Yes,” replied Paro.

Paro drew petals on Uma’s cheeks, fresh, luscious like curled ferns, their laden pores about to fall off.

On her chin, she drew a lily, which was too shy to fully bloom.

They were all in red and beige.

After some time, Paro allowed Uma to open her eyes. She held a large hand held mirror in front of Uma. Its edges were rusty. Uma saw herself in the mirror and tried to scrape of the rust from its edges. Blues and whites didn’t matter.

*
The Dolls at the Big House

“He has been making the Durga idol for this house for the last thirty years,” said Doll One. “It was his father before that.”

“Is it really going to be his last year?” Doll Two sounded truly concerned.

“That’s what I heard.”

“How come you heard him say and I didn’t?” Shouted Doll Three.

“That’s because I don’t have a chipped ear like you,” Doll One shouted back.

“He is scared,” said Doll Four from the corner of the room. “Rana is afraid that the idol maker will talk to his wife.”

“Of course, he is scared,” said Doll One, “He has, you know what, all the maids,” Doll One lowered it’s voice. “And he needs his wife’s money. That’s why he married her in the first place. Rana is a parasite!”

“He is a cheat, a scoundrel,” shouted Doll Three. “How do you think I chipped my ears?” Doll Three sounded agitated. “He had to bring the rotten bitch in here and fuck her beside my table.”

“Watch your language. Don’t forget you are still one of the finest porcelain dolls around.” Doll Four interjected from his corner.

“Does penetration suit your sensitive ears better? And yes, definitely the finest one ear chipped off porcelain dolls around. That’s who I am.”

If Doll Three could come to life, this would be when it would turn away from Doll Four and look the other way.

“One of these days, he will bring in another whore in here and kick up a racket near your corner. And if I’m lucky, will chip both your ears.”

“I wonder how he hears so well with only one ear,” Doll One whispered to Doll Two.
Doll Three let out a little grunt.

“If only he had not walked in on him.” Doll One and Doll Two agreed in unison.

“It didn’t have to be him.” They all agreed.

They were tired. They went to sleep.

“It is never going to be the same again,” Said Doll One. He sounded sleepy.

“The Big house needs his Durga. It needs the show to be the Big house.” Doll Two sounded really worried.

“What he needs to do is talk to Rana’s wife,” shouted Doll Three.

“He will never do that.” Doll Four yawned without opening his mouth wide. He swallowed air.

They were sleepy. They went to sleep.

*
Farewell

On the fifth day he draws the eyes; gives her life.

The sixth day he gives up his rights. He takes home a fish with clear garnet eyes, silvery sweet smelling scales, hanging by a hay twine looped around his hooked index finger. Mud sticks out from under his nails.

For the next four days the city of sinners pray to her for absolution. He stays in, under his thatched roof, behind his courtyard with banana trees, which still has pink and red paper floral garlands hanging from it, from a month ago. His tired eyes rest behind his thick bifocals kept together by tape. He feels cold in the sweltering heat. He curls up into a fetus begging to be let back in.

On the tenth day the women say farewell. They smear her with vermillion, and tears, just like his daughter a month ago.

The men load her up on to a truck. The truck says “Please Horn Stop.” An obscene face, a red lolling tongue, two horns like puny penis on the head, wards of the evil eye.

They take her to the Ganges. They push her into the Ganges. He stands afar and sees her sink. Slowly. Her beige skin blends into the murky shadow of the muddy water, like a splash of white in an ocean of gray. The gray makes the beige look white. She looks up at the heavens, praying to not return, he likes to think. He sits there till the end, till he can no longer see her any more. Then he sits some more, and then some more. And he sits.

***
“That’s four teaspoons of sugar you have added to your tea,” I scream at Naani. Was that a scream? Maybe.

“Your mother takes five.”

“Exactly. You are both crazy.”

“The sugar in this country is less sweet,” she says as she continues to stir her eight-ounce cup allowance of daily tea. That’s all the tea she is allowed to have in a day and only when she has no upcoming chemo. She won’t be having any more chemos. “So she can have all the tea she wants with all the sugar that she wants in it,” Dr. Greenway had declared at the end of her last chemo, almost patronizingly. Later she told us, “It doesn’t really matter anymore now, but eight-ounce is okay. She will be lucky if she can taste it.” Naani was tired of the constant chewing silver taste in her mouth.

“It used to be sweeter back home,” she takes a long drawn sip from her cup. It sounds like a blizzard. Like when a slice of sound slips in through a thieving gap in a soundproof car.

“That’s because the granules are larger. They are more like sugar crystals than sugar. And they are dirty too, with dead flies and ants”, I say.

“That’s because we were having tea at a Dhaba. Were you expecting a Starbucks by a highway in India? Dhabas don’t buy sugar. They make their own. Remember all those sugarcane fields on both sides of the highway?”

I keep quiet. I know where this would go. That was during my last visit to India. I had acquired a severe bout of diarrhea. And oddly enough I had no one to blame for it, since I had not let go of my Aquafina throughout the trip. And everyone else was doing just fine, including my father, who offered no sympathy when I had to go into some ugly looking bushes with a
newspaper. It was not my first trip nor would it be my last. But the scars will stay. I still get toilet nightmares.

Another sip. Another slice of blizzard.

“Do you want me to open the window?”

“No, no. I am not counting leaves,” she says and winks at me. “I know some too. Your Naanu’s bedtime stories. He loved to read. That’s what he mostly did,” she winks again.

It takes me some time to absorb what she says and I am surprised at how much it has embarrassed me. But I smile at her. Irrespective of her husband’s bedroom habits, I know it has never been the same for her after his passing. She tries very hard and it shows.

I take up a magazine and roll it up and begin my famous mimic.

“Breaking news. We are now in the house of Miss India 1947 Gayatri Devi where after so many years she is finally ready to reveal the secret of her beauty.” I hold my fake microphone near her mouth. She sits up to adjust her posture and applies fake makeup to her face with a very big unseen puff before she takes the imaginary microphone from my hand. She covers her head with her scarf and smiles like the demure bride she must have once been.

She touches her index finger to the dimple on her right cheek, shriveled cheek. “Fair and Lovely cream,” she says, faking perfect shyness.

I can count the liver spots on her face. Her fingers look like gnarled roots of sleeping trees in winter. She is pretty.

“Why don’t you have some tea? You look tired.”

“I had some coffee a little while ago.” Too late, this is a mistake.

I have no idea why she began with baby and ended with husband and had teeth in between. They just didn’t seem right. It should be husband, baby and then teeth. But I keep quiet. I roll my eyes and give her the ok—I—will—have—some—tea look.

I open the door of her room and call for Francesca.

“That is rude. Go down.”

“Ok. Old lady.”

Outside her room hangs a huge copper Nataraj in his famous dancer’s pose. It’s not copper. Brass I think. I can never remember the correct one. My mother had had it delivered from India, some place called Hyderabad, I think. It was special order. She had once wanted to learn how to dance and Nataraj being the Lord of dances was a fitting deity. The copper or the brass shone with a brilliant metallic orange hue. It had yellow sapphire for eyes. Why she had it placed outside Naani’s bedroom is a mystery.

Francesca polished it at least once a week. I never quiet figured out if the statue had been placed properly on the wall. It seemed a little slanted to the right to me. Ma didn’t think so. It is your perspective, she said. At least, she never added skewed.

“What do you want with her?” I hear Ma’s voice, a little louder than usual, floating in from downstairs. She must have come in when I was with Naani.

“Naani wants me to have some tea. Though I had some coffee just a while ago. Can she make me some tea?”

I see Ma’s small head come up the stairs. She has cut her hair short, really short, again. The ends have a tinge of golden brown; the roots are gray and the rest salt n’pepper. It’s a mess. She is wearing her maroon cashmere. It had been a graduation gift from Naanu. The hems had
been patched again to stop the wool from running away. This time it is Hello Kitty satin inch
ribbon. I wonder who did it for her. Who agreed to do it? Had to be Francesca.

“Are you planning that cashmere to be my wedding shower or baby shower gift?” I walk
up to her and hug her. She smells like cinnamon. She feels like cinnamon. “You need to stop
going to that stupid health club.”

“Is that jealousy in the air I smell?” She says theatrically sniffing the air.

“I am serious. What do they tell you, to chew bread and drink water? It’s ridiculous.
Look at you.”

I need to stop. We have had the same conversation just a fortnight ago.

“No they ask us to drink orange juice. Do you want some?” She offers me a sip from her
glass of very orange-orange juice.

“Let me guess. That’s one part Fanta and three parts OJ.”

She smiles at me, “It’s good.”

“What’s the point?” I ask her as she follows me back to Naanis room.

“Well it makes the soda healthier. And makes the OJ more drinkable.”

I like it when she smiles. I like it when she is happy. I like it when she seems to forget for
a while all that she has to worry about. I want to hug her again and embed this moment of
happiness in her being, seal it in.

She walks up to Naani and sits beside her. She lets her arms wrap around her like a
shawl. They look so beautiful together. I always wanted to look like them, be coffee colored like
them. I hate my white skin and bulbous nose. And once I hated my mother for marrying my
father. But that was a long time ago. Nanni takes out a clove from her shiny silver snuffbox and
tucks it in between her teeth. I have never seen the snuffbox not shine. The clove will hide in the
corner of her mouth for hours fooling it self into believing that it has been spared while it begins to wither at the ends. She breathes her clove- fresh-cool-silvery breath on Ma. I can see it. I can feel it.

“Did you eat?” Naani asks. She probably asks her everyday. Ma always responds with a “yes”, dutifully, truthfully or not. The last time Ma asked me if I had eaten was when I was in middle school. I had not responded. I had walked out of the family room and locked myself up in my room upstairs. Ma never asked me again. Sometime I wish she would, maybe just once.

I wonder if I will ever have to sit beside Ma like this, hugging and protecting the last few moments, hours, days of her life together, entwined with my life. Will I be around? I wonder if I will ever fill a room with something that pervades each and every corner of this room right now. Like the mystical cinnamon and clove Gods or maybe Goddesses lived there in the room with Naani. And maybe she tucks them in her small shiny silver snuffbox for the night, kisses the foreheads and shoos away their bad dreams. Like she used to do for me.

I never had my friends for a sleep over. Well, not really, only once with Maren. And thanks to her, never again. Maren and I went to elementary school together. Our mothers had agreed to a sleep over when we were in the first grade. It was a Friday and the same day when Ma had decided to ground her spices. I was used to them. Maren was not.

The strong aroma of the cinnamon, cloves, green cardamoms, dark cardamoms, caraway seeds, allspice, nutmeg, and mace, all ground together fresh was to much for Maren. Her eyes watered and it scared her, us. Ma had to drive her back when the unexplained tears led to hysterical crying. I cried a lot that evening, before and after Maren left. I knew we would never again have a sleepover. Ma and Maren’s mother tried their best to organize another sleep over, but it didn’t work out. We never told them that Maren had begun to look at me suspiciously. As
if my white skin was a façade that I was someone else underneath all that whiteness that my dark
eyes were what I really was.

“Your daughter is wearing shorts again,” Naani points at my bare legs. “Doesn’t she feel cold?”

“It’s not that cold and I am coming from school. No body feels cold in California and definitely not on Long Island.”

“I went to college too. I always covered my legs.”

“Naani, you never went to school.”

“Of course, I did. I carried your Naanu’s tiffin box to his college everyday. That is why he could study longer and get good marks. And that is why he got a scholarship.”

Ma picks up Naani’s plate and places it over the cup and brushes off the bits of biscuit crumbs off her lap. She arranges the cup and plate duo neatly on the tray. She brushes Naani’s lap once again and rearranges the plate so that it is under the cup.

“Your Naani told the Jose joke to Dr. Greenway.”

“No. You didn’t. That’s a racist joke.” I can’t believe she did it. It is her favorite joke and told over and over again to different and the same people. We used to be embarrassed once but we stopped telling her anything about it ever since her illness. Although, some times we really had to be careful. But Francesca had found it really funny. She was tickled pink the first time she heard Naani say it in her unique accent. She probably hears it on all of Naani’s good days. Today is a good day.

“What did she say?” I ask Ma.

“Nothing. She just smiled.” Ma picks up the tray and is ready to go back to the kitchen.
I try to imagine a smile, something like a smile on Dr. Greenway’s stern face, her thin lips spreading wide to accommodate a sacrilegious smile, her cold blue eyes lighting up for a second, maybe not, her bulbous nose swelling up and turning red, maybe not. But it’s funny nevertheless. My nose is bulbous too. Not like my mother’s, chiseled sharp. My skin is white, like my father. My eyes are brown like Ma. And I smell like Dior.

I hear Francesca’s car pull into the driveway.

“I have to go. Francesca’s here,” Ma walks toward the door. “I need to go help Francesca with dinner. Robert is hosting a possible new recruit and he is bringing him home for dinner.” As if she reads the invisible question in the room and continues, “He likes Indian food.”

“Add lots of red chilli powder and garam masala. It will keep him up and awake for his interview,” Naani’s eyes are closed; her lips smile. Only she can think and say something like that.

“I think I’ll go get that tea now.” I follow Ma downstairs.

“Will you make us some tea Francesca?” My mother says to Francesca who was emptying out the grocery bags. “We can take care of the grocery.”

Ma hands me Green Giant’s cut Okra to stack into the freezer. “Have you told her yet?”

“Told her what?” The freezer is incredibly full. If it had seams it would burst. “Ma the freezer is about to burst. Where do you want me to stuff the okra?”

She walks over to the freezer, takes out a packet of frozen samosas and stashes the okra in its place. “There’s always some space. About Jose.”

“Not yet. I was trying to but she wanted me to have tea. And you know the rest.”

The smell of ginger, cinnamon, clove and cardamom fills the room. Francesca is making Chai since that’s what Ma always drinks. There’s enough water, milk, and spice in the saucepan
to make tea for at least four people. Which would mean a cup for Ma, a cup for me, one cup now for Francesca and another one for later. I drink my tea without milk, sugar, and the rest of the condiments. But when in my Ma’s house, drink tea like Ma and Francesca. She has been spending too much time around Naani and Ma, and drinking tea with lots of sugar. Poor Francesca. Poor me.

Poor me?

“Francesca, Chitu takes her tea without sugar…”

“That’s ok. I don’t mind.”

Francesca brings us two cups of terracotta colored tea. I reminds me of cold winter nights when Naani made me her famous sugary orange-yellow saffron milk. I thank Francesca. My mother never thanks her but a certain unseen camaraderie binds them.

I watch Ma’s slim terracotta fingers clutch the cup. Her tight and lightened knuckles are claiming the cup. I wonder if they will leave chocolate imprints when she lets go of the cup; chocolate brown spirals on white ceramic.

I let go of my cup. There are no imprints.

“Ma why don’t I look like you?”

“What do you mean?” She takes a sip out of her cup and adds, “Francesca, you went overboard with the cardamom.”

“Why don’t I have your coffee skin?”

“Because, luckily you got your father’s skin.”

“But I didn’t ask for it,” I look at her, “I don’t like it. I like yours.”

“Are you serious? Do you know how difficult it would have been for you if you did? I was so happy that you had your father’s complexion.”
“And nose.”

“Yeah… that too. And anyway wasn’t that why Jose fell in love with you. For your saffron white milk skin and because you’re pet name is “Chittoo”.” She laughs but asks, “What is it?”

“Nothing. It’s just…never mind.”

“No really. What is it? I promise I won’t laugh. For a while,” she adds.

“Ok. That’s it. I am leaving.” I don’t want to leave.

“I promise I won’t laugh.” She zips her mouth shut.

I don’t know what to say. There is so much to say. How do I say? I don’t look like you. I don’t look like them. I am like them but I am not them. They start speaking Spanish before they realize their mistake. Jose thought that too perhaps, but then he probably couldn’t help himself. They ask me how to make Bhaang.

“What the hell is Bhaang?” I really want to know.

“What?”

“Bhaang. What is it? And why am I supposed to know it?”

“I don’t see why you are supposed to know it, but it is a milk drink made with sugar, nuts and a plant product, preferably in a copper vessel for increased potency.” She looks quizzically at me. I feel my charade shattering. “Is that all you need to know?”


She sighs deeply, “It’s marijuana or what you guys call weed.”

“What does it taste like?”

“I am not sure. I have never tried it.” She’s gone back to stashing more stuff in the freezer. “But we can ask your father. He tried it once. Naamu kind of forced him.” She rips open
the packet of frozen Samosas and empties the contents on a baking sheet. “Three minutes in the microwave to thaw and fifteen minutes at 400 degree.” A waft of lemon and rosemary fills the kitchen as Ma opens the oven; baked potatoes for Naani. One of her good day treats.

“Ma, why don’t I smell like you? Like Naani?”

She looks at me, surprised. “You want to smell like us?”

I cannot bear to look at Ma. I know her too well to even attempt that.

“What do you mean smell like us? What do we smell like?”

But she is going to find out anyway. How do I tell her? What do I tell her? Maybe I should just tell her that they call me ABCD, which means American Born Confused Desi, and so I can’t really be a part of ‘their’ community because I was not really born in India. Oh no wait! I can be a part but they will always call me an ABCD the moment I leave. Just as we call them FOB when they arrive as fresh grad students their luggage smelling of cumin that their mothers have packed and hidden in the secret pockets of their oversized suitcase. Maybe I should even tell you that Jose broke up with me because I am not of his kind. Because I am not an American, although I am. Because I am not a white American.

“What’s going on Chitu?”

“Do you know Ma you are the only one who calls me Chitu? Everyone else calls me Chittoo, like I am some kind of a monkey.”

“It’s because they don’t have that alphabet in the English language. I don’t think your friends know that Naanu had a pet monkey called Chittoo.”

“I know.” The tea is really sweet.

“Do you want to talk some more?”
“No, I am good. I am good.” Francesca’s sugar has entered my blood stream. It is slowly making its way to my central nervous system through the several neurons. I feel ticklish but not in a nice way. It’s like tiny ants having a mutiny in my brain, wrecking havoc on my scalp.

I don’t know what I really want. I don’t know what I am mad about. I don’t know if I am mad because of Jose or because he is blind. His blindness is his problem. I know that. But I don’t understand.

“I want to smell like you Ma.” I hug Ma and allow her short Pantene smelling hair to suffocate me.

“I am wearing Ck Summer. It’s on my dresser. Naani doesn’t wear perfume.”

“No silly. I want to smell like cinnamon and cloves like the two of you do.”

“Come on. Don’t be silly.”

“No. I am serious.” I take her palms in my hand and close them over my face and inhale deeply. “See. This is what I am talking about.”

“You are being silly.”

“Am I?”

“Well if you spend time in the kitchen cooking Indian food you begin to smell of the spices. Even Francesca smells of garam masala. Ask her?”

“My husband loves it.” Francesca adds with a blush.

“That’s not what I mean,” I look straight at her, “and you know that.”

She looks at me, hard, as if she is adding up all the various numbers and solving all those equations that have been going on in her mind, behind the unseen curtains of her mind, that no one has access to but her.

“She gave me a clove,” she finally has a solution.
“What?”

“She gave me a clove.”

“She gave you a clove, gives you a clove everyday? And that’s why you smell like cinnamon? I can’t believe she is telling me this. “Great! I am leaving.”

“Don’t leave. She doesn’t give me a clove everyday. It was just that one clove…I don’t know. Go ask her.”

I rush to the stairs and up to her room. Her eyes are still closed but I can hear her soft snoring, like rumbling in a honeycomb. Ma comes in behind me. I walk up to her bed and I sit down beside it. And wait for her to wake up. Ma sits on the other side and softly nudges her. Maybe she just wants to make sure.

“Ma. Ma.”

Naani snorts, sudden and loud and opens her eyes. “What? Not dead yet. Just sleeping. Not any more thanks to you two.”

“Ma, Chitu wants to tell you about her engagement.”

“There’s no engagement. Jose broke up…we broke up.”

Mom looks at me. Her eyes look sad.

“So you won’t be Hose B any more,” comes Naani’s interjection.

I don’t know what to do but I am overcome by this uncontrollable urge to laugh and never stop. Ma is almost ready to burst but she is wondering how I am taking it and she really doesn’t know what to do.

One of has to let it out. Might as well be me.

We laugh.

I still want a clove.
“I want a clove.”

_Naani_ and Ma look at each other. They are not laughing.

“I told her,” Ma says.

“You had to tell her someday.” _Naani_ looks at me. Her eyes look cool, not cold. She looks like the mystical cool grandmother we all want to have but few do. None do.

“If she wants a clove she shall have a clove.” She takes out a clove out of her silver snuffbox and examines it closely with one eye, like the diamond smuggler from some stupid B movie.

“This should do.” She reaches out and places the clove in my palms and closes my fingers over them. “But remember, you may not smell like the clove or like cinnamon. You will smell like what you are. We can’t decide that, the clove can’t decide that for you. You alone are responsible for it.”

I nod my head. I open my palms and look down at the small, chocolate brown, dirty looking, dried bud in my palms that promises me something, everything that I don’t know. It is going to make me different. It is going to make me whole. I press it hard in my palms and press the palms to my heart as I offer a silent prayer to no deity in particular. I put the little hard bud in my mouth. My incisors have had years to train, for this moment maybe. They bite into it. It’s like a flood in my mouth, bitter, cold, fresh, strong, biting, all at once. It’s unimaginable. It feels like I am under a shower of eucalyptus oil that feels like water. It’s so green. It’s so fresh. It’s so bitter and so sweet. It’s like wet green mountains all around, their peaks hidden in the fog. It’s like the single droplet of water at the end of a bay leaf ready to drop. It drops on my tongue. It’s making a poet out of me. I am walking on cardamom pods bursting, but not. Their pregnancies massage my feet. Yes, right there. That’s the spot. A little to the right please. It’s so sweet.
Honey sweet. Thick and juicy. The reluctant runner. It is making me so sleepy. It’s like ginger.

It’s biting. It hits you in the throat and the pain shoots up the cochlea and bursts.

“Naani. I want to sleep.”

“Sure you do.”

***