HOME: A TALE OF FEW CITIES

by

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My mother says she remembers the broadcast of Jawaharlal Nehru's famous address to the nation on the eve of India's Independence. The day was August 14th, 1947. “At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom,” Nehru said. My mother says she was sitting on her bed huddled around a radio, some 600 miles from the Red Fort in Delhi, where Nehru, soon to be Prime Minister, gave his speech. In her hand, she held her favourite doll. If my father is around when my mother tells this story, he will question these details.

“I was wearing a red salwar-kameez,” my mother tells him.

“What does that have to do with anything?” my father asks.

“It had black flowers on it. I remember clear as day.”

“You cannot remember, Rupa,” my father says. “You were only five.”

“I remember everything,” my mother will reply, her voice soft and dangerous. My father will stop arguing. He knows when it is kinder to remain silent.

My grandmother, God rest her soul, refused to speak to anyone about this time. My grandfather, however, confirmed that yes, they heard the broadcast. They were hosting a party at their house in Hyderabad, Sindh. Nehru's voice crackled over the Murphy radio in the den, telling the gathered Constituent Assembly and the entire nation that long years ago they'd made a tryst with destiny. Everyone quieted down and began to listen. Yes, my grandfather said, it is entirely possible my mother was awake for this. He could not, however, verify what she was wearing.

The fact that my grandfather places the radio in a room full of two dozen people and not in a bedroom with my mother calls my mother's story into question. But I want to
give her the benefit of doubt. Memory is slippery at best; it's possible the solemnity of the moment and the events that followed soon after warped the crowded, brightly lit den into a darkened bedroom where my mother, five years old, lay sprawled on a bed, chin propped on her palm, listening to a timorous voice speak of freedom.

Outside, perhaps, the party continued. I imagine my maamu, my mother's younger brother, running around the den, chasing after Pasha, the family's yellow lab. They dodge servers bearing trays of hot mutton kebabs and breaded potato cutlets.

“Sanjay!” my grandmother chides. “Oh, this horrid child.” She calls for the ayah to take him to bed.

“Let him be,” my grandfather says. “It's a night to celebrate. He should enjoy it too.”

And it is a historic night: the end of nearly 200 years of foreign rule.

“We end today a period of ill fortune, and India discovers herself again,” Nehru says that night. The guests' drinks are refilled from carafes of brandy and Black Label that white-gloved palms delicately circulate around the room. Glasses clink, and a baby gurgles in my grandmother's arms. This is my mother's youngest sibling, only a few weeks old, a cherubic boy over whom my grandmother coos. His name is Azaad, which means free. Decades later, when I am born, my name will be derived from his: Azaadi. Freedom. The guests in the house are celebrating freedom. Independence. Nehru, too, mentions freedom in his address. He says that freedom is indivisible. Outside my grandparents' house, firecrackers burst in the air.

One state over, in Punjab, houses are burning. People are beaten on the streets. Hindus and Muslims massacre each other as they try to hold onto to their land. They don't know
that freedom is indivisible. They are not listening as Nehru cautions that disaster, too, is indivisible; one world cannot be split into isolated fragments. They only know that at the midnight hour, when India gains Independence, she will lose a part of herself as she gives birth to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The state of Punjab will be divided between India and this new country. So will Bengal. A new country carved out of an old one; its borders drawn in ink by a man named Radcliffe imported from Britain especially for the task. Lord Mountbatten, India's viceroy, has handed Radcliffe a map and told him his job is fairly simple: Hindu majority on one side, Muslim on the other.

First Radcliffe travels to Lahore. Here, he meets Mohammad Ali Jinnah, President of the All India Muslim League, soon to be Governor General of Pakistan. Next he travels east to Calcutta and sits down with Nehru to record his demands. Only then does Radcliffe realize what he has gotten himself into. He rolls up his sleeves, puts on his spectacles and sets to work. Radcliffe has three weeks to draw two lines on a piece of paper—one moves down the west of the country, cutting through Punjab, down Rajasthan and all the way to the end of Gujarat; the second cuts through the east, looping around Bengal. Two lines. How hard can it be?

Radcliffe's pen begins its downward descent. As he starts to cut through Punjab, Radcliffe's hand trembles. The ink blots. Radcliffe swears and pulls out a fresh copy of the map. Let it not be said that a village was given to the wrong country due to the tremor of his hand.

The line Radcliffe draws is not straight, but undulating. Here, with this loop, Lahore goes to Pakistan; a second loop in the opposite direction, and Amritsar finds itself in India. Radcliffe tries to be precise, but invariably he cuts some villages in half.
Neighbours become foreigners. Radcliffe's map is big, but not big enough. He cannot see the pockets of Hindu and Sikh areas he has isolated in Pakistan, cannot hear the alarmed cries of the Muslim communities left to fend for themselves in India. He lacks a certain dexterity of penmanship. Look, here, Radcliffe doesn't know it, but his line has just cut through a single house, putting some bedrooms in one country and others in the next.

When Radcliffe is finished cutting Punjab into two, his pen has not even traversed half of the 1,800 miles he has been tasked with delineating. His hands are slick and clammy on his pen; sweat drops from his brow and onto the paper below. Smudges of blue ink dot the map, obliterating Ferozepur, bleeding into the branches of the River Sutlej. Radcliffe curses the Viceroy; he curses Jinnah, curses Nehru, curses the blasted heat of this hellhole of a country. By the time Radcliffe's pen reaches the lands between Gujarat and Sindh, he is anxious to get home. He is thankful that this part is easy. With a final flourish of his hand, he allows the entire state of Gujarat to remain in India, and Sindh, my parents' birthplace, the lands of my grandparents' house, is gifted in its entirety to Pakistan.

Radcliffe wipes his brow and studies his creation. He has managed to divide 175,000 square miles of territory, housing 88 million people. Fourteen million of these inhabitants will not feel safe in the country to which they are allocated. They will try to migrate between the borders by air and sea; train, foot, bullock. One million will die.

Radcliffe flees the country days before the plans are officially published. Perhaps, he had predicted the events that would follow. I imagine him and Mountbatten poring over the map, their lips wet with the gin-and-tonics the British drank to ward off malaria. Radcliffe nervously cracks his knuckles as the last Viceroy of India studies the plans.
Mountbatten looks up, his face pale. “Well, old chap,” he says. “That's a job done. What say you make a dash for it before the natives have your head?”

I know this is a caricature, yet every time I play the scene in my head, this is how it appears—the gin, the cracking knuckles, the parody of a British accent.

On the night of Nehru's Independence speech, two days before the divisions are publicly announced, rumours are already circulating. Swarms of refugees crash into each other as they move in opposite directions across the land. There are no colonizers left to fight; a newly-independent nation turns on itself instead. The British legacy of divide and rule persists even in their absence: a parting gift. Hindus butcher Muslims. Muslims burn Hindus. Friends become enemies, religion the new nationality. The streets of Lahore are bathed in blood. It flows in rivulets across Radcliffe's line. Blue ink, not yet dry, is leached crimson.

At my mother's house in Hyderabad, Sindh, however, the party is still roaring. Here, Radcliffe's strokes are still a deep and reassuring indigo. My grandparents are aware that Sindh, with its largely Muslim population, has been awarded to Pakistan. Yet, though they are Hindu, they are not worried. They are thankful that Sindh has remained intact, that it has not been packaged and parcelled off between two countries.

Sindh. My whole life I have wondered about this magical land. The only time my usually reticent grandmother, or my naani, as I called her, would break her silence about the Partition was to defend her lost place of birth. Sindh was not Punjab, she would insist. Sindh was not Bengal.

“Even when we were attacked, our houses burned, our attackers weren’t the Sindhi Muslims. They were refugees who came from outside. Sindhis would never turn
on each other. You must understand this, Azu.” Azu. My naani was the first to give me this nickname. She claimed Azaadi was too similar a name to Azaad, my baby uncle, her youngest son.

“That’s the point,” my mother would reply. But my naani was a stubborn woman, as insistent in her silence about the events that followed in the months after Partition as she was on the family calling me by a shortened name. When she died, I heard many of the condolers who came to offer sympathy to my mother and Sanjay maamu tell them she’d “gone to a better place.” For me, this place is always Sindh.

On this August night in 1947, though, Sindh is still my naani’s home and not just a paradise relegated to the confines of nostalgia. Now, with Nehru half-way through his address, there are no Hindus or Muslims in my grandparents’ house in Hyderabad. Only Sindhis. Children of the same soil, they tell one another.

In three months, that man sitting on the brown ottoman who is stuffing his fifth kebab of the evening into his mouth, that damp-eyed lady fiddling with the radio knob and shushing the crowd, that lovely couple making faces at my baby uncle Azaad, will not live in this city or this state. In this moment, though, nobody in this room believes that a line drawn across a map by a British gentleman will have any lasting impact on their lives. They bask in the warm glow of 12-year-old Scotch and Nehru's words, and in the false sense of invincibility that cloaks the very rich.

Oh yes, this is a rich family, an exquisite house. Look back into this party, and notice the intricate Italian marbling on the floors, the grand chandelier casting its twinkling light onto the thick carpet in the den. Focus out. This is not a house, but a mansion, built in heavy stone with ornate brass doors that will not burn easily. This is
important. Stone and metal saved my mother's family. The land on which this mansion stands, however, will burn fast. Tracts of field stretch farther than the eye can see, growing rice and fruits and barley. See there, on the far right, a few miles out, are the modest homes of my grandfather’s tenants.

*So much land,* my mother will say. So much land. But one cannot flee with one's fields.

My father, who came from a family of even wealthier landowners, will agree. “You cannot pack land into a suitcase, Azu,” he will tell me, his eyes wet and clouded with acres of smoke.

“Maybe if Gandhi had been there.” My mother speaks in that special tone my parents' generation adapts when they talk about the man-God.

And where is Gandhi?

Nehru misses him too. He mentions him in his address. “On this day our first thoughts go to the architect of this freedom, the father of our nation,” he says.

But the father of our nation is not part of Nehru's audience. He is angry with Nehru and the Congress for giving in to the idea of Pakistan. This was not the India of Gandhi's dream. The India of Gandhi's dream no longer exists. Now it resides only on the last pages of my parents' passports under the column for Place of Birth. “Hyderabad, Sindh,” these passports proclaim, and then in parentheses, almost as an afterthought, “(Undivided India).”

Perhaps Nehru feels Gandhi's anger. “We have been unworthy followers and have strayed from his message,” the Prime Minister is saying on my grandparents' old Murphy. Gandhi does not hear this. He is in Bengal trying to calm communal tensions. He will
succeed. He will begin what will be known as the Calcutta Fast and shame the state into compliance. This is Gandhi's way, not brute force, but guilt and emotional blackmail—a technique millions of the fathers and mothers of our nation will use and perfect for decades to come.

Gandhi will take a few months to travel to the northern parts of India where my grandparents' party is currently underway. He will coax the city of Delhi into peace, and vow to visit Pakistan next, although it will be too late for my grandparents. A few days before Gandhi can begin his journey across the border, he will be shot three times in the chest by a man who newspapers label a Hindu fanatic.

Does Nehru see this? Does he carry within him the silent knowledge of what he's set in motion? Can he hear the bullets of a Beretta entering his mentor's heart? Can he smell the singed bodies on the ghost trains that will cross the newly-formed border and soon arrive in India full of Hindu corpses? Does he know that Hindus, too, will rape and slaughter thousands of Muslim refugees fleeing to Pakistan?

I have seen the video of Nehru giving his speech. It shows a man who looks older than his 58 years. Pockets of dark flesh sag beneath his eyes. He is dressed in the Hindu colour of mourning—a starched white kurta and white pyjamas. A pointed cap, also white, completes his ensemble. He addresses an audience dressed similarly—an aerial shot gives the illusion of a white blanket draped around the Indian Parliament Hall. Zoom in closer and the blanket becomes a writhing sea of people clad in white. They look as though they are attending a funeral rather than the birth of a nation.

The guests milling around my grandparents' house cannot see this. They hear only the clipped precision of Nehru's British-influenced English accent. They don't know how
haggard he looks. They don't know that even as he promises “to bring freedom and opportunity to the common man; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease,” years of struggle lie ahead: communal riots, an Indo-China war, a state of Emergency brought about by Nehru's own daughter. They don't know that in a few months their lives will look very different. But Nehru, staring sunken-eyed at his audience, must have known. How much effort it must have taken for him, then, to keep his voice even, to make sure it didn't crack.

Nehru alludes briefly to the imminent division of land. “We think also of our brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries and who unhappily cannot share at present in the freedom that has come,” he says. “They are of us and will remain of us, and we shall be sharers in their good and ill fortune alike.”

My grandfather embraces his neighbour, who will soon die thrashing wildly, a burning tire squeezed around his torso, on the next plot of land. Do they know that Nehru is talking about them? Does my naani, sitting quietly in the corner, baby nestled in her arm, know that her daughter will one day pledge allegiance to another country? That my mother, like my father, will always think of herself as a refugee in Nehru's India? That my parents will move to America and call a small town in Massachusetts home? That I will grow up here speaking a language I call English, but my parents call American? That I will attend the public school four blocks down the road? One day, I will come home and tell my mother that it was the American Government that ran the Indians out of their homes and seized their lands.

“It wasn't the British, Ma. Or the Muslims, or the Pakistanis.” I will say this gently, not wanting my mother to feel foolish about her ignorance.
“Oh, Azu,” my mother says, once the confusion clears from her face. “We are not those kinds of Indians.”

Sitting at the party, my naani cannot predict any of this. She doesn't know that not all Indians are the same.

Nehru says “Jai Hind!” and ends his address.

Three months after Nehru’s speech, Muhajirs, the Muslim refugees from Punjab, pour into the city of Hyderabad and demand homes in return for the ones they have left behind in India. They ask the Hindus to go across the border where they belong. “We are all Sindhis,” the residents tell them. My father, a historian, has told me that Sindhis was not a word the Muhajir understood. They only understood Indian and Pakistani. Hindu and Muslim. They only understood the difference between having a roof above their heads and dying on the streets.

My grandparents flee their mansion with their three children in the middle of the night, carrying with them whatever clothes and jewellery and money they can find in the house even as their fields burn around them. Their driver, Abdul, hides them in his house. No one will think to look here, he assures them. This is a fully Muslim quarter of the city. This last part he says almost apologetically.

My naani looks down at my uncle Azaad, asleep in her arms, trying to hide the apology that has sprung up in her own eyes. Her family of five has filled Abdul's one-room hut. My mother and maamu lie on the only cot in the room. The family car is parked behind the hut in a darkened alley, a behemoth that will almost surely give away their location in the light of day. Pasha barks, breaking the silence. My grandfather pats him gently.
“Take care of him for us, Abdul,” he tells his driver.

“I will keep him safe until you return,” Abdul says.

This time it is my grandfather who looks away. In her corner of the cot, my mother whispers to her doll, clutched in her hands ever since her parents grabbed her out of bed an hour earlier. My mother strokes the doll's shiny hair. “Don't be scared, Neeli,” she says. She shuts the doll's plastic eyelids over its glassy pupils, wraps it in my naani’s shawl and falls asleep. Abdul wakes the family up two hours later. He has heard of a special refugee train that will be leaving from Hyderabad for Gujarat. They must leave before the sun rises. They rush out into the night, my mother clutching her doll still bundled in a shawl, my naani shushing baby Azaad’s cries.

Abdul leaves my mother's family at the train. “Allah be with you,” he says softly, clasping my grandfather's hand.

I try to imagine my mother’s family turning toward the train and away from Sindh. I wonder if my grandfather knew he would not be returning, if he took a moment’s pause, a last long look at his beloved Hyderabad before stepping off the platform. My mother would have been whispering to her swaddled doll. I imagine Sanjay maamu beside her, holding her free hand. I have tried so hard to picture what my mother and maamu might have looked like at this age. Instead, all I see are their adult faces superimposed on children’s bodies. Their oversized heads wobble on their miniature frames like a caricaturist’s sketch or the bobblehead figurines I collected as a child. Only my uncle Azaad looks as he should, or rather, looks as most three-month olds appear to me—tiny and red-faced. I imagine him fast asleep in my naani’s arms as my mother’s family boards the train.
Just before morning, twenty miles from the Indian border, the train crashes to a halt. The lights in my grandparents' compartment go out. They hear the screams of women being dragged into the surrounding fields. Stones clang against the metal railway car.

My father, another Sindhi refugee, remembers his escape, too. He relates it to me as though I were one of his students, lingering on historic details—the names of politicians, the cultural context of the decade, the mindset of the Muhajir. Maybe, this is why it doesn’t resonate with me as much as my mother’s story does. Then again, my mother’s is the more tragic story, and tragedy, as my mother says, has a way of searing your soul.

There is one part of my father’s story that has always stuck with me, though. His family’s escape was more harried than my mother’s, with less time to collect any belongings. They ran onto their roof and climbed over their compound walls, into their neighbour’s property, a property that my father swears was owned by a cousin of the Bhutto's.

“Benazir Bhutto's uncle saved us,” he always says.

My father's escape plays in my mind like a Bond movie. Slim and long-legged at fifteen, he runs sure-footedly across red tiled roofs, leaping walls and fences.

My mother scoffs. “Don't tell ridiculous stories.”

“It is not a story, Rupa. It is true.”

“Well, tell me, then, what were you wearing?”

Embellished or not, these experiences have stayed with my parents. I didn't realize until I was in my teens that most of my friends' parents did not carry $1,000 in their wallets at all times. My parents do not believe in safety deposit boxes, just as they
do not believe in land. Even after over 25 years in this country, they still rent their house. They keep bank accounts out of practicality, but their jewellery is hidden behind a false wall. They’ve hidden stacks of cash in various places around our house: under mattresses, deep in the recesses of each cupboard. My parents pack a week's worth of clothes for a two-day trip. When we go to the movies, my mother carries a dozen sandwiches, bottles of water, and a flask of soup. On August 15th of every year, my mother won’t pick up the phone. She can’t stand the thought that it might be one of the few Indian friends my parents have in America calling to wish them “Happy Independence Day.” I refer to this behavior as my parents’ refugee complex.

“You won't understand, Azu,” my father tells me. “If needed, we will be ready in 15 minutes to leave this place and never come back.”

As a child, I wanted to reassure my parents, but didn’t have the words. Who would partition Massachusetts from the rest of the country, I wondered. Which mobs would attack our two-storey home in this cold New England suburb in the middle of the night? What famine was going to hit our neighbourhood AMC cinemas?

My maamu, too, laughs at this. But if you ask him about that first Independence Day, he will tell you he had a holiday from school and all the children in the neighbourhood were given free samosas. Somehow, I trust this memory less than I do my father's accounts of leaping across roofs, or my mother's insistence about what she wore the day Nehru spoke. Sanjay maamu does not carry around wads of cash or understand the concept of an undivided India. He was only two years old then and is not cursed with my mother's memory. He doesn't remember the journey across the border. Unlike my mother, his gaze is not always turned toward that train.
Look back now into that train full of panicked Sikhs and Hindus trying to make it across the border. My grandparents are struggling to rush out of their compartment before the rioting mobs can reach them. My grandfather puts Sanjay maamu on his back, holds my mother in his arms. My naani picks up her blanketed baby in one hand and carries as many belongings as she can in her other. They manage to run out into the dark undetected. They hide in nearby bushes. My mother keeps her face down in the mud; my grandfather places one finger to my maamu’s lips. The mob reaches the compartment my mother's family had occupied just minutes back. See how it burns.

Even from the bushes, my naani can feel the heat sting her eyes. She grasps her baby closer to her bosom, but, wait— the cheek that touches her neck is cold and hard. She looks down at the swaddled bundle in her arms and is met by the glassy-eyed stare of my mother's doll. No! What has she done? She looks up at the burning train and looks down again, shaking the bundle, willing it into life.

My grandfather drags my naani back as she scrambles up. He puts his weight over her body and covers her mouth with his hands. My naani struggles before going limp. The mob disappears, and the train, with its skeleton carriages, its compartments piled high with charred bodies, moves slowly forward into the night. Only then does my grandfather unclamp his hand from my naani's mouth. His palm is lined with an even row of red ridges from where she has bitten down. Only then does my naani let out a long, slow wail that blends into the mournful blare of the distant train. It is my mother who told me this part of the story. And, for once, my father does not argue with her memory. The specificity of grief is undeniable.
I thought about my mother’s story today as I affixed the final signatures on a document that would finalize my divorce. When my naani spoke of Sindh, she’d say it was so I’d understand that our family came from “good people.” When my father speaks of his time there, it’s so that I understand my history. But my mother talks about Sindh only when she wants to remind me of one thing: You can’t get too attached to anything. “Cherish what you have when you have it, Azu. But remember, nothing is permanent,” she says. “Not your possessions, not your family, not even the land beneath your feet.”

My problem is that I always get attached—to bobblehead figurines, to the idea of a warm country 10,000 miles from where I grew up, to distant mothers and distant men. I no longer need my mother to repeat her story, recite variations of her advice when this happens. Her voice automatically plays in my head.

Instead of taking heed, though, my mother’s words have always made me wonder how different she might have been if she had just left her doll in her bed on that fateful night. Would my uncle Azaad still be alive? Would we still live in India? If she had forgotten her doll could she, then, also forget how my naani continued to hold on to that doll as their family slowly walked the twenty miles to the Indian border? Would she no longer be haunted by the smell of burning plastic as my naani cremated the doll once they reached the refugee camp, as my grandfather buried it under a small stone, the word ‘Azaad’ scratched roughly onto its surface?

I told my ex-husband this story before I introduced him to my parents for the first time. We were driving to my parents’ house. When I reached the part about my naani shaking the doll in her arms as my uncle Azaad was burned alive, he stopped the car. He took my hands in his and pulled me into an embrace. “I’m so sorry,” he said, patting my
back. He rocked me back and forth making small shushing sounds as I tried to say more.

“It’s okay, baby,” he said. “It’s okay. I understand.”

He didn’t realize I hadn’t gotten to my point yet. Maybe that should have been a sign that things wouldn’t last. Perhaps if he hadn’t reacted in such a hurry, I would have told him what I have never told anyone before. Devastating as my mother’s story might be, the moment I dwell on, the moment I have always dwelled on, is one my mother has never mentioned.

It is the moment just after Nehru's speech. I imagine the guests are outside on the lawns. Inside, the household staff clears away half-empty plates; forks clink as they put silverware back into drawers and cabinets. My mother is still happy. My infant uncle Azaad is still alive, sleeping in his crib. It is 11:59 pm. In less than a minute, Nehru's stroke of midnight will finally arrive.

And then, it does.

The seconds hand on the clock hits 12. A servant polishes a piece of silver. A volley of fireworks erupts across the night sky. A baby wakes up and starts crying. A new country is born. An old one ceases to exist.

***
THE AYAH

Anjali caught her previous ayah stealing and terminated her employment. It was a matter of a few rupees. Anjali knew it was easier to let a few rupees go than to find someone new to cook, clean, and care for five-year-old Tara and two-year-old Karishma; but, the woman hadn’t even bothered to wait for Anjali to leave the room. She'd attempted to swipe the money from the dresser when Anjali turned her back. Anjali turned around, the ayah looked up, and their eyes met. It was too late for either of them to pretend it hadn't happened; letting the woman stay would have been embarrassing for them both. Anjali is a compassionate woman; she understands circumstance, understands desperation. She also knows there is a fine line between being compromising and being a pushover.

Now, a new ayah has arrived. She comes with a recommendation from Anjali’s friend whose maid is from the same village as this new girl. The new girl is young and not unattractive, which Anjali knows can be a problem. The girl is told that the job is long-term. The family is not looking for someone who will quickly get married and leave. That won't be an issue, the girl assures Anjali.

“How old are you?” Anjali asks.

“Eighteen.”

Anjali is aware that these responses might be false, but she must be practical. Her husband Sanjay is far too busy working toward being promoted to Senior Director at his company to take time off right now, and so, the longer it takes to find a new ayah, the longer Anjali is forced to take leave from her job as an airline stewardess.

Anjali looks the new girl up and down. She seems clean. She comes from a small Christian village on the west coast of India. Rather than traditional Indian attire, she
wears the printed western dresses commonly donned by women in her region. The girl's dress is a decent length, cutting at her knees; her cleavage is modestly covered. Anjali deems the girl satisfactory.

The new *ayah* puts her belongings into a cupboard that has been cleared out for her use while Tara and her sister watch from a corner. Tara longs for her previous *ayah*: her old-fashioned saris, her wrinkled smiles and mustard-scented embraces. The new girl smells of a cloying perfume. The girl turns toward Tara and her sister and smiles. She tells them her name is Jasanta.

“But call me Jessie,” she says.

They call her Jasanta.

* Within Jasanta's first week, the family decides to drive to a hill-station outside Bombay for a four-day getaway. Jasanta is put up as caretaker in a room with Tara and Karishma. She manages to bring out in them the obvious in-your-face meanness so particular to children. They call her names to her face and behind her back. They make up stories about how nasty she is to them, how she hits and scolds them. They tell their parents, exaggerating and inventing details.

“Should we say something?” Sanjay levels his gaze at Anjali when they’re alone.

“Oh, let them be, Sanjay. They'll get used to each other eventually.”

Tara and Karishma play games in which they are the heroes and Jasanta the nemesis; they quietly creep up and ambush her. They mimic rifle rat-a-tats, and scream battle cries while jumping on her. But Jasanta doesn't yell at them or complain to their
parents. At night, she cries herself to sleep; yet, in front of them, she doesn’t waver. She knows they will not sympathize with her but use her vulnerabilities as points of attack.

Jasanta is given a few hours off in the evenings. She takes a walk in the cool air of the hillside. The hotel is high up on a precipice. Various lookout points are labelled for tourists. Lover's Point is near a particularly sharp drop; it’s fabled that several star-crossed lovers have jumped from here. On her second day at the hill-station, Jasanta sits a few feet away from Echo Point. She observes people standing at its edge, hands cupped around their mouths, shouting in the direction of the empty cave across the chasm. Their disembodied voices echo in her direction. *Hello. I love you.* Jasanta watches the sun dip below the horizon, growing bigger and cooler as it bathes the valley below in a crimson hue. She looks down on a village and remembers the life she left behind. Twilight descends. Jasanta turns away and walks back filled with new resolve.

On the third night at the hotel, Jasanta awakens to a faint sobbing. She moves towards the children's bed to find Tara crying in her sleep.

“Tara . . . Tara.” Jasanta calls the child's name softly, and then a little louder, gently shaking her shoulder.

Tara wakes up with a start. “Wait . . . fast! The plane . . .” Her face is flushed.

“Hush. It was a dream.” Jasanta pours Tara a glass of water from one of the complimentary bottles on the bedside table. She strokes the girl's back and is unsettled by the instinct, remembering her mother doing the same to her when she was a child. Jasanta can feel Tara’s racing heartbeat in the small of her back and tries to lull her back to sleep, but the child holds on, digging her nails into Jasanta's skin. Jasanta scoops Tara up in her arms and carries Tara to her own bed. She holds the child against her, gently stroking
Tara's head until she feels the rhythmic rise and fall of her breathing. Jasanta wakes up the next morning to find the spot next to her empty, and Tara asleep in her own bed next to Karishma. Tara says nothing on waking, but she doesn't plot against Jasanta that day either.

Jasanta soon becomes Jessie. Her once despised clothes, her youth, her perfume, become prized. Above all, she speaks English. Not just the few broken sentences or the customary thank yous and welcome-very-muchs that Tara's and Karishma's other aayahs had fumbled through, but what sounds to Tara like real honest-to-goodness English. Jessie calls Tara and Karishma by their names rather than "baby" as other aayahs have; she calls their parents "sir" and "madam," rather than "sahib" and "memsahib". Tara takes this as her own accomplishment—a skill none of her friends' aayahs can claim.

“Jessie, do you want to play cricket with us?” Tara asks in front of her friends.

“No, Tara. I am fine-thank-you just sitting here.”

Tara smiles and runs off, her point made.

Sometimes, Tara tags behind Jessie as she cooks in the kitchen, pulling on Jessie’s skirt, and singing the song she’s heard on one of her father’s old cassettes:

Jessie paint your pictures about how it's going to be.
By now I should know better, your dreams are never free,
Oh Jessie, you can always sell any dream to me.

Jessie scolds her and claims that the vegetables won’t cook properly because of Tara’s tuneless voice, but she smiles while saying so.

Jessie often teaches Tara recipes and tips for some of the dishes she cooks. “To get the smell of fish off your fingers, wash them with lemon,” she tells her once. Jessie's fingers are puckered and red. Grey scales stick to the sides of the trashcan and on the kitchen floor. Slices of fish lie on a nearby plate, neatly filleted from their bones. A pile
of fish heads rest on another plate; Jessie saves them for her own lunch. Tara looks away from the open fish eyes, the whites around the pupils pinkened with burst capillaries. Jessie continues her lesson. “Fish should not be bought in months that do not have an ‘r’ in them. That is bad season for fish. That is why the price is also higher. But your Daddy, he likes his fish every day. So I’m buying fish in the middle of July, even when the fisherman is selling them at four times the price. Bleddy rip-off, Tara, I tell you.”

Tara questions her father about this and reports back. “It’s an old wives’ tale.”

Jessie harrumphs.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” Tara parrots.

“Tell me, Tara, which are the months without an ‘r’?”

“Um, June, May, Apr…no, wait…May, June, July, August.”

“Right. The monsoon months. The sea gets too rough to fish. The fisherman doesn’t take his boat out that often. So the fish on the market is less and not always fresh.” She lets Tara think about this. “Your Daddy is right, Tara, you shouldn’t believe everything you hear. But you have to know all facts before you decide whether or not there is some truth to what the old wife says, no?”

Tara decides it’s best not to impart this bit of wisdom to her father, but much to his chagrin she refuses to eat fish until the monsoons are over.

In the mornings, Jessie forces the children to drink their milk no matter how late they are for school. Sometimes, she comes down in the lift with them to take the empty glasses back up. She takes the children down to the compound in the evenings. They play endless games of cricket with their friends while Jessie gossips with the other ayahs of
the building. If the children wander out of her field of vision, she shouts to them to come back and not get into any mischief.

“Such mischievous children,” she says, pronouncing it as mis-chew-us.

For years, Tara will think that’s the way the word is said.

* 

Anjali gets a promotion; she now works in the first class cabin. The number of flights on her schedule increases. She is asked to mentor and train some of the newer recruits. She remembers the thrill of her first flight, how her stomach had caved when they'd hit a patch of turbulence during the descent. She’d silently rehearsed the emergency landing procedures in her head as she sat strapped in the crew seat, knuckles white-clenched at her sides. When they'd landed safely, some of the passengers had clapped. Anjali, too, clapped, but stopped abruptly when she caught a senior steward's amused smile.

These new recruits won't applaud. Even her passengers rarely do any more. The 80s are ending; it is already the last year of the decade, and now, more and more Indians fly frequently. Anjali remembers how prestigious it was when she first started, how many people applied for her job and how few were hired. You are the best of the best, new hires were told. The best-looking. The most refined.

*An airhostess should be part lover, part mother*, her mentor had told her. Keep your mouth lipstickked and your nails polished. Serve with a warm touch. Make your passengers feel safe. Smile coyly, but tell them firmly that their seatbelts must be fastened, their seats upright on take-off; that they cannot smoke if they're in a non-smoking section, and never, never, in the toilets. Seduce them with adjectives when you recite the menu—the chicken breast is succulent, the roulade browned in wine, the fish
served in a *delicate* marinade of herbed butter. Cut off their free supply of cocktails if they become unruly.

“You are the finest of the fine,” Anjali tells her recruits. “Look your best, do your best.” There is only so much she can teach them, she knows. The rest they will slowly learn for themselves over the first year of their job.

In *her* first year, she’d stumbled in the aisle over a sleeping passenger's protruding foot and spilled some coffee on him from the pot she was carrying to serve. The gentleman continued to snore gently, unaware of the brown liquid running down his shoulder and pooling at his crotch. Earlier, she'd watched this passenger wash down a sleeping pill with his third whiskey in as many hours. A nervous flier. It was the dead period, an hour after the dinner service, when the cabin lights were dimmed and most of the passengers huddled inside their blankets. Anjali walked away, confident that no one had noticed the gaffe, but guilt nagged at her when she reached the galley. She returned with a wet towel and began gently patting down the sleeping passenger's shirt. She hesitated when she reached the puddle near the man's zipper, but then shrugged and continued. *Part mother, part lover.*

“You missed a spot.” The voice startled her. She looked up and found herself staring into the shining eyes of the man sitting next to her sullied passenger. The man had been silent till then, his head resting on the window. She’d assumed he was asleep. He grinned at her, his teeth bright even in the darkness.

“Didn't realise *this* was part of the service.” He glanced down at her hand, which still hovered over the passenger's crotch.
She'd straightened up and blushed. It wasn’t a line many men could have carried off without sounding at least a little creepy, yet she found herself laughing. There was something open and honest and confident about his face that she found appealing. Six months later, he’d convinced her to marry him. She was only 22, twelve years his junior. They had a clandestine marriage. It was against airline policy for married hostesses to continue working, and Sanjay hadn't been earning enough yet to support them both. She kept this secret in her chest where it fluttered against her heart. A pilot would smile at her; her co-workers would invite her for a drink after a long flight, not wanting to go back to their empty apartments just yet. She would look away or decline the invitation, feeling her secret unfurl. The thought of her husband waiting in bed caused an unexpected desire to expand in the hollow space between her throat and sternum.

The airline lifted the policy four years later; by then, it didn't matter. She was pregnant with Tara, and Sanjay convinced her to put in her papers. Three years later, she gave birth to her younger child. Suddenly, she found herself just shy of thirty, surrounded by diapers, spit up and meandering conversations about why do we go to school, why do I have to eat peas, why does the baby cry so much? Why, Mommy, why? Days passed in which the only adult face she saw was Sanjay's, when he came home from work. Anjali watched Sanjay take off his suit, unknott his tie and sit back on the burnt orange recliner in the living room, happy to be home after a full day's work. She felt something close to hatred bubble in her gut.

“I think it's time I went back to my job,” she finally told him.

He seemed surprised. He was making enough money, he told her. She didn’t have to work anymore. “I want to work,” she replied.
“The children are still so young, Anjali. Why don’t we wait until they’re older?”
“It’ll be tougher to get the airline to take me back once I cross thirty.”
“But you know how that job is. The hours. The travel.”
“I’ve done it before.”
“That was different. We have children now, a family.”
“So why don’t you stay back and look after them?”
“Come on, Anjali. Isn’t this what you wanted?”
“No. You were the one who wanted to get married so fast. Not me.”
“Oh. So what? You’re saying this was a mistake?”
“Don’t twist my words, Sanjay. Look, of course I love our family. But that can’t be it. I haven’t seen my friends in ages; they all work. The only people I meet are other mother’s at Tara’s playgroup and I swear to god, I cannot have one more conversation about paediatricians or at how many months my child was potty-trained. Our kids are great, but this,” she gestured at the toys splayed across the living room, “this was your dream. Not mine.”
“Well when you put it that way, there’s really no way for me to disagree without seeming like an asshole is there?”
“We can use the extra money to hire someone to help with the children. I’ll find a way to make it work.”

And at first she did. She tried to do non-stop return flights so that she wasn't away from home for more than twenty hours at a time. But in the few years she'd been away, the airline had grown and begun to fly to new destinations further and further from Bombay. She found that she was sometimes required to do layovers in various cities. At
first she was hesitant, but soon she realised she enjoyed these stopovers. She saw the Louvre in Paris, went to flea markets in Madrid, the gold souk in Dubai. The crew was young, made up of twenty- to thirty-somethings. They used their travel allowances at various bars and clubs. They staggered back to their hotel at six in the morning and rushed to the airport to make it on time for their next shifts.

Now, Anjali sometimes forgets about her other life and is almost surprised when she sees the familiar blue tarp rooftops of the Bombay slums as the plane descends on the tarmac. She forgets about the sweat and humidity in the outside air until she steps out of the airport. She is vaguely astonished to find her husband in her bed when she finally reaches home. She feels twinges of guilt when she doesn’t see her children for days at a time. But the sudden exhaustion she feels the moment she steps off the plane overrides her guilt; the nicotine inhaled in the galleys, the quick shots of vodka the crew take on the sly to kill the pain of last night’s hangover, the discomfort of heavy uniforms and high heels, catches up with her.

She tries to remember to bring back souvenirs from every trip. India has yet to open a free market with the rest of the world, and the exotic cheeses, the tinned peaches, the Australian kiwis are all still novelties. She distributes these to her children and husband and feels a little better. She is sharing with them the different parts of the world she has seen. Her husband smiles at her on these mornings, holds her close, rubs her shoulders while they share a newspaper. It helps that he’s been busy climbing up the corporate ladder; it helps that the children seem to like the new ayah.

*
After a year in Bombay, Jessie is used to the hustle of everyday life in the city. She was initially disconcerted that the madam was rarely around. Now, she admires the fact that the city allows the madam such liberty. The days pass by and Jessie sees less and less of the madam. In the few interactions Jessie has with the madam, though, the madam is kind. She is generous with Jessie, often giving her the old clothes that she no longer wears. Jessie likes the way the madam's jeans hug her body, change the shape of her hips. The madam's old cotton t-shirts feel soft and cool against Jessie's collarbones.

The more time the madam spends away from home, the more the kitchen fills up with exotic meats, liquor, tinned fruits and cheeses. The madam is generous with these too, telling Jessie she is welcome to help herself. Jessie learns the cheeses with holes in them are often Swiss; they have names she can’t pronounce like Emmentaler. The one that smells like unwashed socks is Limburger. She likes the cream cheeses the best, and often slathers them on the evening toast she has with her chai. Jessie has been told not to touch the liquor and feels no inclination to do so. Their pungent aromas remind her of her father on the nights he’d beat her mother; sated, he’d pass out on the sole cot in the house, his shoes still dangling from his feet.

After one trip, the madam brings home a bag of small rounded pieces of cheese in a thick red covering. Jessie bites into one in front of Tara and Karishma only to spit it out. Tara bursts out laughing. “You’re not supposed to eat the outside, stupid. That’s Babybell. The red stuff is wax. Peel it off and then take a bite.” Karishma imitates her sister’s laughter, twittering in hiccups until Tara shushes her and shoos her away.

“It’s fine,” Jessie says. “I don’t want any pish-posh cheeses. Where I come from, we make our own cheese. Fresh from goat’s milk. Better than this baby bells nonsense.”
“Will you bring some back for us when you go home?” Tara asks.

“I’m not going home.”

“Why?”

“I can’t.”

“But why?”

“Because I ran away. Now enough, Tara. I have work to do.”

Tara follows Jessie into the balcony, helping her take down the clothes that have been drying in the sun. Karishma runs out to join them, picking up one of her father’s shirts and tying it around her neck like a cloak. She runs up and down the balcony, the shirt billowing behind her, its sleeves kissing the balcony floor.


Tara grabs a hold of her little sister and snatches the shirt off her neck. She shoos her away once more. “Why did you run away, Jessie?” Tara asks, handing the now-wrinkled shirt back to Jessie.

“My father wanted me to get married.”

“Who?”

“A man who was much older than me. He agreed to pay my father for my hand in marriage.”

“Didn’t your mother say anything?”

“She had already died. And where would he have listened to her, anyway?”

“Were you in love with someone else?”

“No,” Jessie replies. “All men are useless good-for-nothing fellows.” She quickly excludes her brother from this list. “My brother is one of the good ones,” she says.
“What about Dad?” Tara asks. “He’s nice.”

Jessie contemplates this. “Yes, all right. Your father is fine. But the rest of them are all useless. Useless good-for-nothings who only want one thing from a woman.”

But she refuses to tell Tara what that one thing is.

She repeats the comment to Ram, the Mehtas’ driver, later that evening. They sit together in the building compound as he regales her with stories about his employers. “The memsahib thinks Avi babu is going for coaching classes in the afternoons,” he tells her about the Mehtas’ 15-year-old-son, “but really, he makes me take circles around Malabar Hill as he kisses his girlfriend in the backseat. Well, she thinks she’s his girlfriend. She doesn’t know that last week he was kissing the Sharmas’ daughter, and next week there’ll probably be another girl.”

Jessie tsks. “All you men only want one thing from a woman.”

“Aye, Jessie. Don’t say that. You know it’s not true. Look at me. Sitting here so nicely, not even trying to hold your hand after you slapped it away the last time.” He grins broadly and Jessie can’t help but smile back. She lets him take her hand this time and is surprised at the softness of his skin. His arms are smooth, hairless as a baby’s. “So what about you?” he asks. “What’s new at your house?”

This trading of employer gossip is common among the maids, drivers and watchmen of the building, but something Jessie has always been hesitant about. It feels wrong somehow, exposing the daily vulnerabilities and tragedies of the people whose roofs you live under, even if the only reason you know about these failings is not because they see you as a confidante but because they don’t see you at all. Yet, this once, she
decides to let Ram in on an incident that she unknowingly witnessed because she’s been turning it over in her head, unable to make sense of what it was she heard.

It had happened a few nights back. She’d woken up to use the servant’s bathroom when she heard a scream coming from the sir’s and madam’s bedroom. She’d walked toward their room, her bare feet silent on the marble floors. She’d put her ear against the bedroom wall and the sounds that echoed toward her made her breath catch. It sounded like keening or the wails of the stray cats that could sometimes be heard on the streets at night. And then she’d heard a long, slow moan, raw and guttural and wild. “I’ve never heard anything like it before,” she told Ram. “It was like a symphony of dying animals.”

Ram laughs. “Two kids and they’re still going, haan? Well good for them.”

Jessie is embarrassed as she realises what it was she overheard. The little she knows about sex doesn’t include that kind of passion in its definitions. She nods at Ram.

“A symphony of dying animals, though?” he says. “Never heard anyone put it that way. You’re something, Jessie, you know that?” He leans in to kiss her. She pushes him back. “What?” he says.

“Stop. I know what this leads to. I’ll lose my job if I get pregnant.”

“Silly girl, we can do things without you getting pregnant. You know that.” Her face flushes and Ram smiles.

“Like what?” she says.

“You know what,” he says. Jessie is silent and she can see realisation slowly dawning on Ram. “You don’t know?” he says. “Wait. Didn’t someone teach you this?”

“My mother died when I was in the fourth grade and my father pulled me out of school. He thought it was a waste of money. After that my brother taught me on the sly.”
Her throat catches as it always does when she remembers her brother. “Everything I know I learned from him. English. Math. But not love. This he did not teach me.”

“I would think not.”

“You teach me, then.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Why don’t you come over to my place on your next day off?”

She slaps his shoulder. “You have a dirty mind. Explain it to me. Tell me.”

This time, it’s Ram’s face that’s flushed. “Now?”

Jessie nods. He shrugs and leans in toward her. She’s glad he is whispering in her ear and cannot see her face as her eyes grow wider and wider.

*

Half-way through Jessie's second year of employment, Sanjay is made Managing Director of his company. His work hours begin to stabilize, and he feels content that he has successfully achieved his professional ambitions. His wife, too, has been promoted again and is now the Chief Airhostess of the first class cabin. Her absences at home grow more frequent, her layovers in other countries longer.

Sanjay takes his daughters out to enjoy his newly-earned membership at a private country club on the weekends that his wife is away. He finds he enjoys spending the extra time with his daughters. He misses his wife, but realises that when she is home, she seems absent. He tells himself he hasn't asked her to cut back on her flights because he is a modern man, not one to insist that a woman’s place is at home. The truth is that he finds it easier to ignore the rift that has grown between them if she isn’t actually around. Still,
he is a man unused to failure, and he cannot help but feel the distance between them indicates that he has, in some way, failed.

Sanjay watches the ayah flitting around the house in his wife’s hand-me downs: a pair of stonewashed jeans; a now-faded pink t-shirt, coral Anjali had corrected, that he remembers perfectly complimenting his wife’s skin tone. The fluidity of the ayah’s movement brings to his mind the carefree grace that Anjali had exuded in the early days of their courtship. Anjali’s laughter, the first time he'd met her, had surprised him—a warm, rich cascade that seemed too big for her tiny frame. She’d cheated during the physical evaluation for her job. Wore stilettos that she covered with her sari so that she would measure up to the airline’s five-foot-two height requirement. She confessed this to him one day in a hushed whisper like a child who has stolen some chocolate and gotten away with it. In that moment, he knew he would marry her.

There had been a time, before Anjali, when Sanjay had believed he never wanted to marry, never wanted a family. On that flight though, he had just been returning from visiting his sister in America where he'd spent a month with her and her family, seen the easy camaraderie between her and his brother-in-law. It was then he had finally understood, even been a little envious of, the security that came with belonging to someone other than yourself. More than that, in the one month he had spent with his sister, Sanjay had grown to love his little niece, Azaadi. He had seen in her a resemblance of himself, although his sister Rupa insisted she looked more like their youngest brother, Azaad. Sanjay's memories of his brother are vague. It is Rupa who remembers him, his chubby face, his light eyes. Sanjay had been only two when his brother, still an infant, had died. And so, in his mind, Azaadi's face was not his brother's, but clearly and
painfully his. After having spent time with his niece he couldn't help thinking he would make a good father, a good husband. And then, he met Anjali.

She refused him the first time he proposed, insisting that it was too risky for her to flout airline policies. Never one to give up, he'd persisted. For three months, he proposed to her every day, slowly chipping away at her resolve, until she finally gave in.

She is still graceful, his wife, but her laughter is smaller. Her hands lie resigned at her sides or folded in front of her body as she crosses her arms against her chest. He tries to hold them sometimes, but they feel as stiff as the knots he massages out of her neck after a long flight. Something within her has hardened as she changed from a girl in her twenties to a woman in her mid-thirties. He knows that persistence will no longer work, that if he pushes her too hard this time, she will only pull further away. *Different problems require different approaches,* he has often told his junior managers. And so he remains patient, turning the quandary over in his head, waiting for a solution to appear.

*"

“When I entered the whale’s mouth and called out her name. My voice echoed in the vastness of the whale’s insides.” It’s late evening, and Tara and Karishma sit at the club listening to their father talk. The summer breeze carries with it the voices of various families sitting in the vicinity. A few tables down a baby cries, and their father waits until the infant is shushed by its mother before continuing with his story. “I heard a voice calling back my name. I went towards it and saw that it was her.”

“But how did you see?” Karishma asks. “It was dark. You forgot the part about the lighter.”

Tara glares at her sister for interrupting.
“Right, right. Sorry. So it was dark in the whale’s mouth. And cold and clammy. So I took out my lighter from my pocket and flicked it on. And there she was. . .” Waves crash in the distance and Tara watches her father gaze at them as though he is no longer here, but really in the whale’s mouth.

Tara urges him on, “There she was standing against the oo-vu-la.” This, she knows, is the u-shaped structure dangling at the back of her mouth.

“You-vy-u-la,” her father corrects her.

“You-vu-la”

“Vyu. Like the view from here is of the sea.”


“Then I tickled the whale’s uvula with my fingers, and he coughed, throwing both your mother and me out of his mouth.” Her father stops to take a bite of his toast, brushing away the crumbs that get caught in his beard. “And that is how I saved your mother from the whale.”

This is Tara’s favourite version of the story. Sometimes her father and mother escape in a fountain of water through the spout on the whale’s head. Sometimes, it isn’t a whale, but an eagle that takes her mother away. But the story always ends with her father rescuing her mother. Tara likes this. She likes knowing how things are going to end. It makes her feel safe, like when she sits at the bar at home with her father behind the counter. The bar is her father’s pride. It’s made of a dark wood that reminds Tara of the coffee her mother drinks after she’s come back from a particularly long flight. Sometimes, if her mother returns home from a flight early enough, she sits on one of the
swivel stools at the bar, still in the sari that forms her stewardess’ uniform, sipping at coffee so black that it matches the colour of the counter her mug rests on.

Sometimes Tara’s father fills up a glass with ice and hangs a wedge of lime off its rim. Then he pours the leftover tonic from his vodka-tonic in it for her. He keeps a bowl of spiced cashew nuts between them and Tara washes down the spice with her tonic water, her legs dangling against the foam backboard of the curved bar, the padded cushioning of the bar stool making her feel taller. She listens to her mother talk about her flight to London or Paris, Hong Kong, Singapore, Moscow; about the famous passenger who refused to get off when the plane landed because he was semi-comatose after half-a-dozen Boilermakers, which Tara will one day learn is a shot of whisky put in a can of beer. At seven-years-old, she thinks of it as a bubbling cauldron stirred by cartoon witches. Her father listens to her mother and makes a few comments of his own. His cigar smoke curls above Tara’s head, its sweet oakey smell making her giddy. She rests her head on her mother’s lap, allowing the deep baritone of her father’s voice to lull her to sleep, while her mother distractedly strokes her hair in between sips of coffee.

On these nights, Tara doesn’t have the dreams where her mother is disappearing from her sight on a plane that Tara rushes to catch up with. Even in the dream she can feel her legs hurt, her lungs burn. She keeps sprinting down the runway, until the runway abruptly ends and Tara finds herself falling into darkness. She wakes up from these nightmares, her hair matted to the nape of her neck, and makes her way to Jessie’s bed, only to be told off in the morning. You’re a big girl. What would your mother think to see you sleeping with the maid? But she knows when she returns the next night Jessie will make place for her.
The nights she falls asleep at the bar, then, are a welcome break from the dreams, so the bar becomes her safe place. Sometimes, when guests come over, Tara watches her father serve them from behind his bar. She notices how he measures out a peg; she knows he’ll use rounded glasses for scotch, taller ones for vodka-tonics, stemmed ones for wine, and huge mugs that have been frosted in the fridge for beer. When Tara thinks of God, she imagines He looks like her father: A tall man, with a wide frame and rounded belly, silver hair and a salt-and-pepper beard, standing behind a bar and confidently serving everyone exactly what they want.

* 

For Tara’s eighth birthday, Jessie bakes a cake in the shape of an airplane. It’s what Tara wants and Jessie squeezes the batter into the form of the crudely drawn sketch Tara has given her. It looks more like a big fish to Jessie, until she draws in the windows with pink icing. Jessie plans the party, works out the guest list with Tara, decides on a menu, helps Tara make out the invitations, prays that the madam won’t be working on that day and is thankful when she isn’t. The madam has bought tiny plastic fans as return gifts.

“They’re windmills,” Tara tells Jessie. “From Amsterdam.”

“I knew that,” Jessie says.

The madam looks nervous and overwhelmed around all the children in the house.

“What can I help with?” she asks Jessie.

“Nothing, Madam. It’s all taken care of. Just have fun.”

The Madam appears more and more tired these days. She is away for longer. When she is home, she is often sleeping in her darkened bedroom. “It’s almost lunch time,” Jessie tells Tara once. “Shouldn’t we wake her up?”
“No let her be. It’s just jet lag.”

“What is that?”

“It’s when you spend too much time on a jet, like mom does. She’s seen the whole world and it makes her tired.”

Jessie nods. “Maybe I could be an airhostess, too. I can serve dinner and take care of customers.”

“They’re passengers, not customers, and it’s not just about serving dinner. It’s also about—” Tara tries to recall the word. “Elegance. It’s also about elegance.”

“What does that mean?”

“You have to look pretty and be able to walk in heels. Here, wait.” Tara goes into her mother’s room and comes back with two pairs of her shoes. She puts on one pair and makes Jessie wear the other. Jessie tries walking in them but totters a bit. Tara removes some books from her bookshelf.

“It’s easier if you try with these on your head.” Tara says. She motions to her sister. “Here, Kar, you can try, too. But no heels for you. You’re too young.”

They walk the span of the room together. Jessie keeps her eyes on a fixed point on the wall, concentrating on maintaining her balance. She thinks of her life as an airhostess, how it would feel like to be so high up. She imagines the different countries she’ll visit. She pictures the windmills in Amsterdam. She will go to fancy restaurants. “I’ll have some Babybells, please,” she’ll say. She places one foot in front of the other, lightly and carefully. Her stomach lifts. She wonders if this what it feels like to fly.

A few days later, she catches the madam watching TV in the living room. Jessie approaches her, hesitantly. “Madam,” she says. “How do you become an airhostess?”
The madam looks at her disoriented. She has just woken from an afternoon nap and is still bleary-eyed. “You just apply, I guess, and see if they’ll take you.”

“Would they take me? I can serve food well. I can learn to be…elegant.”

The madam focuses more clearly on her now and Jessie isn’t sure if it’s amusement or surprise she sees on her face. “It’s not just about that, Jessie.”

“Then what else? What would I need to learn?”

“Well, what level of education do you have?”

“Fourth grade pass, ma’am.”

“No. You need to have at least completed up to your twelfth. That’s a minimum requirement. I’m sorry, Jessie.”

Jessie blinks away the unexpected wetness in her eyes hoping the madam won’t notice. But the madam has already turned her gaze back to the TV screen. “Would you get me some coffee, please?” she says.

In the compound that evening, Jessie interrupts the other ayahs’ conversations. “The madam sleeps till two in the afternoon these days,” she says. “On the days she’s around that is. Most of the time, she’s hardly there. The sir drinks late into the night. He sleeps alone.” She pauses, and then adds for good measure, “Their daughter comes and sleeps in my bed at night. Can you imagine?” This is no longer true. Tara’s dreams stopped soon after her eighth birthday, but saying it fills Jessie with satisfaction.

The other ayahs ooh and aah. “Your memsahib should be careful,” one of them says. “Leave a man alone too long and he’s bound to stray. Look at Mr. Sharma. He takes up with Mrs. Gupta every time his wife goes on her visits to her mother’s house.”
The Guptas’ maid blanches. “That’s where she’s been going when she says she’s spending the night at her sister’s!”

“It could be worse. See, what happened to that poor girl who worked with the Zaveris. Mrs. Zaveri caught her husband with her on their bed and packed her off. You better be careful, Jessie. Keep an eye on your sahib.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Jessie snaps, immediately regretting saying anything. The guilt comes later, but it’s not enough to subsume her anger. She tells Ram about it as they sit by the seaside on her Sunday off.

“Who is she to think I can’t do what she does just because I’ve studied less? She’s just a flying maid. So what makes her better than me? I also know how to take care of people. I know how to serve food. Who makes her children lunch, haan? Who sits up with them at night when they have a fever? Me or her?”

Ram presses her hand gently. His other arm is slung around her back as they look out onto the ocean. “Jessie, Jessie, it’s okay. Two years from now, I’m going to start a driving school. Then we’ll get married and you can study more or do what you want.”

“I can take care of myself, thank you.”

“Yes. You can do anything, I know. But I can help, no?” He turns toward her and smiles. He leans in and waits a moment to see if she’ll draw back, but she closes the gap. His lips are salty and warm and for a moment she forgets her anger.

*

The summer of ’93 descends on Bombay and temperatures hit boiling. School is out for the holidays, and the children spend most of their days at home, only venturing out in the gap between sunset and nightfall. The air-conditioner in the living room finally breaks
down one Sunday evening after ten days of continuous humming. Sanjay sits on his recliner, fanning his face with a rolled up newspaper despite the ceiling fan that whirs at full-speed. Anjali sits on the couch besides him, her feet curled under her, sipping from a snifter of brandy. It’s a rare moment in which the entire family is together.

“It’s been a while since we went to the hillsides, hasn’t it?” Sanjay says. “Maybe we can drive up for a few days. Have a family holiday. It should be fun, what do you think?” He leans in toward his wife. She has just returned from a thirteen-hour flight and he can smell stale smoke mingled with her perfume.

Anjali looks up from her brandy, her brown irises blackened by dark circles that rim her eyes. “I don’t know, Sanjay. Works a bit hectic right now. I doubt I can take time off.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun. We can escape this heat. What do you think girls?”

Tara and Karishma look up from their game of Chutes and Ladders and give their merry assent.

“Why don’t you and the girls go?” Anjali suggests. “It will give you some time together.”

Sanjay stares at his wife, who has turned her attention back to her brandy, measuring his words carefully. “That’s not quite what I meant by a family holiday.”

Anjali sets her glass on the table and turns toward him. “I already told you, Sanjay. I’m busy at work. Surely, you must remember what that was like?” Her gaze is cool and unwavering.
Sanjay senses his daughters going quiet and bites back the hot remark that springs to his lips. “Sweetheart,” he says, instead. “All I mean is the girls and I miss you. It would be good for them to have some time with you.”

“I spent four years with them Sanjay, all day, every day, while you built a career for yourself. I don’t remember us taking too many family holidays then.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” Karishma, his younger daughter, ever the pacifier, chimes in. “We can go with Jessie. She can take us to Echo Point. She saw it last time.”

“Yes,” Anjali says. “That’s a good idea. Take Jessie with you. I’m sure she’ll enjoy it.”

Sanjay gets up to pour himself a drink, his mind grasping for another approach. “That’s right,” he says, “Jessie was with us the last time we went, wasn’t she? That was what, four years back? Don’t you think it’s strange that she hasn’t visited home since she started working with us?”

Tara mumbles something under her breath. Anjali grunts.

“You know, if we took the kids for a holiday with us, it would help relieve her of her duties for a while. She could visit home. Doesn’t she deserve that? I mean, Anjali, she works just as you do.” His wife’s eyebrow arches. “I mean, just as we do…I mean, she works hard, too. Shouldn’t we give her a break?”

Sanjay can sense his wife falter as she looks for a gracious way to deny this.

“Fine,” she finally relents. “I’ll talk to Jessie about it.”

But when she asks, Jessie is anxious. “Did I do something wrong, Madam?”

Anjali looks at the young woman, her skin only a shade darker than Anjali’s. Jessie wears a frayed "I Love NY" t-shirt that once fit Anjali like a glove. “No, of course
not. Sir and I just think you deserve a break. You haven't been home since you started working with us.”

“I'm okay over here, Madam. My Sundays off are more than enough.”

“You're sure? You don't miss home?”

“No.”

“Oh?”

“No, no. It's just . . . I've been away so long,” Jessie admits. “I don't really think of home anymore.”

Anjali decides there is nothing more to say. In the past year, the airline she works for has been nationalized. Affirmative action and quota laws require the hiring of more employees from the Scheduled Caste and lower education brackets. Disgruntled with this dip in quality, many members of the old crew have left their jobs. The senior staff members who continue at their positions must put in longer hours to train the new recruits. Anjali is frankly quite thankful that Jessie doesn’t want to visit home, and she reports to her husband that they needn’t bother with a family holiday as Jessie seems perfectly happy staying put in Bombay.

“Are you sure she wasn’t just feeling hesitant?” he asks. “Maybe we could go anyway. Give her a break, even if she doesn’t want to use it to go home.”

“Actually, I just signed on for some additional shifts,” Anjali tells him. “There’s so little of the old crew left that we’re trying to take as many shifts together as possible to keep our morale up. You know how it is.”

“Of course. Maybe once things have settled down?”
“Yes, maybe then. That would be better.” Anjali watches her husband leave for work, vaguely aware of her body relaxing. A few moments later, she identifies the feeling as relief.

* 

The next evening, Sanjay sits by himself in the recliner slowly swirling a tumbler of scotch. Figures move on the TV screen in front of him. His wife has left for another flight. He plays the previous day's conversation with Anjali in his mind. Her unmitigated relief at the ayah's decision to stay had triggered in him a memory of his younger self, the sense of freedom he'd felt when he saw some of his friends tied down by wives and crying babies.

Before he brought Anjali to meet his parents, he'd told his mother about her, how she'd changed his views on bachelorhood, how she was the one. His mother had scoffed.

“It's your nesting instinct, that's what it is. Something has finally triggered it.”

“My what?”

When a woman meets a man, his mother had explained, she automatically thinks of whether he would be a good life partner, whether he'd make a good husband and father, and then she acts accordingly. With men, though, it's different. Their attraction to women is physical and fleeting, that is until they enter the phase of their life where they want to settle down and have a family.

"It usually happens earlier than it has with you," his mother said. "You're a bit of a late bloomer." Her point, however, was that, when a man entered this phase, the very next woman he met would be the one he nested with. "Unless of course there's something
phenomenally wrong with her," his mother said. "Which I assume there isn't with this one. Anjali, you said?"

"Yes. She's wonderful, Mom."

"I'm sure she is, Sanju. All I'm saying is don't read too much into your feelings. You're just nesting."

"I'm not a bird, Ma."

Sanjay thinks about this, now, and wonders whether Anjali is going through a process of reverse nesting, whether like two opposing poles of a magnet, they are moving further and further in opposite directions. He wants to call either his mother or sister to ask whether this is possible. But his mother is long dead, and it’s too early in the morning in America for him to call his sister Rupa.

Sanjay takes another sip of scotch, allowing its peaty warmth to settle in his stomach. He watches his children, the children he once never wanted and now can't imagine his life without. They run around the ayah as she finishes her daily duties. He remembers glancing into Tara’s bedroom one evening almost a year back and catching his daughters and the maid, each with her back turned to him. Jessie and Tara had been wearing his wife’s shoes, Tara’s feet submerged in them. All three of them had books on their head and they moved gingerly forward, hands linked, arranged in a line in order of height, like three unpacked Russian dolls. Karishma was giggling, her free hand stretched out to maintain balance. His eyes had lingered on Jessie’s waist. She wore a checked shirt that he’d once teased Anjali looked like a tablecloth. He’d felt a twinge in his chest and shook it off, immediately recognizing it as something dangerous.

He feels the twinge more often, lately. Sometimes, as he lies in bed at night, he tries to pretend the spot next to him isn’t empty. It’s been almost a year since he and
Anjali made love, but he closes his eyes and recalls her primal, riotous energy. He tries to picture her hips, her skin. But, these days, the hips that emerge in his mind curve differently from Anjali’s; the skin is a shade too dark. He realises that it’s time to take action. He has waited too long. He analyses the variables in this situation and carefully weighs his options.

The *ayah* folds clothes, lays the table, dusts the sofa, moving constantly, obliviously, in and out of the periphery of his vision.

*  

Jessie approaches Anjali, two weeks later. “Madam, if you don’t mind, I think I may need to take some leave after all.”

“Is everything all right?” Anjali asks.

Everything is not all right. Jessie's brother is seriously ill. She has received a call from her father who has somehow managed to track her down. They are in desperate need of money for his treatment. “I know you do not wish to see me,” Jessie's father tells her. “But if you have any love for your brother, you will come back and help us.”

Jessie withdraws the bulk of her savings from her bank account and takes the first train out. A week later, the family gets a telegram from Jessie's father: Jasanta married. Will not return.

When Anjali tells Tara the news, her daughter is disbelieving. “She was forced,” Tara says. Anjali listens as her daughter fills her in about Jessie's father.

“Even if that’s true, Tara, what can we do?” Anjali asks her daughter.

“Fine. Don’t do anything.” Tara's locks herself in her room and refuses to come out for the rest of the day.

*
New applicants begin to arrive to fill Jessie’s position, but Sanjay can’t seem to agree on any of them. One girl agrees to stay only if there is no meat brought into the house. She lasts a week before Sanjay decides his fish is more important to him than the religious beliefs of his staff. The next candidate who arrives insists she’ll only stay if the family buys a washing machine and provides her with a colour TV. India has opened up its markets, the economy is booming, and everyone feels they deserve a share. Sanjay says it'll probably work out cheaper if they eat out for a while and wait until they find someone with fewer demands.

Anjali cashes in on the accumulated vacation days she hasn't used in over three years. The family begins to go to the club for dinner. Some nights, Sanjay takes them for a drive along the seafront. They stop for ice-cream. Anjali is reminded of the early days, when she first met her husband, and they would sit by the ocean eating corn on the cob, buttered and rubbed with red chilli powder and lime. She shares the memory with him one night, and they spend half-an-hour looking for a vendor who is still selling at that hour. They finally find one, but it doesn’t taste as good as she remembered. Her husband is thrilled, though, and she watches him tell his daughters about their early courtship, hears their giggles, sees the way they lean in towards him. She feels like she is far away from this scene, looking out from behind the windows of a plane that is slowly taking off into the sky.

* 

A month passes and Anjali slowly begins to reacclimatize to life at home. She finds she has forgotten certain things—where the switches for certain lights are, which one of her daughters likes her eggs scrambled and which one prefers them fried. She realises that
there are certain things she never knew—that everyone in the family has a fixed place at the dining table, that the girls go to bed at 9. Certain things seem to have changed when she wasn’t looking—there is a new painting in the living room. She seems to recall that the curtains in her bedroom were once brown, but they are now a mossy green. When she asks about this, Tara tells her that Jessie ordered new curtains when she noticed tears in the old ones. Sometimes, Anjali can’t remember if some things are different, or she just remembers them differently. She could swear they never had a carpet in the living room, that the couch in front of the TV was bigger, but she can’t be sure, and it becomes difficult for her to align in her mind what is new, what was always there, and what she has simply made up.

One night Anjali takes over the responsibility of putting the children to bed. She remembers enjoying this once, remembers the soapy scent of her children’s hair as they rested their heads against her shoulders, remembers the warmth of their breath on her neck. She picks a book from the children’s bookshelf and goes into their room. Her younger daughter is already fast asleep. Tara is sitting up in bed, underlining passages in a book she rests against her knees.

“You shouldn’t hunch over like that, Tara. It’s bad for your posture.” Her voice comes out sharper than she’d expected. Tara looks up startled. Anjali clears her throat and tries for a gentler voice. “All I mean, honey, is you’ll get a back ache. Sit up a little straighter . . . What are you reading?”

“Rudyard Kipling's short stories.” Tara straightens her back against the pillow and shuts the book to show her mother the cover, keeping her pen in between its pages as a marker.
“Isn’t that a little advanced for you?”

Tara shrugs. “It’s for class. You wanted something, Mom?”

“No, nothing. I just came to tell you to switch off the lights in a bit. It’s late.” She pulls a blanket over Karishma, who sleeps with one arm sprawled over her eyes, her mouth wide open. She notices tiny jagged ridges of new teeth poking out from her daughter’s gums in the gap from where two of her milk teeth have fallen. "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi."

"What's that, Mom?"

"That was my favourite Kipling story when I was your age."

"I'll tell you when I get to it."

"Okay. Don't stay up too late now." Anjali inches out of the room, hiding the book she brought in from Tara’s view. It strikes her that her nine-year-old daughter is probably too old for *The Illustrated Aesop's Fables*.

*The sound of crashing waves reminds Jessie of Bombay. On her Sundays off, she would walk along Marine Drive after attending the morning mass. She'd linger by the boardwalk, losing herself in the rhythms of the sea. Here, in her village, the sea is an all pervasive presence—the source of income for local men who spend their days casting nets and sitting in wait on their rocking boats. The man Jessie has married owns two trawlers and leases them out; he is considered a rich man in these parts. Yet, his wealth means nothing to Jessie, except that she lives in a concrete house instead of a straw hut.

The house is one-fourth the size of the apartment she’d become used to in Bombay, and she finds herself often missing the city, its expanses. Sometimes, Jessie
steps out onto the front awning in the early evenings, but the landscape outside the house is as flat and empty as her days, the sunsets muddy, the sea a mocking presence that echoes from a distance beyond her immediate horizon. She hears its roars and thinks back to the moment she returned home, the moment she realised it had all been a farce.

Her father had met her at the train station. They'd gotten into a rickshaw that was meant to take them to the village hospital.

“Here, let me take your bag,” her father said, in an unnatural display of affection. She should have been suspicious then. Yet, she’d been disoriented at being home after so long. The dialects of her village felt foreign on her tongue as she spoke to her father, sounded harsh in her ears when he replied in the same language. It had taken her a while to realise that they were heading toward her old house rather than the hospital. “Just a small detour,” her father said.

But when they entered the hut he’d locked the door behind him. Jessie blinked, her eyes adjusting to the sudden darkness. Her gaze settled on the silhouette of a man who’d turned toward her at the sound of the closing door. Her brother’s stare reflected her own surprise.

“Bakul? You’re well?” she said.

“Jessie. You came back?”

“Baba?” She turned toward her father who was ruffling through her bag, counting the wads of cash she’d brought back with her.

“So much money,” he said. “Yet, you never thought to send your father any. What sin must I have committed in my past life to raise such an ungrateful child?”

“What’s happening?” she asked even as realisation slowly dawned.
“Do you know how much debt you left us in when you ran away?” her father said.

“You were betrothed. The dowry had been settled. All these years we’ve been paying back your debt while you made merry.” He waved a bundle of notes in her face. “We’re lucky I’ve found someone else to marry you despite your reputation.”

She ran toward the door, but he grabbed her by the wrist. A familiar discomfort rose within her at his touch; the hairs on her arms stood on end. “You will not leave again,” he told her. “I would rather lose a child than earn the reputation of a man careless enough to lose you twice.” He pulled her toward him, staring down at her, letting the meaning of his words seep in. His breath was warm and sour on her face.

That night, as her father lay passed out on the cot letting out an occasional intoxicated snore, Bakul motioned for her to follow him outside the hut. They sat on the stoop and spoke in whispers as he filled her in. After she’d run away, the man she was set to marry had demanded their father return the dowry, but he had already spent most of it on alcohol and paying back his gambling debts. In return for not beating them up or taking them to the police, Bakul had agreed to work for the man and slowly pay off the amount. But between the interest on the sum, the money their father took every month for his daily drink and the running of the house, the debt continued to grow.

Bakul lit a beedi after finishing his story, a habit that was either new or one he’d hidden from Jessie when they were younger. Bakul no longer looked young. White streaks lined his hair, his face was gaunt and creased. Their father had lied about him being ill, but he definitely wasn’t healthy. He let out a plume of smoke and a moment later, a cough wracked his body. From inside the house, their father let out a snort. They both froze on the stoop and held their breath, only exhaling when they heard a low snore.
“How much do you need to pay off the debt?” Jessie asked once it was clear there father was still asleep.

“You shouldn’t worry about it. Listen, he won’t wake up for a while. If you leave now, you’ll have gotten far enough by morning.”

“How much, Bakul?”

He told her.

“I’ll take care of it. But promise me once it’s settled, once I’m married, you’ll get out of here. There’s no future for you here.”

“Jessie—”

“Promise.” She held his gaze until he nodded and looked away.

The next morning, after Bakul left for work, Jessie told her father she would do as he wanted as long as the money she’d brought back with her was used to free Bakul from his employment. Her father scoffed and moved toward her, his arm raised, but she easily sidestepped him and he stumbled forward. “No more threats, Baba,” she said calmly as her father struggled to pick himself up from the floor. “I’m sure this new man is giving you enough money for my hand to keep you comfortable. Let Bakul go and I promise I won’t run again.”

The man she’s married is twenty years her senior, a widower with a flat face that is neither ugly nor handsome. The man reminds Jessie of Sanjay, not because of his age, but because of the look in his eyes when he glances at the photograph of his dead wife that adorns their bedside table.

His efforts in bed seem lacklustre at best. Jessie has no benchmark for comparison, but whatever it is her husband is attempting summons nothing close to those
feral cries she’d once overheard. Her husband doesn’t talk much. His silences make Jessie miss the chaos of Bombay, the daily bustle of the house, the children who were such a ball of motion and words that it made Jessie cherish the rare moments of stillness that greeted her in the early hours of the morning when the city was still waking.

She would take her morning chai to the balcony in these purple hours and watch the sun rise. In the winter, the sweetness of the raat ki rani, the night blooming jasmine, lingered in the dawn air. She could hear the rhythmic thwack of clothes hitting stone as the washermen started their day's work on the nearby ghats. Once the sun was up, the milkman would ring the doorbell to deliver that day’s milk. Jessie would wake the children from sleep and dress them for school. She would put out a freshly-pressed shirt for the sir and prepare his breakfast. But the short hour before the sun rose, and the doorbell started ringing, before the children woke and the sir left for work, had been Jessie’s alone.

Now, all Jessie has is time. The days bleed into each other. The nights are a repetition of the same dull motions. One night, as her husband moves on top of her, Jessie notices his gaze shift toward the photo frame on the bedside. He shuts his eyes and looks away as he thrusts deeper into her. Jessie wonders if he is picturing his wife, the stillborn son she died giving birth to, and—because he is not a bad man—she wants to splay her fingers against the matted down of his chest, grab his face in her hand, and force him to hold still for a moment. She wants to gently explain to him that when you lose a life that held so much promise, that ignited every fibre of your being with its potential, you can’t just close your eyes and hope to replace it with a cheap imitation.
Instead, she turns him over on his back, the photo frame outside his field of vision from this position and slowly mounts him. This time she controls the rhythm of their motions. This time she closes her eyes. She pretends she is back on the balcony in Bombay; she lets the jasmined perfume of that air diffuse into the musk of her bedroom, lets the imagined thwack of wet cloth hitting stone merge with the beat of her hips striking her husband’s pelvic bone. She pictures Ram’s face, his smooth, hairless arms. She wonders if this is how it would have been with him and wishes she’d found out.

She can feel the mattress springs push against her knees even as she remembers the ice of marble against her bare feet in a house that is not this house, her ear pressed against the cold wall of a bedroom that is not this bedroom. Her breath is ragged and when she hears the guttural moans she doesn’t know if they emerge from her, or her husband, or the echoes in her mind.

And, then, she stops imagining anything, concentrating only on her breath, the up-and-down of her movements, shifting her husband’s hands where she wants them, realising, suddenly, that pleasure can be purely physical, detached from everything else, hers alone.

The next morning, the photo frame has been moved away from their bedside.

Two weeks later, Jessie is pregnant. Her husband hires a lady from the village to come in every morning to cook and clean. “You shouldn’t be doing that,” he tells Jessie. “You are the mistress of this household. And, besides,” he adds, “you need to rest now. You can’t over-exert yourself.”

So she sits at home, doing nothing. At times, the three months she has spent in the village since leaving Bombay seem closer to a year. The hours stretch. The days pass.
Her ankles swell. Her husband massages them at night. His touch elicits neither excitement nor revulsion. It is as safe and kind and nondescript as him. There are worse things in the world, Jessie supposes.

She moves her palms over her belly examining the rigid, newly-stretched skin. She had thought she would run again once Bakul was safely away, once things had calmed down, but now that no longer seems possible. “We’ll educate this child. At least till the twelfth grade, more if needed, okay?”

“Yes,” her husband says.

“Even if she’s a girl.”

Her husband nods. His fingers confidently knead her calves. Jessie leans back into her pillow, closing her eyes. Outside, lashing waves crash against the distant shore.

* 

Three months after Jessie leaves, Anjali still hasn’t found an ayah. She takes an undetermined leave of absence from her job. She starts taking her daughters to the club in the evenings. Her husband joins them once he’s done with work. They play games of Scrabble and Uno. They go for sunset swims. She teaches her daughters the backstroke and the butterfly. She watches them imitate her moves and is startled by the idea that both of them have come from her. Her children have grown from crying babies to miniature individuals with distinct personalities. She feels like she is just discovering her eldest's intelligence, is often disarmed by her younger daughter's unguarded affection.

One evening, Anjali stands by the sea with her daughters. She tastes the salt on her lips. White-foamed waves crash against cement tide-breakers. Anjali remembers her surprise the first time she flew to the other side of the Arabian Sea, when she realised that
the water was actually a clear blue, and not the dirty grey of Bombay’s shores. It still amazes her, sometimes, how the same thing can look so very different when viewed from another angle. She wants to share this feeling with her daughters, but can’t find the right words to describe the magnitude of what she felt. Someday, she will take them with her and let them see for themselves, she thinks. Tara is obsessed with America, a land she has learned about from the books about teen romances that have recently flooded the market submerging the Enid Blytons and other English literature that used to be Anjali’s staple as a child. Even on the flights she took there as a hostess, Anjali never liked America. She’d found it crass in comparison to the history and culture of Europe. She wonders, now, if this was just a colonial hangover; a symptom of growing up in an British-inspired education system, reading *Tom Brown's School Days* and *Mallory Towers, Anne of the Green Gables* and Roald Dahl, rather than the *Goosebumps* and *Sweet Valley*-whatever that her older daughter seems to devour. Karishma, her younger daughter, is unencumbered by these cultural dilemmas and still seems to live in the universally untouched land of fairy tales.

“Mommy, what was it like near the whale’s uv-lah?” Her younger daughter tugs at her hand and asks, now. Anjali looks away from the crashing waves.

“It’s just a story, stupid,” Tara interrupts. “It didn’t actually happen.”

“What’s the story?” Anjali asks.

“Nothing,” Tara says quickly, before her sister can open her mouth. “Just something Dad used to tell us. About how you were swallowed by a whale.”

“And once even an eagle took you away.” Karishma shoves her way back into the conversation.
“How did the stories end, darling?”

“Daddy went out looking for you, and then you were saved. Remember?”

“She can’t remember, dummy. I told you, it’s not real.”

But her youngest is insistent. “Were you scared, Mommy?”

Anjali returns her daughter’s serious gaze. “No, darling,” she says, finally. “I knew if I just waited long enough, your father would find me.”

That night she lies beside her husband as he finishes his crossword.

“Our children are turning out well,” she tells him.

“You sound surprised.”

She traces his collarbone with her finger. “You've done a good job raising them. Thank you.”

He laughs. “It wasn't all me.”

She knows her husband is implying that she somehow had a hand in things, but her mind immediately wanders to the missing ayah. God alone knows how many times Tara has mentioned her name. Anjali wondered at first, on hearing Tara's stories about Jessie's father, whether they should have tried harder to get Jessie back. She had been itching to get back to work then, and felt the same kind of panic she’d felt that time the girl had told her she wanted to leave to be an airhostess. She asked Sanjay to call Jessie’s father and see what could be done, but her husband had been reluctant. “She's his daughter, Anjali. How much can we say?”

Anjali knows that there is some truth to Sanjay’s words, still she cannot sometimes help but recall a mirror-image of her younger self appearing in front of her as Jessie spoke of a home she no longer remembered. That moment seems far away, now.
Anjali knows she will not be getting Jessie back, but is grateful to the girl for holding her house together, for leaving her with prettier curtains and two children who are loving and often delightful. She convinces herself that the young girl, too, is happier in her new-old life. She, too, must have returned home and discovered something unexpected, Anjali tells herself. Maybe, she will realise she loves the man to whom her father has married her. Maybe she will have children of her own. Jessie would find happiness in her children, Anjali decides.

It is only in this break from work that Anjali has realised how tired she'd been. Looking back, her job no longer seems glamorous. The government takeover, the new staff, the budget cuts that eliminated the fancy silverware and gourmet food, have dulled the shine her job held for her. New rows of seats cut into leg space. Serving crammed passengers meals in cardboard boxes, she had started to feel like a glorified waitress. There had been times recently, during several back-to-back flights, when she’d forget whether she was coming or going, what day it was, what time. Paris, Taiwan, New York, Melbourne blurred into each other. And there’d been that one particular drunken night in Amsterdam, not too long ago, when she’d almost slept with a pilot friend. He’d, fortunately, passed out half-way through their fooling around and she’d stopped.

She finds being at home grounds her in a way it didn’t before. She wonders if this has something to do with growing older. She is the same age now as Sanjay was when they married. She contemplates confessing her almost-dalliance with the pilot to Sanjay, but can’t see the benefit. She knows that all her husband really wants is for her to be home. She sees through his flimsy rejections of each new ayah that comes for an interview. Once, she would have put her foot down, but now she doesn’t mind giving him
this small victory. The wanderlust, the thirst for independence, the anger she’d felt at her husband for leaving her alone in a house with two crying children have dissipated without her even realising.

Sanjay switches off the bedside light. Anjali removes his glasses and hands them to him to place on his bedside table. “Sanjay?”

“Yes, hun?”

“What’s an uv-lah?”

*  

Anjali leaves her job. The family hires a part-time cook and cleaner, but for the most part Anjali now looks after the children. Karishma forgets about a time when things were different, but Tara remembers for a while and uses it against her mother from time to time when she is angry.

Out of the four of them, it is Sanjay who will remember Jessie longest. There are times when seeing his wife sitting with his daughters, or hearing her reminiscence about the stress and the adventure of flying, he is struck by the memory of a phone call he’d made on a particularly desperate night in the summer of ‘93. He’d gotten the number from the friend who’d first recommended Jessie.

“Well, Sir, of course I would love my daughter to come home for a visit,” Jessie’s father told him, “but what can a father do if his daughter doesn’t want to see him?” The man’s voice was raspy, and Sanjay imagined him as a frail, bent man with livered skin and thinning hair. At the time, he’d identified in Jessie’s father’s voice a despair with which he was familiar. Now, he thinks it likely the man was intoxicated.
“Mr. Reddy, there must be something Jasanta misses about home,” Sanjay had said. “Give her a good enough reason, and I’m sure she will willingly return.” Sanjay gave him their telephone number and the man had promised to think about what he’d said. Sanjay thought he was buying some time alone with his wife. He’d only meant for Jessie to be gone long enough for his wife to realise that what she had at home was far more precious than a job that was running her haggard. By the time he'd heard Tara's stories and realised what he’d set in motion, Jessie was married, and it was too late to undo what was done.

While Jessie’s face slowly fades from Sanjay’s memory, her features blurring in his mind with passing time, he remembers clearly the hoarseness of her father’s voice on the other end of the line. The memory elicits pangs of guilt, so Sanjay tries not to dwell on it. Anyway, he tells himself, really, everything turned out for the best.

A year after Jessie’s departure, Anjali looks for a place to keep some of the old trinkets from her flying days. She stumbles across a few of Jessie’s belongings in the storage room and throws them out. The aroma of her perfume lingers for a few days, until it finally dissipates.

***
**BLACK FRIDAY**

I was seven seas away and asleep when the first shots were fired in Bombay. It was 2008 and I was living with Rahul. Hell is a 300-sq.ft studio in Fuck-Knows-Where, Queens, in the dead of winter. Yet, here we were, Rahul and I. He woke up early for his shift as an engineering trainee at a subway construction site. I woke up hours later, at noon, slipped into my winter coat, propped open the sole window in the apartment and crawled out onto our fire escape for a cigarette.

I would smoke my cigarette and step back into the studio to begin the mind-numbing process of applying to any and every job for which my BA in Publishing seemed a suitable qualification. One Thursday morning, a little over a month before the attacks, the Dow had fallen by 700 points. Words like 'recession' and 'Great Depression,' bandied around in the papers and on the news, were no longer abstract concepts. Obama had won the presidential nomination, assuring me that “Yes, we can!” but the dozens of rejections flooding my inbox seemed to hint that I, at least, couldn't. Hesitations surfaced at various interviews when I mentioned phrases like “foreign passport” and “H-1 visa sponsorship,” and I had a nasty suspicion that we did not necessarily include me. I later learned that *Business Week* had called this period the “Panic of 2008”. It's a term I have since appropriated to describe my state of mind at that time.

On the morning of the attacks, I woke up late to a series of BlackBerry Messages posted on an ongoing group chat with friends in India.

11:00 AM EST: There've been reports of shootings @ Leopold Cafe.
11:15 AM EST: Guys, shots were just fired at Victoria Terminus Station.
11:35 AM EST: At least 5 dead at Leopold...some foreigners too.
12:01 PM EST: Hey, i just heard Taj Palace and Trident hotels are both under attack. Reports of shootings & grenades.
12:15 PM EST: WTF is happening?
12:16 PM EST: Seems like coordinated attacks.
12:20 PM EST: VT station assailants escaped. Police confirm at least 20 dead and 100 injured.
12:21 PM EST: Taxi bomb gone off in Ville Parle.
12:30 PM EST: How many dead so far overall?
12:31 PM EST: Dude, I don't know. Switch on India TV. They seem to have the latest updates.

I scrambled out of bed and switched on CNN. A reporter was interviewing supermarket staff about how many Butterballs were left in stock.

“None,” a shop attendant brayed into the microphone. “Shoppers will be lucky if they find a half-dozen left in the city at this point.”

“It's the day before Thanksgiving, and last-minute shoppers better rush if they want those turkeys on the table tomorrow! Back to you Bo—”

I switched off the TV and called my mother. “What's happening? Are you okay? Is everyone okay?”

“We're fine. We're home. Nobody's sure what's going on yet.”

I called Rahul next.

“Tara, I can't hear you.”

“There've been attacks in Bombay.”

“What? Listen the network here’s shit. Text me. We'll talk when I'm home.”

“Wait—” I said. But he'd already hung up.

I switched on the TV again. This time there was a report on Black Friday deals.

I stepped onto the fire escape and watched my breath frost in the outside air. Soon, it would snow.

*

The December I met Rahul passed as one long, unrelenting snowstorm. We met at a temple. To anyone who knows me, this is a joke. I'm a terrible Hindu. I eat beef and drink
too much and only pray to God when I really need something. The God I pray to is nebulus, an abstraction rather than one of the 330 million specific manifestations with which my religion presents me. He is not Shiva the destroyer, blue and stoned, sitting on a rock with serpents coiled around his neck; nor is he the more serene Vishnu the preserver. He is definitely not Ram, the embodiment of good, and the presiding deity at the temple in Boston where I met Rahul.

It had been years since I'd visited a temple. The pandit handed me a silver tray with a lit lamp and I held it awkwardly, not knowing what to do. I was thinking that going there had been a terrible idea when I caught sight of a gangly boy, standing just behind the pandit, looking directly at me. His hands moved in the air in clockwise circles, and I instinctively began to mimic the action. Seven circles later, he motioned for me to stop and hand the tray back. Later, I saw him outside the temple and went up to thank him. We were both headed to the T and continued talking as we walked. He was three years older than me, a grad student at Northeastern. I studied at the other end of the green line.

Rahul had been in the US for a shorter time than I, only a year, and his accent was reassuring. Mine had adapted over the years, but Rahul’s English retained its Indian cadences, and I found myself reverting to a more familiar speech pattern as we talked. I’d drop in a couple of “onlys” and “butss” and “alsos” in places they didn't belong. I'm at home only. I'm sleeping soon also. Why but? I’d sprinkle in Hindi words I hadn't used in what felt like decades. What, yaar? Haan, really? Accha. Okay, bye.

He lived with six other Indian grads in a three-bedroom apartment that smelled of curry and garam masala. The first time he invited me over, he'd managed to get the house
to himself. He cooked me a three-course Indian meal. The rice was a fluffy basmati, the dal tangy with tamarind, the kicking spice of the vegetables nicely cut with a chilled cucumber yogurt. My culinary skills extended to scrambled eggs and toast. Later, he pulled out a guitar and played an old Hindi song about lone wanderers in a desert. He sang with his eyes closed. It would have been hokey if it weren’t so damn endearing. Our fingers brushed as he saw me out the door.

A week later, he asked me to be his girlfriend. I laughed.

*

By the time Rahul returned from work the evening of the Bombay attacks, the train station had been cleared; Leopold had been cordoned off; bomb squads had given the all clear on the sites where the taxi had exploded. But the two hotels in downtown Bombay, barely 10 minutes from each other, remained under siege. The Bombay Chabad House, a Jewish synagogue in the same area, was also under attack. CNN had caught wind of the Bombay attacks by this point. It was a slow news week and reports confirmed that there were Americans in the hotels as well as in the Chabad House. The combination of these two details resulted in 24-hour coverage.

“I got your texts,” Rahul said, taking off his shoes near the front door. “Is everyone you know safe?”

I told him about the messages I'd been receiving from home about friends of friends trapped in the hotel, friends' relatives who'd gone to one of the restaurants at the Taj for dinner and were still inside.

“Yes,” Rahul said. “But no one you really directly know?”
It could have just as easily been someone I knew, but I continued to stare at the television, not wanting to have this conversation. I'd been excited when Rahul first told me he was from Bombay. But I later learned he was from a suburb so far to the north that it was akin to someone from the depths of Queens insisting they were from Manhattan. I'd said this out loud to Rahul during a fight we'd had the previous night and he'd called me an elitist.

I was an elitist because I'd gone to a private school, because my parents were members of a country club, because I grew up speaking English and corrected Rahul's pronunciation of certain words. I was an elitist because I'd been to these hotels that were now burning, eaten at their restaurants, attended weddings in their banquet halls. I was an elitist because I thought Bombay extended only to the parts I'd grown up in, the parts that now smouldered on our TV screen.

Maybe Rahul was right, or maybe there was a difference between being an elitist and simply being a little richer than him. I kept that thought to myself. You say something that awful out loud and there’s no taking it back.

I could see that despite Rahul’s misgivings about “my Bombay” as he put it, he was interested. It was difficult to believe that the scene unfolding before us was real. The attackers, now upgraded to the level of terrorists, were holding hostages at the Chabad House and both the hotels. Fire-fighters climbed up tall ladders and pulled trapped hotel guests from their bedroom windows. Flames billowed from the top floors of the hotels.

“This is crazy,” I told Rahul.

He nodded.
“It’s like 9/11, but in India, you know? My God, this is going to be our 9/11, isn’t it?”

“I doubt that’s what the people in the hotel are thinking, Tara.”

It was true, but it also wasn’t what I’d meant. I didn’t say anything. Rahul and I had recently developed a shorthand in cutting each other down. We were quick, efficient, adept in crafting that one simple sentence that really hit at the other person’s shortcomings. Is this what happens as a relationship slowly deteriorates? You mine each other’s vulnerabilities as points of easy attack rather than something sacred?

At close to 1 AM in the morning, CNN began to rebroadcast old clips and not many fresh details emerged. Rahul got up, stretched, and began to get ready for bed.


“I'm tired.” He pulled down the covers and began climbing into bed, but then stopped and turned toward me. “I mean, unless you want to talk.”

“No. It's okay. Go to bed.”

* 

I've always gone to bed later than I should. This was especially the case the year I met Rahul. My room in Boston had an attached balcony, and I had begun to spend an inordinate amount of time on it in the months leading up to that fateful temple visit. I would step out for a smoke or a quick breath of air, only to find over an hour had passed when I stepped back in. It wasn't a particularly good-looking balcony, but to me its charm lay in its faults. It was about three feet wide, maybe five feet long; the wrought iron had yellowed with rust. Two outdoor potted plants, left behind by the room's previous owner, slowly shrivelled and died during my tenancy. I left them out, though. The image of the
rotting, brown twigs against the intricate metal trellis of the balcony railings appealed to my artistic sensibilities; I found the occasional budding of a single bright green leaf on an otherwise withered branch a triumphant symbol of life adamantly springing from decay. I was a Liberal Arts student.

I'd managed to fit a small round table and plastic chair onto this balcony, and I spent many late hours there. Slowly, I began to understand the rhythms of the night: the parting cries of groups of twenty-somethings a little after 2 AM once the bars shut, a random drunken fight between lovers, an hour of dead silence before a massive cleaning truck came barrelling down the street, its circular brushes whirring violently.

If I stayed awake beyond the passing of the cleaning truck, the night would wane into dawn. I would be tasked with the disorienting ordeal of attempting to fall asleep to the chirping of morning birds and the odd rays of sunlight that invariably found their way through chinks in my blinds. A wiser person might have considered changing sleeping habits. I decided the fault lay in the blinds and invested in hotel-style, heavy-duty blackout curtains; my curtains rods bent with their weight. My flatmates began to call my bedroom “the cave.” Equally dark at 3 PM and 3 AM, it existed as an eternal vacuum where one lost all sense of time.

I never told anyone what really kept me on my balcony that year. A group of Indian boys had moved into the first floor of the building opposite mine. From three stories above, I had a clear view of them. I could tell they had all just arrived from one of the small towns in India; they dressed in checked short-sleeved shirts that looked a size too small, and tight dark brown trousers. I knew that once it started getting chillier, ugly brown sweaters would emerge, made from the kind of wool that scratches against your
collarbone. There were about four or five boys; I wasn't sure. I never saw them together, only separately or in twos; they would often step out to make phone calls, which made me think they had no privacy, that they were cramped into a two- maybe even one-bedroom apartment. They all probably worked for the same company and had been posted here together. I guessed they were on a tight budget and saving money to send home. I imagined them huddled around a hot plate, making ramen for dinner. Somewhere, at the back of my mind, I knew that their apartment probably had a stove, but the hot plate fit in better with my picture of their lives.

I don't know what drew me to these boys. Though they were much older than me—they looked to be in their early-30s—they were boys, not men, in my head. Perhaps it was because it was that time of year when summer had already faded into fall and fall was slowly turning into winter: a time that always made me feel slightly homesick. That year, I was a semester shy of graduating, down with a case of senioritis, and felt particularly adrift.

I spoke to my mother often then. I was able to tell when she was standing at the window of our 12th floor Bombay apartment because I could hear the cawing of the crows so clearly through the phone line that it felt as though I was standing right next to her. Every morning, for the first sixteen years of my life, I had heard these crows and wished I could sleep for just ten minutes more. But during those phone conversations, the sound elicited a sense of fondness rather than annoyance. I remember being surprised, even then, at how the harsh crow cries from ten thousand miles away stirred within me sharp pangs of longing. It reminded me of the everyday chaos of life in Bombay: the cries of the street sellers mixed with the honking of taxis careening down narrow alleys, the
overpowering smell of spices and dust and heat. My life in Boston—a city I largely loved, whose going-ons I so assiduously observed from my balcony—seemed achingly bland and sterile.

Watching the Indian boys only magnified my longing for home, and they began to possess my nocturnal hours. I could see partially into one of their bedrooms, and noticed that in place of a bed there was simply a futon. The occupant of the futon would often lie on his back, facing the window, seemingly looking out into the sky. On some nights, the light in his bedroom stayed on almost as late as mine. I wondered if he knew that once it got colder, his woollen sweaters wouldn't afford much protection; he would have to buy winter coats and bulky gloves. He would think of home more often once it started getting dark early; he would feel just a little more alone. I would feel my throat catch on his behalf. These thoughts made me want to go down and hold him, tell him it would be all right, that he would make it through.

“Come home for Christmas,” my mother said.

The offer was tempting, but I declined. My parents were paying a fair amount for my education even after my scholarship, and I felt guilty asking them to fly me home. So, I stayed and spent countless holiday hours on my balcony, shivering in the cold, waiting to see how the boys were doing. But the boys didn't come out much that December. My longing for home increased and, on a whim, one Sunday morning, I decided to go visit a temple.

*
After Rahul went to bed, I continued to watch the news, but there were no new details. I turned down the volume on the TV and stepped out onto the fire escape to call my mother. It was early afternoon in Bombay, more than 14 hours since the attacks started.

“What's going on there?” I asked.

She told me about her friends who lived in buildings close to the hostage sites. She'd been talking to them on the phone. “There's smoke everywhere,” she said. “They say the air smells like gunpowder.” My mother couldn't see any smoke herself. Everything around my parents' house was still. “The streets are deserted,” she told me. “And it's quiet. So quiet we can hear the exchange of gunfire from the Taj.”

I tried to imagine this. My mother was some four miles from where the hotel was burning. I strained my ears to try and detect the background noise around her. But, for once, there was only silence.

I went back into the apartment. Rahul had fallen asleep with his face turned to the ceiling. For one crazy instant, my mind wandered back to that other Indian boy, the one I would see from my Boston balcony, lying on the futon, his gaze perpetually trained outside his bedroom window. I wondered, as I watched Rahul, why that boy was always up so late, what thoughts kept him from sleep. I wondered if he'd been remembering the caws of the crows in a country so far away that on some nights it felt as though it had never really existed.

* 

I’d dated boys before Rahul, but they were mostly American, and I'd never slept with any of them. Not because they were American, but because I had some strange fantasy about my first time.
“I want my first time to be special,” I'd tell these men when they pushed for something more. *And you're not special* was the unvoiced thought I left hanging in the air. I had just entered my twenties, and it made me feel sexy and mysterious and somewhat unattainable. Or maybe I just needed some deeper meaning to justify the excruciating monotony of giving a 15-minute hand-job.

“Why would you go through that?” my American girlfriends asked me. “It's so much easier to just have sex.” But most of the boys I'd been with didn’t seem to mind too much. They usually came back, tried a little harder, shrugged and resorted to hands and tongues after I spewed my usual line. They were broad-shouldered, generous, easy-going guys, as white and blue-eyed as my initial preconceptions of America.

Nothing much had ever come out of my relationships with these men outside of a shortlist of phone numbers I knew I could call at an hour’s notice for a good time, and a smaller list of guy friends who were sometimes willing to be more.

This, I thought, was the freedom of America. The anonymity, the disconnect, the ability to have male friends who would get over the awkwardness and continue to be your friend even if you sometimes kissed or fondled them. A few years later, in a completely different context, I would explain this concept of ‘friends with benefits’ to my mother. It completely baffled her. She'd tell her friends about it when she talked about “the youth of today.” Except, she kept referring to it as “friends with provisions,” which sounded more like someone who came bearing the promise of groceries rather than the promise of sex.

It had been years since I'd been someone's girlfriend. It made me feel 16 again, and so when Rahul asked, I agreed.
Rahul had never slept with anyone either. All the magazine articles I'd read advised me that the first time is better with an experienced man. I decided to go against the grain of conventional wisdom. The fact that it would be the first time for both of us convinced me it would be more special.

Rahul was hesitant. “Won't it be more special, if we wait until we're married?”

“Don't you want more right now?” I countered. I flexed my sore wrist in the air. I rested my head on his bare stomach, spent.

I don't know what finally convinced Rahul. We began to spend more time together. Maybe our interactions began to resemble some form of domesticity: eating breakfast over the morning newspaper, sharing a sink while brushing our teeth, silently working together on my bed on individual assignments, my feet propped on his. Maybe it was being able to communicate in Hindi with each other on the T, comfortable in the knowledge that no one else could understand us. My Hindi was rubbish—the genders mixed up, the tenses all out of place. The first time Rahul heard me speak it, he laughed. But his laughter was kind. He leaned in as he responded in a Hindi purer and more sophisticated than mine. I listened to the music of his words. The sounds around me dissipated into the background. The obnoxious jeering of the Massholes on their way to a Sox Game dulled into a murmur, the beeping of the doors as they opened and closed at various stops was a muted echo. Over Rahul's shoulder, I could see a group of UGGs-clad teenage girls, their heads thrown back, hooped earrings swaying. Their laughter sounded distant and distorted as though it came from somewhere leagues above, refracted through miles and miles of water.
One Sunday night, when Rahul was helping my flatmates and me take the trash out, our eyes met over the blue recycling bin on my curbside.

“I love you,” I blurted.

“I love you, too,” he said.

Equally surprised, we leaned over the blue barrel, our hands resting on its lid, and kissed.

Maybe, that was the moment that convinced him. A week later when he told me he was ready to “go all the way,” I thought it wiser not ask why he'd changed his mind.

I don't know what I was imagining the many times I talked about the first time being special. Fireworks. Musical crescendos. Two aesthetically-lit bodies, tastefully covered in satin bed sheets, moving gracefully in tandem.

Rahul wore two condoms.

“Am I in yet?” he asked.

“I don't think so.”

“Now?”

“I don't feel anything.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Ten seconds later, it was over.

We held each other for a while. Then I put on my T-shirt, threw the yellow Durex Performa Intense wrappers into the bin, and stepped out for a smoke.
We got better with time. We progressed from a dash to a sprint to a satisfying lap. We gleefully discarded the marathon hand-jobs that tested our endurance and embraced the adrenaline burst of a better-paced and more satisfying race to the finish.

Rahul and I had few common interests. He didn’t drink. I’d come back from a night out with friends and find him waiting for me on the stoop of my building, sober and smiling at 2 AM. Rahul didn't read, but he listened closely when I read him passages I liked from books. He laughed at the right places, nodded at the correct points. We could never share food. He didn't eat meat, wouldn't touch any dessert made with eggs. But he watched me eat my shrimp, my egg-laced chocolate pastries, as he poured ketchup over his pasta.

He poured ketchup on everything: rice, pizza, mushrooms. We'd go to a mid-level Italian restaurant just fancy enough to not carry ketchup, but Rahul was not deterred. He'd pull out a fast-food packet of Heinz from his pocket: his emergency rations. A boy scout, he was always prepared. I found it charming at the time.

We had little in common, except for sex. We spent almost every night at my apartment. Weekdays he would take the T back to Northeastern in the morning. Weekends we spent in a cocoon, wrapped in my blanket, taking a break occasionally to watch a Hindi movie, order delivery. *Extra ketchup, please.*

I watched the thick red liquid ooze over vegetarian lo mien. My stomach turned. Later, under the sheets, it would turn again in a very different way. My nights of balcony wandering ceased.

Six months after we first met, I graduated. Rahul got offered a job in New York as part of his co-op program. I packed up four years’ worth of belongings into two suitcases.
I left my apartment, my flatmates, the Indian boys, my beloved balcony, my bedroom with its sagging curtains. If I had Rahul, I decided, I didn't need any of these other things.

*  

On Thanksgiving morning, I was awakened by the familiar sound of bells. The clock on the bedside table flashed 9:15 AM. Rahul stood near our bedside in front of a shelf lined with framed images of half-a-dozen gods, ringing a bell and chanting. This, too, was something we'd fought about. That morning, however, I simply said, “Pray for the hostages.”

Rahul nodded and continued his chanting.

It was evening in India. The two hotels and the Chabad House were still under siege. We stayed in front of the television that whole day. People were slowly being evacuated from all three sites even as gunfire between the terrorists and the National Guard continued. A new series of explosions rocked the places under attack.

The news reporters commented on how the Taj Palace Hotel was architecturally modelled to resemble the Taj Mahal in Agra, one of the seven wonders of the world. On television, smoke rose thick and black, almost obscuring the hotel's grand dome. A political commentator made a remark about the symbolism of the flames engulfing one of the oldest hotels in India, a tribute to a national treasure. “It's almost as though everything the country holds dear has been set ablaze in a single day,” he said. “History. Security. Freedom.”

At 10 PM that night, Rahul told me we better get going.

“Where are we going?” I blinked, confused.

“Black Friday, remember? We said we'd sit outside the mall together tonight.”
“We can't go now. Just look what's happening, Rahul.”

“C'mon. We can't change anything from here.”

“How can you think about shopping right now, when your country's burning?”

Rahul contemplated me silently for a moment before he spoke. “You know, about two years back, there was a series of bombs that went off on local trains in Bombay. You would have heard about it, I'm sure, but I don't know how much it would've mattered. You would never have any reason to be on those trains. Your friends wouldn't either. They were trains going to places like Jogeshwari and Bhayandar. Borivali. Places you don't really consider 'Bombay.' Over 200 people died. One of them was my friend. Four years before that a bus blew up in Ghatkopar. Again, too far flung a suburb for you to know much about.” He shrugged. “But my mother was shopping in the area at the time. For three hours we couldn't reach her. It was okay, but. She got home, eventually. She was safe.”

He looked toward the TV now. There was a clip, a day old, of Victoria Terminus emptied, its floors swathed in smears of blood. “There wasn't much reporting about the bus. Nothing like this. It was no big deal, I guess. Only two people died. The train blasts took out more people. Still, the next day we were all back on the trains. We had no other way of getting to work, you see? There were mentions on world news, but nothing like this. Life went on. Most of the people stuck in these hotels have probably never ridden a local train in their lives. But they're rich. Some of them are American even. And I guess that's enough to stop the world.”

Rahul walked away from me. He slipped on his winter coat, shoved his feet into his boots. He turned toward the door, but then stopped and looked my way. “Of course, I
care about my country, Tara. But this,” he gestured at the television screen, “*this* is not my India.”

I heard the front door slam as he left. I continued watching. At about 4 AM, I stepped out onto the fire escape and looked onto the street below. The view from our fire escape was always brown, always cold and always Indian. I'd left the task of finding an apartment to Rahul, and this was the one he had chosen. It was an Indian building, in an Indian immigrant neighbourhood. The streets swarmed with clones of the boys I'd once watched from my balcony with such affection. Dirt littered the sidewalks. The smell of stale spices was everywhere. I saw a few couples and groups of friends walking around, even at this late hour. They seemed happy, unperturbed by all that was happening in their homeland. Rahul's words played in my mind. *This is not my India*, I thought.

I went back inside. CNN was reporting that the siege at the Trident hotel had ended. Two terrorists had been shot dead; 143 hostages had been recovered alive. Close to 30 people were believed killed. By 10 AM, about 8:30 PM in India, the siege on the Chabad House was over too. Two more terrorists had been killed. Six hostages, including a rabbi and his wife, were found inside, tortured and murdered. Rahul still wasn't back. The last thing I remember hearing was that there had been fresh explosions at the Taj; one terrorist still remained inside.

*  
Rahul and I had sex in common, until, one day, we didn't.

Shortly after we moved to Queens, Rahul began to withdraw in the moments after we finished. Our spooning was replaced by a deep, sulking silence.

“What is it?” I finally asked. I should have known better.
“This is wrong,” Rahul told me.

*This* was about God. Sin. Temptation. Premarital transgressions.

Initially, I tried to pacify him. *We love each other*, I told him. *Love forgives all sins.*

I felt like a Hallmark greeting card.

“How can something that feels so good be bad?” I cajoled

“There's other ways for us to feel good,” he countered.

A recent graduate of Everything But Sex 101, I pretended to be obtuse to his insinuations.

Eventually, I let him be. We'd have sex. I'd move to the fire escape, replace pillow talk with nicotine. Rahul would remain on my bed, contemplate our ceiling as he had interior monologues with his God.

It was just a phase, I told myself. He'd get over it. It wasn’t too bad, really.

Nothing tasted as good as a post-coital cigarette.

Days crawled by this way—last ditch job applications, tepid sex, and cigarettes on the fire escape. Each day was reliably grey and overcast. Some days, tired of the job search, I'd venture out into Manhattan and meet a few of my friends from Bombay who were studying at NYU. One night, I went out with them, but didn’t bring Rahul with me. I told him it was more of a girls’ night out, it would get late, the ride from the city back home was a long one, it wasn't worth his effort. But, really, I was embarrassed. Embarrassed by his accent, which I'd once loved, embarrassed by the way he dressed—in the same checked short-sleeve shirts and scratchy sweaters that had once endeared me to the Indian boys living opposite my Boston apartment, embarrassed of the serrated Heinz
packets that would invariably come out of his front pocket. I didn’t want my friends to know Rahul; I didn’t want them to know anything about my life in Queens.

Whenever Rahul came back from work, we heated a few Ready-to-Eat boxes of Paneer Tikka Masala or Dal Makhani. It was greasy and processed and awful. Never in my life, not even back home, had I eaten so much Indian food. At home, we ate Indian in the afternoon, but for dinner, my family usually had what we called “continental food”: roast chicken, mashed potatoes, pasta, baked fish, soup, garlic bread. Now, everything felt upside down.

“Why are we having lunch for dinner?” I once quipped to Rahul.

This is what my sister and I asked my mother on the rare occasions we were served Indian food at night. Rahul looked at me blankly. This was not something he understood. Just as he didn't understand the humour in most of the sitcoms I'd watch in the evenings as we ate. He'd go to bed by 10 and switch off the lights. I'd plug my headphones in the TV to mute out the noise. Sometimes we’d fool around a bit before he slept. I'd move toward him, try to push the kissing and groping in another direction.

“We did it last night, do we have to do it again?” he finally asked one night.

We negotiated a twice-a-week compromise.

When we were done, I'd get out of bed and go back to the TV, sit with my face a mere foot from the screen. Every time I'd forgetfully move back, my headphones would jerk out of my ear. I can still picture myself sitting in that darkened studio, canned laughter ringing in my ears, the glow of the TV, the only light in the room, bathing my skin in a blue sheen.
While the sex had waned, Rahul's religious fervour had increased. He prayed all the time. He kept trying to purify himself. If I smoked, I'd have to brush before kissing him. If I'd eaten meat, I would brush. If I drank, I would brush. I'd never had such impeccable dental hygiene. I usually crawled into bed at some time close to 3 AM, after my last cigarette of the day and my final round of brushing. I could sometimes smell my breath on my pillow. The sharp burn of Listerine made my eyes water.

Rahul’s alarm would go off at 5 AM. I could hear him turn on the water in the bathroom through our thin walls. He insisted on bathing from a bucket. The echoes of water clattering into an empty plastic drum drove me crazy. Rahul used a mug to swoosh the water onto himself. Between swooshes I could hear him chant the Gayatri Mantra. He'd emerge, cleansed, and then the ringing would begin. He would stand near our shared bed in front of the shelf filled with the metal statues of his gods, a lit incense stick in one hand, a small brass bell in the other. He would mumble prayers I had never learned. His mumbles would slowly turn into a steady chanting; the bell clanged with increased urgency. Hours after the bell was put down, hours after Rahul left for work, the metallic clang would continue to ring in my ears.

The first time I'd seen Rahul pray was on a Saturday evening at my apartment in Boston. We'd spent the day in bed, and I started when he suddenly got up. This was in the days before his guilt had settled in and taken residence. It had just been the two of us.

Saturday was the day of Saturn, he explained. He needed to shower so he could pray. He said this apologetically, almost embarrassed. Still in bed when he returned, I watched him take out a picture of Hanuman, the monkey god, from his wallet before
launching into his prayers. His voice was loud, clear, no longer apologetic. I remember watching him and feeling something close to envy.

Now, there was just annoyance.

“For fuck's sakes, man,” I finally erupted the morning before the attacks. “The sun's not even up yet. Could you please just pray in your head?”

My expletive hung in the air between us. He looked at me, stunned. His hand paused, suspended. It tilted to the left, the bell still between his fingers, silenced mid-clang. He didn't say anything, but that evening, a scheduled “sex night,” he pulled away. He told me I'd offended his beliefs that morning. I was leading both of us into sin.

“I don't believe that,” I told him.

“How can you not believe that? We both come from the same culture; we both grew up in the same city.”

“Please. Saying you grew up in Bombay is like saying we live in Manhattan right now. Don't lie to yourself.”

“You're such an elitist.”

The conversation deteriorated from there and we decided to shelf it until he returned from work the next day. But by then Bombay was burning and nothing else mattered to me.

*  

I must have fallen asleep while watching the news reports. I woke up on the couch hours later. My mouth felt like cotton. There was a blanket over me. Rahul sat on the other end of the couch looking in my direction.

“What time is it,” I asked.
“Just past nine.”

The television was switched off. Rahul stopped me as I reached for the remote.

“It's all right. It's over. They caught the last guy. It's done.” He moved closer toward me.

I sat up and looked around. “What did you buy?”

“Nothing.”

“It's over?”

“Yeah.”

“When did you get back?”

“In the evening. Around four.”

“That's a long time to return with no shopping. No good deals?”

“Naah, had other stuff on my mind. Walked around. Was thinking.”

“Whaddya think?”

“Listen,” he took my hand. “I'm sorry, you know? About everything. Last night. Before that. I said some stuff I shouldn't have.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I leaned in and kissed him. He pushed me back toward the couch as our kiss deepened. He pulled off my t-shirt. His hands were warm on my skin as they grazed my stomach.

We lay there once we were finished, his face buried in my shoulder. After days, everything felt calm again, new.

“We're going to be okay,” I told him. “We'll work through this.”

He didn't say anything for a while. I ran my fingers through his hair.
“I spoke to my parents this morning,” he finally mumbled into my shoulder.

“About the future. About marriage.”

I sat up, surprised. Rahul's parents knew nothing about me, about our living together. It had been an issue we'd fought about before. My parents knew, although, I'd told them Rahul and I were sleeping in separate beds. They pretended to believe me.

Later, my mother told me she'd never thought it would last. I suppose, I wasn't surprised. Even when Rahul and I were together, my mother always called him that boy. As in, are you still living with that boy? How is that boy? Are you and that boy still friendly?

“His name is Rahul, Ma,” I would say. “And it's not called being friendly. We're together. We're seeing each other.”

In a conversation I'd had with my mother a few nights before the attacks, I'd added, “We love each other.” I'm not sure if I said this for her benefit or mine.

“Yes, darling,” my mother replied. “But if you love each other, you must be friends as well, no?”

The fact that Rahul's parents, too, finally knew about me was big.

“You told them about me?” I asked him. “What did they say?”

“No. Not about you...” He was looking down at his hands. “Look, they want me to start meeting some girls over here. From my community. Like, arranged. I agreed.”

“You what?”

“Look, this thing with us ... you know there's no future.”

He was right. Of course, he was right. But it still stung that he got to say it.

“What was this then?” I asked, gesturing at our unclothed bodies.
He shifted on the couch. His skin looked sickly in the harsh white glare of the overhead tube light. As he leaned forward, his stomach protruded slightly over the elastic waistband of his Jockey briefs. “I thought I owed it to you,” he said. “I wanted to give you something good to remember me by.”

I've never believed people when they talk about their mouths falling open, but I swear for a moment I just sat there, jaw unhinged. Then a laugh slowly wrenched itself from my gut—long and loud and clear as a prayer.

I called a friend with a spare couch in Boston and began to pack my bags.

* 

Six months later, Rahul would be engaged. I would be back in India. Not his India, but not mine either. The Bombay I came back to was nothing like the Bombay of my memories. I'd left home at 17. I came back at 22 and landed just as the monsoons settled in. I hadn't witnessed a monsoon in a while and my last memory of the Bombay rains was jumping in puddles as a child, laughing into the mist of waves that crashed onto Marine Drive. I had developed cinematic images in my head of street urchins with faces turned skyward, opening their mouths to the downpour, or leaving greasy handprints on rolled-up windows of air-conditioned cars stuck in the standstill of traffic; of lovers under black umbrellas drinking *chai* from earthen pots and holding paper cones of spiced *bhel* with diced onions and tomatoes bought from the closest roadside vendor; of the sharp, sweet smell of freshly wet earth. In my picture postcard memories, I'd forgotten how the rains could turn into cascades that made a mockery of even the sturdiest umbrellas. I'd forgotten that Bombay taxis have the magical knack of disappearing off the roads the moment the heavens break, leaving pedestrians staring into a blurry liquid wall, squinting
for a flash of black and yellow, their toes squishing against the slush that has filled their flimsy shoes. I had forgotten that there is no wet earth in Bombay, only wet garbage and the rancid smell of rat dung rising from overflowing sewage water. My *Slumdog Millionaire*-esque memories had been coated in the Technicolor sheen that makes even children shitting on train tracks seem beautiful. But where I had expected beauty, I only found filth; where I'd imagined poetry, there was only noise. The crows cawed far too loudly and far too early in the morning.

Only on returning home did I discover that I had no idea what home was anymore. But that is another story, set in a world so distant from my life in America that my Queens studio with Rahul seems to exist in a different dimension. When I try to picture it now, I always seem to be hovering outside, somewhere on our fire escape, looking in.

In my mind's eye, it is always 2008. It is always Black Friday. My suitcases are packed. They lie near the couch as I wait for morning and the first bus to Boston. Rahul is in bed and I am sitting in front of the TV, headphones in my ears, watching reports on the aftermath of the attacks. Over 150 dead. Nine terrorists killed. One captured. Clips of the destruction from the past 48 hours play over and over on loop. The siege has ended, but I still sit there and keep watching. The sky lightens outside, and in front of me, the Taj continues to burn.

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HOME: A TALE OF FEW CITIES

Part 1: This is How You Find Yourself

Bombay/Boston, 2004. You dreamed of America as though America was a single entity made up of McDonald's and malls and money. When you finally got the scholarship to an American university, your mother warned you not to become one of those foreign-returned who come back with a Yankee accent. By this she meant the stretched *aah* sounds and drawling *rs* that roll off the tongues of all the Non Resident Indians when they come home on holiday. Your friends come to see you off. “You're going to be one of those NRI types now,” they tell you before you leave for the airport. You shake your head and laugh.

You reach Boston with three suitcases—one filled solely with packets of spices and dehydrated Indian foods, another with clothes, sweaters and thermal underwear, a third with plastic storage boxes, collapsible cloth shelves, and a dozen hangers. The last of these suitcases seems unnecessary the first time you enter a Bed, Bath & Beyond, but you comfort yourself with the thought that it was much cheaper in India even factoring in the cost of excess baggage. It will take you over a year to stop converting dollars into rupees each time you make a purchase. You will continue to layer your sweaters one over the other straight into November, until, tired of being unable to fully raise your arms, you finally buy a winter coat. Your experiments with Indian food will end the day one of your food packets explodes in the microwave, setting off all the smoke alarms on your dorm room floor, filling the corridor with the tangy scent of tamarind, and forever staining the walls of your microwave with turmeric-yellow streaks.
You know none of this as you stand before the immigration officer at Logan Airport. He doesn't return your smile and your hands fumble as you give him your passport, your I-20, your scholarship offer letter. He points to a cloth near the fingerprint machine and you wipe off the sweat stains you have left on its screen. He looks you over once more—your hair dishevelled from the 20-hour plane ride, your breath curdled in your mouth. The stamp clenched in his fist thuds decisively on the pages of your passport. “Welcome to America,” he says.

**Boston, 2004.** You soon learn that Yankee doesn't signify all of America, that there is no one American accent but many of them: New Jersey twangs and Massachusetts brogues, Louisiana lilts and Texan drawls. Each sounds equally incomprehensible. The frequently swapped *t* and *d* sounds confuse you. When they are thirsty, people ask for *wader*. The first time you mishear the phrase “It's like herding cats,” you’re horrified.

You learn to say *skedule* instead of *shedule*. You learn to say *restroom* instead of *loo*, *trunk* instead of *dickie*, *elevator* instead of *lift*, *trashcan* instead of *bin*. You're surprised when you find out the final *s* in Arkansas is silent, that jelly is *jello* and jam is *jelly*. The concept of a PB&J suddenly makes sense.

You carefully hoard these tiny morsels of information. At first they feel shiny and new, objects to be handled delicately. You let them grow, veins of freshly-acquired knowledge branching into your system and slowly becoming absorbed until they are ingrained, until they slide off your tongue and etch their way into your mannerisms.

One night, your American roommate overhears you on the phone with your mother. Later she asks, “Were you speaking Indian?” For once, you don't bother to correct her. For
once, you don't indignantly say, *Indian is a nationality, not a language.* You had been speaking English.

You realise to your horror that you have been putting on an American accent when you speak to your professors, your classmates, your friends. It is on this day that you begin to cultivate a rhythm of speech that is devoid of all cadences, equally erased of the sing-song Indian rhythms as of the rising American inflections—blank, uniformly neutral. “An international accent,” one of your professors calls it. “Foreign,” your mother says. A part of your identity splinters when either of these labels is used. Both are as bland and generic as your newly-formed accent, belonging to no place and every place at the same time.

**New York, 2004.** Sitting in a Chinatown bus, you discover privilege. While talking about India with two girls you’ve befriended on the university-organized weekend trip to New York, you are surprised to find that they consider you privileged because you have never cooked or cleaned or done your own laundry.

“You don't have to be rich to have domestic help in India,” you try and explain, “just middle class.”

The two girls, blonde twins, look at you in disbelief. You want to tell them how much your parents had to save to afford your education, even after the scholarship; you want to explain how you won't be going home this winter because the fares are too expensive; you want to tell them about the extra shifts you keep trying to pick up at your fund-raising job at the alumni office. On your previous shift, a potential donor had stumbled over the pronunciation of your name. He hadn't believed you when you told
him you were calling from the university offices. “Stop stealing our jobs,” he said before hanging up.

You want to share all of this with someone. Instead you say, “We're not privileged. We just have cheap labour.” You hear the horrible echo of your words even before the disbelief on the faces around you turns to judgement.

**Boston, 2004.** You mainly begin to cultivate friends that are Indian. Not the Indians who have grown up in the US, the American Born Confused Desis or ABCDs as you call them, but Indian from India. You move into an apartment with three of them. The Authentics, you call each other. “The Auth-ethnics,” your roommate Sameera says, playing off the term the ABCDs use for your group. You observe Indian holidays and rituals you never knew existed. You slip into Hindi in each other's company. When a new Bollywood movie releases, you spend an hour commuting to a theatre in Arlington that screens Hindi films. Here, ten thousand miles from where you grew up, for the first time in your life, you identify yourself as Indian first and everything else later.

**San Diego, 2005.** Three chickens live in your aunt’s backyard. You are visiting over winter break and are startled the first time you see one blissfully darting across patchy grass as though this were Old MacDonald's farm rather than the middle of a bustling city.

Azaadi, your cousin, looks at you, amused. “Those eggs we had for breakfast?”

“No,” you say.

She nods toward the poultry. “Yes.”

The eggs had been delicious.

“Fantastic,” you had said. This is something you have learned to say. “You have to be more appreciative in America,” your mother has told you. “People there don't
always have domestic help. If they make you a meal, tell them it is great, tell them it's the best you've ever had.”

The first time someone invited you over to their house in Boston, you'd declined their offer for a beverage, thinking they would ask twice more. These are the rules of hospitality you’ve grown up with. You didn't receive a beverage that day. You've learned, now, that in America you have to ask for what you want.

Your cousin shows you a few of the eggs—smooth ovals in blue, pink and green.

“We only eat organic,” Azaadi tells you. You are still learning these terms. Organic. Vegan. Lactose free. You tell her the first time you went to a supermarket in Boston, it took you two hours to find everything on your list.

She laughs and asks how your freshman year has been. “Do you miss home?”

You tell her it's gotten better. You admit you cried at the airport when you left.

Your aunt, your father’s sister, remembers being at your parents' wedding. She'd been elected, after the ceremony, to accompany your mother back to what used to be her house, what had that day become her parents' house, to help her pick up some belongings. “She wouldn't stop crying,” your aunt tells you.

You are startled by her memory. It has never occurred to you until then that your mother would have cried, too, when she first left home, that she ever had a home that wasn't yours.

**Boston, 2005.** On a grey Thursday afternoon, you see snow for the first time. It catches you unaware as you walk out of class and toward your dorm, gentle flurries that sit on your eyelashes and the tip of your nose. It takes you a moment to register what the white streaks slowly drifting toward the asphalt really are, and something inside of you lifts.
You sit on a bench and watch as the ground at your feet is carpeted. So little of America has been as you imagined that it delights you that snow is exactly how you thought it would be, soft and feathery and pristine. You gingerly walk on it as it accumulates, and your feet sink to precisely the level you thought they would, as though you have done this before, as though snow is a memory that has always lived within you, nestled in a forgotten corner just waiting to be rediscovered.

You stay out until the sky darkens. The wind picks up and you tilt your face and watch the fluffy drift turn into a slanting cascade, whirling in scattered directions with increased intensity. The criss-crossing flakes blur into dashes, glinting orange and yellow in the reflection of the street lamps. It looks like a downpour of liquid fire.

In the weeks that come, the snow will turn to yellow slush and then to boulders of ice. You will almost slip several times and start to get paranoid when you walk back in the dark, always putting one foot cautiously ahead, testing for black ice. “Walk like a penguin,” Sameera will tell you, and you wonder from where your roommate picks up these arbitrary strands of American advice.

Once the snow starts, it will seem to ceaselessly continue and you will yearn to see bare asphalt once more. You have never known cold like this. An electronic board near the T-stop on campus flashes the current temperature. On the next line there is a “Feels Like” temperature. This is invariably lower. You hadn’t understood what this meant until someone explained the concept of wind-chill. You stand at the T-stop, a scarf drawn over your nose, your fingers numb inside your gloves. Feels Like. Never before have you felt so much hatred for two words.
The flashing lights on the temperature board blur as the wind stings your face and your eyes tear up. Never again will you rejoice in snow; never again will you be able to recapture that first feeling of exactness, that night of wonder when a thousand comets seemed to hit the ground and turn to delicate powder.

**Bombay, 2005.** The heat slaps you in the face the first time you visit home. You have forgotten this as you have forgotten many things. You will soon remember. After living with people your age, on your timetable, your rules (or no rules), you will find it odd to live in your parents' house. Your friends back home will find it odd that you refer to it as *my parents' house.* “Coconut,” they call you: brown on the outside, white on the inside.

“You're not a guest here,” your mother will say, after your first week back. “You can't come and go as you please. This is not a hotel.” But you feel like a guest, and the house seems strange. It has changed. The upholstery is a different colour. Your parents and sister laugh at jokes to which you are not privy. You have imported certain new behaviours. After dinner at a friend's house, you say, “This ice-cream is delicious. The best I've ever had. Fantastic!”

Your friend looks at you, her eyebrows raised. “Calm down, Coconut. It's only Baskin-Robbins. You must have that in your America too.”

**New York, 2005.** The first time you'd visited New York on that university trip, you hated it. It was vast and confusing. You’ve heard people say this about Bombay, too, but hadn't understood what they meant until you were the visitor to a new place. Times Square had been a nightmare of jostling elbows. You were a tourist and were made to feel that way by endless strangers in black and grey. (Why did people in New York dress
predominantly in these colours?) Passersby glanced at you with indifference or withering stares as you posed near the LOVE sign while on the *Sex and the City* tour.

This time, though, you go with your Indian roommates. You avoid Times Square and discover the West Village. On a surprisingly warm fall day, you sit in Union Square surrounded by laughing students from NYU and the New School. The diversity of faces surprises you. You realise that what you had termed an “otherness” on your previous trip is what you now call a “New Yorkness.” Here, you think, you aren't Indian or American, Black or Hispanic. You're either a New Yorker or not. “Maybe that was the real message of *Sex and the City,*” Sameera sagely says.

You find the Big Apple is your city of discovery. Where you'd first discovered privilege, you now recognize praise. People in Boston have constantly stopped you on the road to compliment your shoes or your handbag. “Tara? That's such a pretty name,” you hear, when you introduce yourself. More than one stranger on the T has turned to notice your looks, has asked where you're from and actually seemed interested in the reply. This openness, this effusiveness, took you aback at first. You are not used to giving or receiving compliments. You have learned to be more restrained, to express your discontent but not your pleasure.

It had annoyed you initially: being constantly asked how you were and urged to have a good day. In New York, though, you begin to take pleasure in these random exchanges with strangers who seem so concerned about your well-being. The businessman standing behind you in the line at the Union Square Starbucks is ecstatic when he realises you are both from Massachusetts. He asks if you've travelled outside the East Coast and you tell him you about your trip to San Diego to visit your cousin and
aunt. He laughs in delight. “I'm so glad you said ah-nt and not ant,” he tells you. He shares how he, too, recently went to the West Coast where everybody said ant. “They called bubblers water fountains and frappes milk shakes,” he goes on to say. “I couldn't understand a word.”

“What a dick,” one of your roommates says when you share this exchange. “As if just because you said ah-nt doesn't mean you don't say water fountain or milkshake.”

A year back you might have coldly said the same thing to the businessman, simply because it was true. Now, you feel it would have also been unkind. When Sameera nods along with your other roommate's statement, you simply shrug. You don't share that you’d joined the man in shaking your head in disbelief, or that you told him to have a good day. You don't say that when you'd left the coffee shop, you were smiling.

**Bombay, 2005.** You go home for the Christmas holidays because a childhood friend is getting married. Strange things begin to happen to your body on this visit. You find your sleep disturbed, your stomach bloated. Your feet erupt in heat blisters; your face explodes in an adolescent magma of pimples. Your mother takes you to an Ayurvedic clinic where the doctor feels your pulse and tells you your body is riddled with toxins. He asks you what drugs you've been doing. You tell him none, avoiding your mother's suspicious stares. You tell him you've just come back from America.

“Ahh,” he says, “now it makes sense.” The toxins are from processed foods, he tells you; the blisters and pimples your body's reaction to the Indian heat. You will acclimatize to the weather, but the toxins have to be purged from your system. He prescribes a week-long detox regiment. You spend an hour every day in a sweltering, unventilated room where hot oils are poured on your body. On the sixth day, you are told
it is now time for the *basti karma*, which might leave you feeling a little weak. You realise too late that *basti* is the Ayurvedic term for enema. At the end of the week, you have lost five pounds. You have sweated and shat out all the remnants of America from your system.

**Goa, 2006.** You bring in the New Year on the beaches of Goa at your friend's wedding. During dance practices for a choreographed performance by the bride's family and friends, you realise that you have forgotten how to move to Bollywood songs.

“Don't worry,” you joke with the bride. “I can just stand in one corner and pretend to be a tree. I'll sway silently in the background.”

Your friend clasps your hands and gives you an earnest look. “You'd be a great tree,” she says comfortably. “You have such pretty limbs.”

**Boston, 2006.** In your junior year, you turn 21. You celebrate by going on a bar crawl. You proudly flash your passport at each bartender, although you’ve been drinking at bars in Bombay since you were 16.

“The drinking age in Bombay is technically 25,” you tell the few non-Indian friends who have showed up for your celebration, “but as long as you have the money and are tall enough to reach the bar, you're legal.” They laugh, as you knew they would. You have used this line so often, you have to work to make sure it doesn't sound rehearsed. You have many such lines.

“Do people really ride on elephants in India?” a boy you're dating asks.

“Yes,” you say. “I would have scored thirty points higher on my SATs, but I hailed a slow elephant. I reached the centre 15 minutes late.”
The boy laughs, but you can tell he isn’t entirely sure to what extent you are joking. You find this endearing, but as with most of your relationships with American boys, the feeling doesn’t last long. There will be too many things you feel you have to explain. You grow tired of being their *foreign girlfriend*.

The last boy you broke up with had studied you in a moment of long pause. “I think you need to ask yourself whether I saw you that way, or whether that’s how you see yourself,” he said finally.

“Oh, Chris,” you replied. “Do you need to intellectualize everything?”

You continue to visit bars through your junior and senior year. You play Buck Shoot and darts. You only eat organic because you still have graphic memories of the hot Ayurvedic massage chamber. Your friends remain predominantly Indian but, now, along with Diwali, all of you celebrate Halloween and Thanksgiving. You still speak of home, but you speak about it with nostalgia rather than the single-minded sense of longing that used to cut through everything else around you. You play beer pong at MIT frat parties. On the Fourth of July, you sit at the Esplanade and watch fireworks erupt over the Charles. You have been to several games at Fenway Park and proudly sport Red Sox paraphernalia. Chris would have told you that you’ve assimilated. You think of him and feel an unexpected pang in your chest.

**Boston, 2007-08.** Supermarkets no longer intimidate you. You enjoy roaming their aisles; you pick up Hunan sauce and prawn crackers from the international section, Italian sausages from the deli; Swiss cheese, Middle Eastern stuffed olives. The world is at your disposal, and if you have a coupon, you can buy it for $2 off.
You begin to believe you can make a life in this country. You graduate with honours and a confidence you never knew you possessed. You were told that Americans are arrogant and brash and don't know about anything beyond themselves. You have slowly learned the difference between arrogance and self-confidence. You were surprised at first at how easily students articulated their opinions and disagreed with professors. You were surprised even more when professors seemed to appreciate them for this. You have learned about Kant and existentialism; you have taken a seminar on Post-Colonial Literature and the White Man's Burden, you have studied the Chinese opera and the theatrical history of Kung Fu in a class on Asian Cinema. In these classrooms, you have discovered your voice. Your professors call you bright, incisive. “Don't hesitate to ask me for a recommendation,” one of them says.

You meet a boy and, for once, he is Indian. You shrug on the long-forgotten guise of “girlfriend” like an old and comfortable coat. You apply for positions in publishing. Sameera and you plan to find a job in New York. You decide you'll live in Brooklyn until you make enough money to move to the city. You’ll live on bagels to make ends meet. You laugh into your cocktails and name this the “Bread and Brooklyn” plan. You can feel the beginnings of your future unfurling in front of you, and it is bright and exciting and glinting with potential.

Sameera finds a position as a junior software engineer. You graduate with no job offers in hand. Your American Dream is interrupted. Your diploma lies uselessly under your mattress, unframed, and you wonder if you, too, should have found a career within the hallowed Indian trinity of doctor, lawyer, engineer. Surprising waves of homesickness grip you in their currents and keep you up at night.
“Buck up,” Sameera says, flinging your covers off you at two in the afternoon.

“You can’t just dream about success, you have to wake up and work at it.”

“Please,” you say. “No more American wisdom.”

“You think Gandhi gave up the first time white people ignored his appeals?”

You groan into your pillow.

“Don’t lose hope, Tara. You’ll find something soon.” Sameera’s voice softens, but then, everything sounds more muted when you have your head back under the covers.

Queens, 2008. You do find something or rather, someone. The Indian boy begins to occupy a larger role in your life. Later, you will refer to him as “my first and only Indian boyfriend in America.” You won’t want to talk about how you move with him to Queens. You won’t admit how, at your low point, you apply to a detective agency in Idaho as a report writer and administrative assistant. “My theoretical understanding of the subtleties of human interaction coupled with the writing and analytical skills developed over the course of my English minor would make me a valuable asset,” you write. “Additionally, as you will see from my resume, I have extensive experience with filing and copying gleaned from the various publishing internships I have completed over the last two years.”

As the number of job openings reduces, you spend your afternoons lying on the couch in pyjamas watching daytime talk shows and VH1's true celebrity scandals. You eat cereal for lunch and dinner. “Cheerios and Couch,” you call this plan. It doesn't have quite the same ring. Fall approaches. You begin to sleep till even later in the afternoon. You see very little sunlight. You dream of home and heat and your own bed.
Thanksgiving arrives. Terrorists storm a five-star hotel in Bombay and hold hostages for 48 hours. You watch the news from the studio apartment you share with the first-and-only Indian boyfriend. The tiny TV screen makes you feel even farther away from the events than you are already. The siege ends; so does your relationship. These things don’t sound related, but they are.

**Cambridge, 2008-09.** Everything is new in Sameera’s life. New apartment, new job at a software consultancy near Harvard Square, new roommates, new leather couch for you to crash on. Only you are old. “Anything for an old friend,” Sameera had said when you’d called from Penn Station.

If only you were a graceful sleeper. You’re uncomfortable in your awareness of each greasy fingerprint you leave shining on the couch’s glossy leather exterior. Your body imprints itself into seat cushions that stick to your skin. You fear you’re so jaded that you’ll dull the leather of its sheen Already, you can feel your exhaustion seeping into its pores, overwhelming its crisp musk and leaving everything stale.

“So much drama, Tar,” Sameera says. “That boy really did a number on you. The couch looks fine. Really. Of course you aren’t imposing. No, none of my roommates are judging you.” This last comment made with barely concealed frustration. Once you knew how to be grateful instead of needy.

One mid-April morning, you receive an email from the detective agency. *Thank you for your application,* it says. *Unfortunately, we have found a candidate who was better suited for the job.* You use the $641 remaining in your bank account to buy yourself a one-way ticket home. This time you leave with only two suitcases. You don’t have the money to pay for excess baggage. You gift Sameera your boots and winter
clothes. You push the cardboard cartons towards her as she shakes her head and asks if you're sure. “I won't need these where I'm going,” you tell her.

Part 2: This is How You Lose Yourself

 Bombay, 2009-10. A part of America has lodged itself so deep into your system that no number of massage therapies can knead it out. You are told the Bombay you have returned to is part of the New India, an India shining with opportunity. You only see poverty and filth. “Was the traffic always this bad?” you ask. “Was it always this hot?”

Your mother shakes her head at you and calls you a foreigner. “Five years, and you've already become a firangi,” she says. You ask the driver to roll up the windows and turn on the air-conditioning.

You find a job within a month. In India, your American degree means something. Your new position is as an editor at a custom publishing firm that creates magazines and brochures for various companies and clients. The proprietor interviews you.

“Can you write?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Do you know anything about books?”

“I have a degree in publishing.”

“Excellent. We've been getting many requests for coffee table books. You can help with that. Coffee table books are the Next Big Thing.” You negotiate a start date.

"No, not Monday," he says. "Monday is the 13th. That is an unlucky date. Start on Tuesday."

You soon discover that by “help” what your boss meant was handle. He takes you for meetings and introduces you as the “Head of my Books Department.” You smile and
shake hands and pretend you have a legion of subordinates working under your leadership. “My team will get back to you with some numbers in a few days,” you say.

Everything seems to run on this kind of *jugaad*—half-truths and bending of rules, creative solutions with meagre resources. The director of the Online Department takes you for a meeting with a potential client. “Wear a suit,” he tells you. “You can dress as one of those creative types when you're working with the editorial team in the office, but I need you to look like you have some business sense for this meeting. And listen,” he adds. “If they ask, tell them you have five years of experience. They need to think you're older than you are. And don't give them the name of your university. Just say you studied in Boston. Boston means Harvard.”

When you ask the project manager of the printing press about the status of an important project, he tells you, “Don't worry ma'am, *ho jayega.*” It will happen.

Your colleague laughs when you relay this conversation. “*Ho jayega* means you're fucked,” he tells you. “It's never going to happen.”

“Then why did he say it would?” you ask.

“You're editorial. You speak English. You're higher up than him. He's not going to say no.”

You want to point out that the man is a manager with easily more than a decade of experience over you, but you remain silent because you know when your colleague says “higher up,” he's not talking about work experience.

Your colleagues on the editorial team are mostly your age but come from places outside of Bombay. Some of them have M.A.’s in Journalism or English Literature, but are generating content for real estate and hotel brochures, travel magazines, pharmaceutical
pamphlets. Sometimes they get to write articles titled “From Hair to There: DIY Hairstyles” or “Five Hot Spots to Visit in Madrid.” They have never been to Spain. Their articles are based on “research,” which means Google.

“It's all jugaad, boss,” they tell you as you sit at a cheap bar that serves quarters of Old Monk. With each new round, the conversation goes from rising rents and taxi prices, to the absurdities of your jobs, to at some point around the fourth of fifth quarter, the final voicing of the thought that “Yaar, there has to be something more to this bastard life.” The arrival of the bill comes with the realisation that you have to return the next morning to earn back what you have drowned in rum, and that for now this bastard life will have to do.

You try and pay a little more than your colleagues. They live in places over an hour away from the office, in distant suburbs where they are barely able to afford the rent. You’re still living at your parents' house in the city. You now call it my house.

**Pune, 2010.** You are at a sarkaari office in Pune chasing down a payment for a project you had completed for the Government. They'd refused to pay you an advance when you started the project. “The sarkaar represents your country, and the country is your mother,” you’d been told. “Are you saying you won't take your mother at her word?” The logic was hard to argue.

Six months after the project's completion, your mother's promise still remains unfulfilled.

“How much are you owed?” the government official asks you.

“Thirty lakhs,” you tell him.

“Okay. Come back in a week. Bring fifty thousand rupees to pay for the cheque.”
“I need to give you money in order to receive the payment you owe me?” you ask.

"Yes, madam," the official says patiently. “That's the fee to release the cheque. This is standard procedure, madam. See you next week.”

When you return to Bombay and relate this story to your friends at work, they laugh.

“What does it bother you?” you ask.

“Stop your first-world melodrama and enjoy your rum, na,” one of them says.

“No, c'mon, seriously.”

“Arre, we are like this only. The whole system is corrupt, yaar;” he says. “Of course it bothers me, but tell me, tomorrow, if some cop stops your car, will you take the ticket and go through all the red tape and the months of court dates and the thousand rupee fine, or will you just slip him a hundred rupees and end the matter there and then?”

You remember being stopped for running a red light the week before. You were late for work. “Here, Brother,” you'd told the cop, taking out a fifty rupee note. “Let's just sort this one out between you and me.”

The policeman had looked at you, offended. “Bas, only this much?” His bushy moustache had bristled. There were sweat patches under his armpits.

You'd taken out another fifty and offered your apologies. You had just restarted the engine when the man knocked on your window. He looked at you sheepishly and handed back one of the fifties. “This was my first baksheesh of the day,” he told you, using the Hindi word for reward. “Whatever God offers you first thing in the morning, no matter how small, you must accept. After that you can haggle. Forgive me, I shouldn't have complained.”

You tell your friends this story. This time you laugh, too.
Bombay, 2011. It seems no opinion is real these days unless you can blog about it. You decide you have things to say that need saying. That night you start a blog. You title it “We are like this only.” For your first post you write about the trip to the government offices. The next day you add a post about the policeman. The first comment you get from an anonymous reader states: “The problem wid diz country is tht only money talks.”

You write about the different colours of money in India. *Here money has many shades,* you write. *There's white money, the legitimate money, which won't buy you much. Then there's grey money, the money you don't declare and hide in secret accounts, and hope the tax men won't find. Finally, there's the black money, the money so illicit that it needs to be spent almost as soon as it is made, quickly exchanging hands and leaving no trail behind, almost as though it never existed.*

You hit “post” without mentioning that you've often reaped the advantages of the last kind of money. You remember the wads of cash held in the money clips and wallets of many of your male friends who come from “business families.” *Your money's no good here,* these friends say to you when you go out with them. They push your credit card back into your purse and order rounds of Patrón for everybody. Pink-starched thousand rupee notes are slapped onto bar counters, placed into leather folders, folded crisply into waiters' front pockets.

You tell your parents about your recent post over dinner, and your father shrugs.

“So what?” he says. “You think there isn't black money in America?” His eyes take on a familiar gleam and you know he's about to launch into a story.

“So,” he says, almost on cue. “Chicago had this mayor. Haley...no, Daley. Yes, Daley. Corrupt bugger. Anyway, when he was mayor, Chicago and Bombay were named
sister cities. So, the mayor of Bombay visits Daley at his house in Chicago. He says, ‘Mayor Daley, this is a grand house. The city of Chicago must treat you well.’

“Daley takes his Indian counterpart to a window in his study and points outside.” Your father makes a sweeping gesture. “‘See that bridge?’ Daley says. The Indian mayor nods. Daley shoves his hand into his pocket. ‘Twenty percent.’

“‘Ahh,’ the Indian mayor says, finally understanding.”

Your mother and sister roll their eyes and you know that they've probably heard this story before.

“Anyway,” your father continues. “Then Daley comes to Bombay on a reciprocal trip. He realises the Mayor of Bombay's house is even grander than his.

“‘How did you get all this money?’ he asks.

“The Mayor of Bombay takes Daley to a window in his study. ‘See that highway?’ he says.

“‘What highway?’ Daley asks.

“‘Exactly,’ says the mayor. ‘Hundred percent.’”

Your father chuckles. *Ha Ha Ha.* “Get it?” he says. “Get it.”

“Yeah, Dad, I got it.”

Your father laughs again. His laughter sounds as though he is reading it of a comic book talk bubble and you can't help but smile.

“Ah, but maybe you have a point,” he says. “The whole world is corrupt, but we? We are the most corrupt. Nobody can beat us.” Your father beams.

You tell a friend of yours the story about the Bombay mayor the next evening over an after-work drink.
“You Bombay guys are fools,” he says. “Where I come from in Bihar, the government will take money to construct a well. Then they'll say they dug a hole and proclaim the land is too dry. Then they'll take some more money to cover up this hypothetical hole.” He wiggles his eyebrows at you. “That, my friend, is two hundred percent.”

You groan and finish the last rummy dregs of your Old Monk in one large gulp. You realise you're short some cash as you count out your portion of the bill. “Shit,” you say. “It's not even half way through the month.”

Your friend grins. “Looks like white money is no different from black money, haan?” he says. “Spent as soon as it is earned, just like...no, wait, what was your line? Oh, ya, almost as though it never existed.” He pats you on the back as he leaves, throwing in a hundred rupee note to cover your share.

**Delhi/Bombay, 2012.** This year all your friends seem to be getting married. Your mother calls it the “wedding season.” Dance practices last for months. The “1-2, 1-2, 1-2-3, turn, clap, shimmy, shimmy, shimmy!” of the choreographers' directions echo in your dreams. You are at one of these weddings in Delhi, when the story of a girl struggling for her life after being brutally raped on a street 20 minutes away breaks on the news. The details are gory. The three-hour attack left the girl in the critical care unit, her intestines ripped beyond repair. Security is beefed up on the roads. You cannot see these roads from the banquet hall of the hotel where the wedding is being held. The guests swirl their drinks and talk about how dangerous the nation's capital has become for women.

You return to Bombay and immediately write a blog entry on how sexual assault has become so common in India that nobody even skips a beat while including it in
cocktail party conversations. “I'll have a Belvedere-tonic with a side of rape, please” you call the post.

That weekend, your mother stops you as you leave the house.

“Please don't wear that if you're taking a cab,” she says, pointing at your skirt.

“Mom, this isn't Delhi.”

“Just be safe.”

“You don't seriously think what a woman wears is an excuse for rape?”

You begin to recount this conversation on a new blog post, but pause before typing out your mother's response. You remember her face bleached with concern, how she'd looked at you as though your naïveté was breaking her heart.

“Darling, don't you get it?” your mother had said. ”What I think doesn't matter. What matters is what your taxi driver thinks.”

You highlight the still-incomplete entry and hit delete.

**Bombay, 2012.** The week you return from Delhi, you are assigned to a coffee table book that celebrates the 20th anniversary of one of India's largest condom companies. Your client wants you to design a book that explains how the company formulated a campaign that changed the country’s perception of condoms from a family planning measure to a symbol of sexiness. You come up with a concept and pitch it to the client as the “brand that inspired the Indian sexual revolution.” Everyone on the table around you nods in happy agreement.

After three years, you finally have a team working under you. You are the only woman on the team. You sit with your designer, a man born and raised in the heartland of Uttar Pradesh. In the aftermath of the Delhi rape, the newspapers have been reporting
how the state of UP is the rape capital of the country. Your designer speaks very little English. Your Hindi is broken, fractured by the privilege of a convent-based English medium education, of growing up in a family that denounces the British occupation of India, but has always spoken and thought in the Queen's language. You sit next to your designer as you both stare at a print ad displaying a woman sitting on a desk, legs crossed, hair mussed. Her charcoal pencil-skirt rides up her thighs; her rectangular-framed glasses slip down her nose. On the lower right-hand corner of the poster is the photograph of a box of condoms branded 'long-lasting performance'. The caption below reads: “The boss came late. The secretary was glad.”

You tell your designer in halting Hindi to Photoshop away the stretchmarks on the woman's legs. Neither of you looks at the other, your eyes trained on the bright monitor. You watch white cellulose marks dissolve to a smooth bronze.

Three months later, the book is complete. The launch party is at a fancy club. Everybody wears shades of red and enjoys cocktails with names such as Cosmo Climax and Ribbed Rum-tini. Half-way through, members of a local government party charge into the room with wooden sticks. They break glass and strike the organizers that stand in their way. They chant slogans decrying the corruption of Indian culture. They set a display of books on fire.

Everything swirls: the high flames, the people running past you; their screams and cries are a vortex of noise with you at its centre. Someone puts an arm around you and guides you forward. Outside, sirens echo. You can still smell the choking odour of smoke; the red-hot singe still stings your eyes. You realise you are trembling against the chest of the man who swept you out in an embrace. You look up and find yourself staring
into your designer’s face. He steps back and gently pries open your fingers from where they are gripped around his shirt, the apology in his eyes reflecting the embarrassment in yours.

The next day, you go with your boss to the client's office. The project manager who meets you has a yellowing welt on his forehead from the night before. On the car ride over, your boss had mentioned that he thought the clients were fools for not having paid off the required parties before the event. Here, at the office, he only expresses his condolences.

“These right-wing fundamentalists give a bad name to democracy,” your boss says. He explains the company will still have to pay for the damaged books, but he is willing to print additional copies for a discounted rate. He is all for democracy, but even free speech has a price.

You write a short post about this and file it under #crazyclientstories. You've found the articles under this tag get the most hits. Your most popular one is about a project you did for a client who sells the leading skin-fairness products in the Indian market. The product was initially conceived when an astute marketing director had noticed that “wheatish complexion” was a touted attribute in Indian matrimonial ads. The darker complexioned candidates often used euphemisms such as “dusky” in their newspaper listings. The company had earned their first million through a successful skin-lightening cream for women—a product that had gotten an equal number of sales as media backlash for their “stereotyping of beauty.” They followed their initial product with a fairness cream for men under the pretext of gender equality. With the next round of backlash came their next millions.
Now, they were trying to market a female genital fairness product. In the pitch you had branded it as an “intimate” wash called Fresh&Fair. Two days later you'd written a blog post headlined, “Do we really need to be fair down there?”

Once the campaign went live, several media outlets linked to your original post while publishing their own commentary. As you saw the hits on your blog post pile up, you realised that international media had picked up the articles, too.

Looks like race is not just an American issue, one commenter from Wisconsin had posted.

This isn't abt race, an Indian commenter replied. It's about the colonial ideals of beauty this country has adopted.

Another commenter added, There is no race in India. Only class & caste. Class & caste are India's race.

Secular19 from Ahmadabad disagreed. As a Muslim, I can tell u this 1 thing. Religion is India's race.

“Do you think religion is India's race?” you ask your parents that night over dinner. Your sister sighs into her dal.

“A Muslim dies and finds himself at the gates of heaven...” your father begins.

Your mother cuts him off. “You're writing about your clients?”

“It's an anonymous blog, Ma.”

“People aren't stupid. Don't go starting trouble for yourself.”

“C'mon, we live in a democracy.”

“Tell that to the two girls on the Facebook who were arrested last week for bad-mouthing the government.”
“Somebody needs to be asking these questions.”

“Somebody doesn't have to be you,” your mother says. "This kind of parlour talk is only the luxury of the very rich or the very idealistic.”

“What's your point, Ma?”

“My point is your father will be retiring in a few years, darling. Let's concentrate more on your career and less on cultivating airs we can't afford. What is the point of this blog, anyway?”

“How else will I find myself?” you say, flippant. “Discover my calling or whatever?”

“What do you mean, find yourself?” your mother says. “You know, when I was your age, I had a job that paid all the household bills. I was supporting my mother, not the other way around. You're spoiled. That's the problem with your generation.” She harrumphs. “You live rent free. You sleep till 10. Everything you want is served to you on a platter. This is why you have the luxury to sit and think about useless things like your calling. We didn't look for callings, we looked for jobs. Find yourself, indeed. You think you're lost? Come, I'll show you where you are.” She bangs her index finger on the wooden panelling of the dining table. “You're right here, living off your parents.”

You look at your father, and he shrugs. “So, anyway, this Mozzie is at the gates of heaven,” he continues.

**Bombay, 2012.** For once it’s your sister who’s caught your parents by surprise. She’s gotten into a Master’s program in Education in America. Nobody in your family even knew she’d applied. It isn’t the first time your sister has seemed a cipher to you. You’ve always envied sisters who share friends, secrets, social lives. Karishma and you feel more
like strangers who incidentally grew up with the same set of parents. The three-year difference between you has always appeared more exaggerated than it really is, and you wonder if part of this has to do with the fact that you left home around the same time she turned old enough for the age difference to matter less. Sameera is probably more of a sister to you now than Karishma. You still talk to her every week. An only child, she’d once asked you why you didn’t talk to your sister as often as you did to your mom.

“We’re just not that close,” you said.

“Why? What happened?”

“Nothing happened. It’s just the way it’s always been.”

So it surprises you when your sister suggests you get a drink together. “Celebrate with me, didi,” Karishma says. This too is a first. Not Karishma using the Indian term for older sister, though this is rare too, the term only appropriated by her when she wants something from you, but the idea of going out alone without your family. Karishma’s set of friends is separate from yours and more plentiful. You’ve fallen out of touch with most of your childhood friends during your time in America. Karishma has kept hers and accumulated more over time. You’re vaguely aware she is probably more popular than you though you usually push this thought to the back of your mind because at least within the confines of your family, you feel like the favoured child, as much as you know your parents would resist this definition.

You’ve never been to the bar your sister takes you to, a small basement with UV lighting, graffitied walls and a crowd your colleagues at work would call “decidedly South Bombay.” It feels like a blind date. Your sister is the first to break the silence. “So tell me, didi, how is America going to change my life.”
“What do you mean?”

“Well, you clearly hate it here.”

“Is that what you think?”

“That’s not true?”

“Is that why you applied there? Because of me?”

Your sister laughs. “Calm down, di. You’re not *that* important. I applied because they pay teachers better there. I’m tired of earning less than a street cleaner.”

“Street cleaners are important, Kar. Imagine how much dirtier our streets would be without them. As it is they’re streaked with *paan* stains and urine.”

Your sister shrugs. “Maybe if people were more educated they wouldn’t spit and piss on the streets.”

“Well, if that’s the case, don’t you think your skills are more needed here?”

“Is that why you came back, Tar? Because your skills were more needed here?”

Karishma smiles but it doesn’t do much to hide the sharpness in her voice.

“It’s not that easy there, you know? It’s very different from here.”

“Isn’t the point? Why’re you being so negative. What? You going to miss me or something?”

“Mom will miss you.”

Your sister shakes her head. “Naah. She missed you. She has the practice now. Things feel less meaningful the second time around. Anyway, she loves you more.”

“No. That’s not true.”

“It’s all right. She loved you first. She got to know you better. By the time I came around she went right back to work.”
You are surprised your sister remembers parts of your mother’s initial absence in your childhood. You have always guarded this as your personal memory and feel almost proprietary when she encroaches on it until you are overcome by a sudden and unexpected protective instinct. “It’s nothing like that, Kar,” you say. “She just loves you differently is all.” The conversation lulls.

“So tell me, didi,” Karishma says once the second round arrives. “Are the streets of America really paved with gold?”

You laugh. “More like ice.” You tell her how it wasn’t as rich as you thought it would be. “But the poor are fat. That was so weird for me. I’ve never seen so many fat, poor people before.” You wait for your sister to laugh, but she just shakes her head and asks why you always look at the negative.

“Yes, you do,” she says over your protestations. “I’ve read your blog. You only talk about the corruption and the heat and the poverty. You don’t write how beautiful it is in the winter or how enterprising people are or how generous they can be. You don’t write how even though our poor are thin, they still laugh sometimes.”

You have nothing smart to say to this. The feeling that there is so much about your sister you’ve never stopped to think about preoccupies your thoughts. Karishma misreads your silence. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I don’t mean it in a bad way. You write really well, di. Really.”

“Thanks.”

“I am a little anxious about leaving, honestly. Tell me it’ll be okay. I’ll be fine, right?”
“You know the thing about the States is that it's a completely different socio-economic context. Don't expect it to be India, Kar. The sooner you realize the world is different from the one we live in, the easier you'll acclimatize.”

You've never fully understood what it means for someone's gaze to shift until you see it happen with your sister. "That's not what I asked at all, Tara," Karishma says. Her voice is the opposite of what it was when she called you didi, and you realize only then how much the term meant to you.

"Fuck it," she says. "Just promise you won't blog about any of this, okay?" She insists on paying for both of you even though you easily earn double she does. “It’s okay, Tara. It was my idea to celebrate.”

The last time you felt your chest cave like this was with the off-limits-to-talk-about first-and-only Indian boyfriend. Your current exchange would possibly need fewer hyphens in its hashtag categorization; still, it somehow feels worse.

**Bodhgaya, 2013.** You are visiting the old Buddhist city on a writing assignment. The interiors of the stone temples are a cool relief from the outside dust and heat. Tall statues of the Buddha loom at the gates. You stay for the evening meditation at the Japanese temple and feel the hum of the priest's chanting reverberate in your stomach. You eat at a roadside stall that claims to serve international cuisine, boasting Chinese, American and Burmese food. You treat two monks to a plate of Chinese fried noodles and garlic vegetables, both of which have the overpowering Indian flavour of garam masala.

The younger of the two monks is an American in his early forties. His robe drapes thinly around his pale, muscled torso and you can see green-inked tattoos snaking the length of his back and arms. The older monk, his mentor, nods and smiles at you both
while you talk. You are told he is Japanese and speaks very little English. The American monk tells you he's entering his seventh year of monkhood. He'd found the order as a path to sobriety after years of heroin addiction. The best thing about it, he tells you, is that even after monastic vows one can leave the order whenever the time is right.

“This life is a temporary experience, man,” he says. “And Buddhism understands that. I can leave the order tomorrow if I want and no foul.”

The older monk slurps his noodles and gives you both a toothless grin. “Berry good,” he says.

You smile and turn back to the American. He lights a joint and tells you about how Buddhism helped him find himself. You hide a smirk as you think about your mother's reaction to your comment at the dining table.


“You talk like a California surfer,” you tell him as you exhale.

He laughs and tells you he's from Boston. The conversation turns from there, with both of you hungrily talking about the city like it was an ex-lover. You discuss the curves of the Esplanade, the charm of Cambridge, the old Independent theatre in Coolidge Corner. “Let's pahk the cah in Hahvahd Yahd,” you both yell and dissolve into juvenile giggles. The next morning you will remember this and roll your eyes at yourself. In that moment, though, you are giddy and grinning so hard your cheeks hurt.

Dilapidated rickshaws and splintered handcarts pulled by shrivelled men kick up dust around the wooden bench you're occupying. A gang of mangy strays bark in the distance. You don't know whether it's the Himalayan ganja or something else, but in the
gathering dark you have the fleeting sensation of everything being as it should be; in that rare moment you feel like you've finally been found.

The next day is hot and hazy. Your face feels thick and rubbery with the aftermath of mountain weed. You visit the Mahabodhi temple. Swarms of monks prostrate themselves in the temple's courtyards. You watch them glide up and down in fluid swoops. Their bodies form smooth lines in sunset hues. You sit under the wide shade of the Bodhi tree where the Buddha was rumoured to have attained enlightenment. The heat dissipates and your head clears.

Three months later, on a July morning, a series of bombs go off in the temple complex. The attacks are blamed on an Islamist group. You remember the monks in saffron and orange robes, the porous texture of the centuries-old stone, the statues and paintings of the Buddha, calm and composed, the gummy smile of the Japanese Buddhist. You remember a sea of glowing candles on TV: scores of people around the country held vigil for the Delhi rape victim until she eventually succumbed to her injuries. You remember your sister telling you that even the poor laugh sometimes. You think about the traffic cop, with his sweaty armpits, working 12-hour shifts for minimal pay, sitting in the sun day after day, waiting patiently for his baksheesh and thanking God for his lot, and you wonder how this country can be so beautiful and so broken.

**Bombay, 2013.** When you first read about the mixer for “the recently returned,” it had sounded like a cult of near-death experience survivors. “Are you having problems re-adjusting to the life you left behind?” read the invite to the Bombay chapter of the organization. “Do you find it difficult to relate to friends from the past who haven’t crossed the same horizons and been immersed in the same life-changing experiences of
the New World as you? If you’re a recent return and wish to congregate with a gathering of like-minded souls, come join us for an evening of food and drink. Share your story of re-assimilation and connect with members who have gone through similar challenges.”

You attend thinking it will make an interesting blog post. You’ve already formulated the hashtags in your head: #brownprivilege, #pretentious, #coconuts. An hour into entering the outdoor bar of the five-star hotel where the soiree is being held, you find yourself indoctrinated.

“Do you think religion is India’s race?” you ask a goateed banker. His nametag reads Mehul, Seattle, USA. Each member is stamped this way, their names linked to the names of the cities and countries they have deserted. They talk about these places as you had talked to the monk about Boston—in a voice that is incessant, ravenous. Seattle is the best because it mixes the natural wonder of lakes and mountains with urban life. No, no. New Orleans is the best because of its unique culture. But how can the States compare to the history of England? No, lads, London is unquestionably the best. And then there’s New York. Every third person in the room seems to be from New York. Columbia. NYU. Oh, the art. Oh, the brunches. Oh, the diversity. Central Park in the summer. Why doesn’t Bombay have any open spaces?

“Once you leave, you can never truly come back home,” says a petite girl whose nametag reads Neha. Fumes of fermented Merlot waft toward you from the glass she swirls in her hand. “Once you’ve had California wines, you can’t drink any of this domestic shit,” a boy from Berkeley had told you earlier in the evening.
Now, Mr. Berkeley-returned gives a knowing smile. “What is home, though?” he asks. “Is it where you were born and grew up, or is it where you finally discovered who you are?”

“Neither,” someone else interjects. “Home is where you left a piece of yourself behind.”

You sip your cocktail and nod at your new friends. The lulling warmth of vodka fills your stomach.

A few weeks later, you get an email from the co-founder of a Los Angeles-based start-up that provides content and networking opportunities for the South East Asian ex-pat community. She's gotten the link to your blog from a friend of hers that you'd met at the mixer. She might have a job opportunity for you in LA that involves writing their blog and speaking at conferences. “Let's set up a time to connect over Skype,” she writes.

When you speak to her, you realise the offer, while not generous, is adequate. You could find a small place 20 minutes from the office, buy a second-hand car and still have enough to carefully live on. Plus equity, the co-founder reminds you. Equity is the Next Big Thing.

You think about how long it would take you to achieve the same level of independence in India. Your mother suddenly changes her tune and reminds you that even the colleagues making less than you over here are still able to afford a part-time maid. “Do you really want to go back to doing your own laundry and cooking your own food? What's wrong with living at with your parents as long you're comfortable? Anyway,” she counters, “once you get married, you'll have a house of your own. And where will you find a boy who understands you over there, beta?”
“Don't be an idiot,” your friend at work says. “Grab the opportunity and run while you can. Look, there it's simple. You work hard, pay your taxes and worship the red and blue ideals of democracy and freedom, and they'll love you.” He waves away your protestations. “Yeah, yeah. I know, I know. There's poverty in America, too, and corruption and crime. But there's also a system, and the system can be your friend. Here, the system is a motherfucker that you have to manipulate, beat, and throw money at, if you want to get anywhere.”

You pack your bags. Four years after leaving the States, you return once again. This time, only your mother cries at the airport.

**Part 3: A Tale of Few Cities**

**Los Angeles, 2014.** You're sitting in a Lincoln Town Car that smells like masturbation. The driver is Indian and has the same name as that long-ago ex-boyfriend. You know your accent has become Americanized because he doesn't understand what you're saying to him.

“Lady, where you wanna go?” he asks for the third time, frustration thickening his voice.

You sigh and slowly begin to spell out your street address. You feel the driver's eyes studying your face in the rearview mirror as the car begins to inch away from the curbside of the Arrivals terminal at LAX.

“Where you from?” he asks after a few moments of silence.

In a conference on “The Immigrant Identity” a few months back, you had postulated that the immigrant belongs in a middle land between her country of origin and
the country she has adopted. Today, you are just returning from a panel entitled “The Myth of the Melting Pot,” where you argued that assimilation resulted in a loss of cultural diversity. Your recent blog post entitled “Neither Here nor There: The Statelessness of the Global Citizen” got over 5,000 hits.

You don't know how much longer you can do this. Once upon a time, everybody bought into the Indian Immigrant experience. Now, you are slowly becoming passé. You think maybe the African experience is the new fad. Everyone seems to be talking about Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia. You make a mental note to write a blog post about the similarities between the African and Indian immigrant experiences. (You will do this and get several agitated comments about how Africa cannot be stereotyped as though it is a single country.)

You have just read a critically-acclaimed novel by a Nigerian writer which features a protagonist with a blog similar to yours. You wonder if people will begin to accuse you of being derivative. *I was there first,* you want to say, but you wonder if you were. Is anyone? Or are we, all of us, really just telling the same story over and over again, and pretending it's important, that it matters, because it happened to *us?*

*Where are you from?* The driver's question hangs in the air, a slightly confused smile drawn across his face as he waits for your response. You've made a living telling people where you're from, but suddenly in the backseat of this musky cab, you don't know whether to talk first about the noisy building compound in Bombay where you grew up, or the day you spent on Coronado Beach in San Diego, your thirsty eyes soaking up the expanse of ocean that you had taken for granted as a child (a different ocean, yes, but ocean still the same). In Boston, you want to say, there was a small coffee shop that
overlooked the Commons where the barista knew my order by heart. You feel the urge to
tell this man about that long ago Chinatown bus ride and the two girls who looked at you
strangely; you want to tell him how you recognize the cadences of Punjab in his voice;
you want to ask if he misses the vanilla sweetness of Old Monk had at a corner bar
surrounded by voices that sounded just like his. But you just turn away from him and
stare at the LA traffic crawling past your window. You close your eyes behind your
sunglasses. The exhaustion from the flight rolls over your shoulders and pushes you
deeper into the upholstered car seat.

“You visiting?” the driver persists. “This your first time in LA?”

“No,” you say. “No. I live here. I'm on my way back home.”

***
45 Midland Street

Prologue

I’ve lived in many houses since, but that house was my first in America. You remember your firsts just as you remember your lasts, perhaps even more so. Firsts are easier to identify, after all.

Maybe that’s why I held onto the keys for 45 Midland months after I’d moved out. Finally, my old landlord called to tell me that new tenants had started moving in. Could I please drop my keys off with one of them at the house? I was annoyed by the request. Six months prior, I'd visited the house for what I thought was the last time. I’d made my peace, said my goodbyes (or so I thought, but why the hell had I kept those damn keys, then?). I remembered Scotty once telling me that there are no goodbyes. “We only part to meet again, K,” he said. Dude was always spouting these cheesy lines.

The first thing I noticed when I got to the house was that the couch on the front porch was gone. A new welcome mat sat at the front door. The redhead who opened the door to me seemed mildly irritated. “Ya'll have still been getting some mail at this address,” she said. “You might as well take it since you're here.”

I walked in and looked around. The walls, once cream, were now yellow. I still expected to see the webbed impression of a crack on the basement door from when it had been punched in, but the door was new, too. I pictured a bowl of pungent granules sitting in a now-empty corner of the stairwell. I looked over at the mail counter and imagined a tall glass of wheatgrass juice perched there, condensation dripping down its sides. This was not my memory, but I've been told about that glass so many times, it might as well
have been. How much of what we remember are the things we actually experienced, and how much are the moments we wish we had?

There was a new letter rack on the counter with the names of the current tenants printed on its slots. Our orphan mail lay next to it: credit card bills, student loans, Sallie Mae letters and so on. Nothing to be happy about, really. I sifted through it, picking up the ones addressed to me and Marty and Terry. Angela was no longer in Jersey, but I picked hers up too. I noticed a few bills addressed to Scott and added those to the pile. The rubberband I pulled over the envelopes stretched ominously; the last remnants of our occupancy threatening to burst out. The redhead tapped her foot, impatient. One of the floorboards on the second floor creaked above my head.

“Mice?” I asked.

“What?”

I pointed toward the ceiling as another creak sounded.

“Must be the guy in the upstairs bedroom. Dylan? David? Something. You know him?”

“I don’t know anyone here,” I said.

“Oh. Well.” I took it as my cue to leave. She cleared her throat as I turned the doorknob. “You said you had keys?” She looked at me expectantly.

*Right. The keys.* I rifled through my bag until my fingers grazed their metal edges. I found my palm gripping around them in a fist, unable to let go.

1.

The house swallowed people up and the house spat people out. You either belonged or you didn't. It sat at 45 Midland Street in the more sketchy part of Jersey City, and I'd
personally seen over 20 people come and go in the three-odd years I lived there. In my last year, though, we remained a steady nine. One short of the even ten the house could hold at full-occupancy. Those of us who loved the house called it a mansion. The ones who didn't, the ones who left, had other names for it. Decrepit. Squalid. Haunted. In some ways, that last qualifier holds true.

Even without the traffic of people continuously moving in and out of the house, it was always full. Housemates' family members would come visit, or an old college friend here, a one night stand there, buddies who'd come by to have a few drinks on a Saturday night and were too totalled by the end of it to go home. There was always somebody sleeping on the living room couch, always a random soul floating around our kitchen on Sunday mornings, an embarrassed girl walk-of-shaming it across our front porch, a dude wandering through our stairwells and corridors, who'd woken up hungover and wondered where in God's name he'd landed.

One of these visitors caught me having a cigarette on the porch as he hightailed it out of the house. He stopped, bummed one off me, and slowly oriented himself after a few hits of nicotine. He let out a low whistle. “This place is like the house in Shameless, you know?”

I nodded, although I hadn't seen that show yet. I was tickled that we were being accorded TV-level notoriety. I knew enough about the show that I felt an odd sense of pride. I thought it meant that we were raw, we were authentic, we were ghetto, man. We lived with reckless abandon, utter indifference; we didn't care what no one thought about us, yo. We was the real deal, none of that pussy ass bullshit. I don't know what it was about this statement that made me rant in my head like I was some clichéd caricature of
an urban black youth rather than a brown girl from the better part of Bombay who spoke the Queen's English.

I was completing my Master’s in education at St. Peters University, where I was the only foreign student in the program that year. At the house, though, I was one of many “Internationals.” In that last year, the Internationals consisted of me, Bridgette the Brit, and Vincent and Vittoria, this gorgeous Italian couple. Vincent was a musician; Vittoria had a laugh that could travel light years. They both moved in a little after the mice did, but I’ll get to that part in a bit.

The Internationals that lasted the shortest amount of time were this group of Chinese girls. They arrived together and departed together three weeks later, leaving behind packets of fish sauce and boxes of dim-sum wrappers that stayed in our refrigerator for months after they'd moved out. I think Angela drove them away, although I'd never say this to her. They didn't understand what she was saying to them; they just heard her tone, you know? And Angie always sounded like she was yelling, no matter how many times Scotty told her, “You gotta be more gentle, Ange. Just ‘cause you say something loud don't make it true.”

Angela and Scotty were best friends, tight as siblings and different as fuck. Angela was this petite Vietnamese-American thing with a mouth that would shock a sailor. God help anyone who incurred her wrath. Scotty was a big, black boulder of a man, but the gentlest soul ever and a diplomat's diplomat; we always brought him in if there was a particularly ugly disagreement between housemates, which invariably meant a disagreement between Angie and someone else. Scotty was working at Best Buy while part-timing at community college. He and I sometimes worked together in the basement
on our respective college assignments. Scotty'd look at me furrowing my brow over a textbook and say, “Why the frown? Smile, darling, the world is a beautiful place.”

*Smile, darling.* This was something I'd come to hear from many African American men over time. Doormen and bouncers, businessmen at bars, random strangers in the line at the campus convenience store. I don't know what it was about my face that made black men think I was sulking. A friend of mine later told me it was their way of flirting. I would have called my friend out for stereotyping, but he was black, too, so hell, maybe he was allowed. I don't know the rules, man. But I do know that Scotty wasn't flirting with me. That guy, *that guy,* just wanted everybody to smile.

Scotty, Angela and I had been at the house longer than others; scarred veterans, we knew which floorboards creaked, how to find our way in the dark to the small room in the basement that held the circuit board. We knew if you used the tiny Venetian bathroom in the laundry room the pipes would vibrate and clang so loudly throughout the house that everyone would know you were having a shower or had just flushed. The house exposed little indignities like that. We had one tenant who showered in that bathroom at odd hours of the night. At 3 AM, everybody would be woken up by the familiar grumble followed by the clang, clang, clang of air rushing through metal. She didn't last long, the night bather. The house dispelled her just as it dispelled the hippies who wanted to transform it into an artist's commune. They built a compost patch in the overgrown backyard.

A tree grew in this backyard. The tree was over a hundred years old. Its shade spread wide, covering more than half the yard and a fourth of the neighbour's. It was maybe the most majestic thing that belonged to the house, which was otherwise marred by warped window frames and peeling paint and flimsy walls that let the wind in on cold
nights. But this tree, *this tree*, allowed us to call the house historic instead of old, heritage instead of dilapidated. Its trunk was gnarled and knotty, gargantuan in width. You could wrap almost eight averagely-sized people around it. And the hippies tried.

They invited their friends over for a love circle and formed a ring around the tree, trying to hold it in their arms. “We give ourselves to the earth,” they chanted, “just as the earth gives itself to us.” The tree was having none of this crap. It wasn't giving any of itself to these crackpots if it could help it, no sir. The tree shook off their embrace with a sting; it left the hugging hippies' limbs raw and swollen with bites from the red ants that traversed its twisted surface. The compost ripened in the heat of the summer, squelching in the smell of dirt and rot and fermented fruit straight into the house.

Let's be honest, these people, *these people*, they weren't built for this house, with its three rising stories, or the raccoons that roamed its front, or the weeds that thrived insistently in the back no matter how hard the hippies tried to pull them out and grow tomatoes and basil. They wanted the country, and the house was decidedly city, in a neighbourhood clustered with clapboard homes, surrounded by the sound of cars darting down a nearby highway, wailing sirens, broken-bottle sidewalks. Some of these hippies eventually did move deeper into suburbia, or into the woods, the mountains, where they lived in log cabins and found soulmates and gave up their hippie lifestyles and moved on to picket fences and happily-ever-afters. See, part of the house's rejection was kindness. It knew when *it* wasn't meant for *you*, just as it knew when *you* weren't meant for *it*.

After the hippies left, the mice descended. These events happened almost simultaneously and with the hippies gone, we had no one to blame. We'd seen the odd mouse before, here and there, darting through the kitchen, scurrying under a couch. But this was
different. These were hordes of them, excreting little droppings everywhere, tearing through packs of ramen and boxes of cereal that stood on our kitchen shelves. When the problem had still been manageable, the hippies had refused to let us put out sticky paper or traps that clapped over their little mouse necks, insisting it was too cruel. Now the hippies were gone, and it was we who were left sweeping yellow, hardened noodle curls and Cheerio dust from our floors in the wake of the rodents' nocturnal activities.

Truth be told, it was Marty and Terry who did most of the sweeping in that jovial, easy-going way that they did most of the tasks the rest of us cribbed about. I always thought of them as a unit. Marty and Terry. Terry and Marty. They were bros—both white boys, both from the heart of Jersey, both working low-level jobs on Wall St. They'd moved in at the same time as Vincent and Vittoria, shortly after the hippies moved out.

I was indifferent to the mice until I saw one in my room one night. I was sitting on my bed, typing on my laptop, when a shadow moved under the gap between my closet door and the wooden floorboards. Then a tiny head darted out. We met eyes. I gasped. The creature turned, a flick of tail sweeping my floor, and then, nothing. I jumped off my bed, rapped hard on the closet wall, ran to my bedroom door, swung it open and waited.

Still nothing.

Across the hallway, I could hear a video playing in Scotty's room. I knocked; waited. “It's me, Karishma,” I said. “Can I come in?”

“No, wait. I'm coming out.” The sound on the video stopped. There was an inordinately long pause. Then I heard Scotty's bed groan as he heaved his weight off it. I wondered what he'd been watching on his laptop. It was late, and it occurred to me that
Scotty might think I was intruding. I liked Scotty and I thought he liked me too. *Special K*, he called me. But Scotty had a nickname for everyone.

“What's up?” he said when he swung his door open.

“How do you feel about mice?” I asked awkwardly.

“Special K, it's two in the morning,” he said in that blunt way of his. “Why you asking me about mice?”

“I think I saw one in my room. Can you come and make some noise to scare it away?”

He chuckled, deep and rich. “Girl, I don't think that's the way it works. But whatever helps you sleep at night.” He shuffled into my room. “What? You want me to do a dance or something?”

I was beginning to feel stupid.

He laughed. “I'm just playing. Closet, you said?”

I nodded.

He opened my closet door and prodded around. “Nothing here.”

I glanced around the room. Poked my head under the bed. *There*! A shadow. “Scotty, I think there's something under here.”

He grabbed a hanger from the closet and got down on all fours. He swept the hanger under the bed snagging something on it. “Special K? You missing a sock? ’Cause I found it.”

I watched him, this big man, down on his knees at two in the morning, peering at my floors, and if you ask me now, I'd tell you, right then, that moment, was when my
liking for Scotty turned to genuine affection. Then again, the mind has a funny way of romanticizing random shit in retrospect.

We tried many ways of getting rid of the mice. The traps were useless. The mice usually managed to grab the bait from them, without setting them off. I don't know how. They were skilled. They could creep in through holes tinier than quarters, slip through the smallest cracks. They were dextrous, flexible, the fucking Cirque du Soleil of rodents. Sticky paper caught one or two, but at the rate they were reproducing, that wasn't fast enough. And the hippies were right; it was cruel. Nirvana found this out firsthand one morning. Nirvana was one of the other white boys, the first to advocate for the eviction of the hippies. His parents were baby-boomers, Woodstockers, grass-smokers. I mean, this boy was white as whole milk, and they'd named him Nirvana for fuck's sakes! (To make it worse, the second “a” was silent.) Nirvana McElroy. Call me Mac, he said. But we called him Nirvana just to piss him off. Pronounced that last “a,” even. We could be real fuckers like that, but I'd like to believe he knew that it was just our version of love.

Nirvana sold software solutions or something, something I didn’t quite understand that had him travelling in spurts to places in the deep Mid-West and all along the East Coast. I'd see him every night for a week on our front porch, where we'd smoke and talk and have a beer or two. Then he'd disappear for weeks on end, until suddenly, there he was, back on the porch again, sharing Brooklyn Lagers with me and telling me about how he'd bought a carton of Marlboros in Ohio for less than what you'd pay for three packs in New York or Jersey. Highway robbery, we'd both agree. But who the fuck wants to live in Ohio, right? Can't have everything in life, man, can't have everything.
Anyway, on one of the days that Nirvana was around, he noticed a trail of blood leading under our kitchen counter, heard a periodic squeal, some shuffling. He trained a flashlight under the gap and saw a pair of panicked eyes staring back. The mouse had chewed off a part of one leg while trying to get itself off the paper, but two legs still remained glued to the sheet. With the one spare leg that had remained off the trap, it managed to drag itself into dark comfort. Nirvana put the creature out of its misery. The sticky traps were thrown away.

Meanwhile, none of the girls were getting any sleep. With every creak at night, we imagined little furry creatures scuttling past our floors. And it was an old house. It creaked. It squeaked. We began sharing beds, sleeping in pairs, whispering secrets to drown out the sounds of the house settling until we drifted into unconsciousness. It was on these nights that I learned that Angie had been briefly married at 21. *Lasted 117 days, K,* she said. *About a hundred days too long if you ask me now.* It was on these nights that I found out Bridgette’s father had died of a freak choking accident when Bridgette was nine. Bridgette had chewed each bite of food thirty-two times ever since. She counted.

On the nights I came home late from campus and the girls had already paired off and gone to bed, I'd knock on Scotty's door. He'd sit by my bedside and talk to me in that booming voice of his until I drifted off. He told me about the huge rats he used to see around his neighbourhood in Chinatown as a kid. *Big ass mofos,* he said. *Like kittens.*

“Why're you living here if you've still got family in Manhattan, Scott?”

“There's family you're born into, and there's family you choose, right? The family I grew up with, they were leeches, man, and that's all I'm gonna say about that. But you guys, yo, you guys are the family I choose.”
“Aww, Scott, that's so Hallmark of you.”

“Why you gotta do that?”

“Do what?”

“You know, be all sarcastic-like the moment shit gets real.”

Whoo, I hadn't seen that one coming. That Scotty, every once in a while, he'd throw you these curveballs. I changed the subject. “You know we used to get this one massive rat at my apartment back home, too.”

“That so?”

“Yeah, around the time of the Ganpati festival, this one motherfucker always came into my house. My mom thought it was auspicious. Ganpati, he's the elephant god, right? Anyway, he's supposed to travel around on this rat. ‘God's chariot is visiting our house,’ my mom would exclaim. ‘We must greet it with reverence.’” My laughter folded into Scotty's deep chuckle. “She'd keep a bowl of milk and some flowers out for it every night. Do you believe it?”

“Ahh, everyone's free to have their own beliefs, K,” Scotty said.

He'd tell me about his classes, his professors, how he was excited that he’d finally receive his associate's degree in Marketing come summer. “A 32-year-old senior,” he laughed. “Man, about time.”

I didn't always understand his accent, was still learning his slang, but the rhythms of his speech were reassuring, a lullaby. “Thanks, Scotty,” I'd slur as the beginnings of sleep descended on me.

“No problem, Special K. You just knock on my door, anytime you want, you hear?”
In the morning, when I woke up, he'd be gone, but I could still sometimes smell the scent of him in my room: Drakkar Noir and Johnson’s Baby Cream. It was the smell of spice and candyfloss, sharp and sweet. It felt like danger, but also like the best parts of your childhood and I’m sure he knew that, too. He was a smooth dude, Scott. We’d go clubbing together, sometimes, and the ladies would be all over him. He called them honeys. Man had the moves. He might have been a big guy, but if you ever saw him glide on the dance floor, you’d think he was all air. He’d twirl those honeys away from him and then pull them right back in, their hands gripped warmly in his moisturized palms, their heads nuzzled against his shoulder inhaling the heady aroma of citrus and glycerine. I knew better than to ask, but I’d bet good money that many of our early morning walk-of-shamers were Scotty’s girls.

One of the ways we tried to get rid of the mice was with a bucket. I came home one day and found Bridgette in the kitchen, hooking up a wooden plank at a slant against a plastic drum half filled with water. Two holes had been drilled in on either side of the top of the bucket. A rod pierced these holes, passing through an empty soda can smeared with peanut butter, which had been placed close to the rod's mid-point. Scotty and Angela watched in amusement.

As I remember, the way it was explained to us was that the mouse would climb up the plank lured by the smell of peanut butter, hop on to the can, only to lose its footing as the can began to rotate on the rod with the mouse's weight, throwing it into the water below where it would drown. If we were lucky we'd be able to catch close to ten mice a night using this technique. The next morning, we could dispose of them without anyone
having to touch them. Bridgette was studying Engineering at NYU. I'm not sure if this Goldbergian contraption indicated she was hella smart or just wasting her degree.

Scotty was eating this huge plate of pork chops. At least, I want to say it was just chops, but really, with the portions he ate, it looked like the whole damn pig. He licked his fingers and asked Bridgette if she wanted to use some of the leftover grease on the can. Angela made a joke about walking the plank. I said something about throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

When the bucket didn't work, Angela took charge. I came home one evening to find a granular substance placed in bowls at strategic corners of the house—bowls we'd once used for the cereal the mice had slowly devoured. On a counter in our corridor lay a gallon-large plastic container. SHAKE-AWAY RODENT REPELLENT it said in large letters. The smaller text under the sign read: Shake-Away uses the strongest force in nature to get rid of your problem animal...instinctive fear!

What's this? I asked.

Fox urine, Angela replied.

I nodded. Sometimes, with Angie, it was best to just agree and get on with the rest of your day.

A week later, we found the urine-soaked granules flecked with droppings. Turns out Jersey mice were immune to fear. I suggested filling the bowls with Coca-Cola instead. I'd read online that mice couldn't fart or burp. The carbonation from the soda would build up in their tiny bodies and eventually kill them. This idea was rejected. It was deemed even more cruel than the sticky paper, and, besides, we didn't want exploded
mice littered all over the house. The bowls were thrown out. The musky odour remained long after, sweating out of our wooden floorboards.

In the end, we convinced our landlord to call in an exterminator. When he came, he guffawed at a forgotten bowl of fox urine he saw in the corner of our hallway. *Never seen that used indoors before,* he said. I saw Scotty pinch Angie before she could open her mouth.

The exterminator wore a grey jumpsuit with 'Pest Control' slapped on its left breast pocket. He looked a little like a rodent himself, with beady eyes hidden under rolls of flesh that extended beyond his jaws. Jowls, my mother would have called them. He was a tall, hulking man, with hair that hung in greasy strings well past the nape of his collar like rat tails. He had ratty hair, that's what it was. I want to say it was mousy ’cause that's the better pun, but that just wouldn't be true.

“How bad is it?” he asked us.

Pretty bad, we told him. At least six of us had seen a mouse at some point.

“So, six sightings?” He made it sound like an alien invasion. “Multiply that by ten.”

“Sixty mice?” Angie squeaked in a most un-Angela way. “We have *sixty* mice?”

“It's possible. I won't know till I examine the droppings.”

My stomach turned. “So you'll chase them out?” I said.

“Chase them out?” His laughter was mocking. “Honey, I ain't gonna be able to find all of them even if I spent the whole day here on my hands and knees.”

“Oh,” I said. *Oh.* I'd imagined him running after the mice with some kind of net, chasing them all out of the house. Like the Pied Piper or something.
“Nuh-uh,” he said. “Ain't no way I could catch them. Firstly, they're nocturnal. Second, they're nervous. They eat and run. They hear any noise, they hide.” I pictured a mouse trembling in a quiet corner of the room as this Goliath of a man strode in.

“Look, I’ll put some poison bait around the house. These cubes, see?” He showed us a solid block in bright blue. “They eat this, they feel weak, they move outside the house, or into those nests they've probably built in your walls and roof. The poison slowly seeps into their system. They die.”

“They die in our walls?” This was Bridgette.

“Ah, don't you worry child. The winter chill will contain the smell of their bodies and by the time summer's here their bodies would have disintegrated and you won't know any better. Might be one or two here and there that you'll find dead around the house, but mostly they either migrate outside or go so deep into the bowels of the house that you'll never see 'em. Trust me.”

Like we really had a choice.

“One thing though. Make sure you don't leave any food around for them, okay? They don't see your food, they go for the bait. They see your food, they call all their mouse friends over and have a party. You see what I'm saying? This ramen, for example, that's gotta go. All food in plastic containers, you hear me.”

We nodded. Yes, sir. We heard him, loud and clear.

A week later, we began to see bright blue droppings around the house, a sign that the mice had taken the bait. As it turned out, the exterminator's fix was no less cruel than my Coca-Cola suggestion. It was Vittoria, one half of the Italian couple, who finally saw one of the promised few mice who didn't make it to safer ground before the poison took
effect. Vittoria used to be a restoration artist in Italy. Here, she was a dependent on her husband Vincent’s visa, and my landlord often paid her under the table to carry out various renovations at the house. She was fixing a door that had fallen off its hinges that day. She opened our storage cupboard while looking for a screwdriver and saw a mouse in the last throes of its life.

She described it for me. “He lie here.”

“It.”

“Pardon?”

“It not he. The mouse is a— ah, never mind. Then what?”

“He move on his back. Like so.” Her shoulders clenched; her torso shook.

“Like shivering?” I asked.

“Like too much shivering. Convulso, you know?”

“Convulsions?”

“And then the blood. So much blood.”

“Where?” I looked at the spot on the floor where she said the mouse had died. “I don't see anything.”

“Ay, no of course not. Two drops. Right down the nose.”

“Vittoria! Two drops isn't much.”

“It is if you are so very small. If your whole body and my finger are the same, then two drops is much, no?”

Something about the sparseness of her language, about the thought that went into every word as she slowly translated it into English in her head before speaking it out loud, lent the situation a gravity that, under ordinary circumstances, I would never have
accorded a mouse. I imagined the little thing, lying on our cold floor, its tiny body seizing as the poison seeped through its system, paralysing it, causing its internal organs to slowly shut down. I saw two bright spots staining grey fur crimson.

It was brutal, but we had no more mice that winter. It also united us, the experience with the mice. That's how we came to be the steady nine—a crew—fourty-fivers, we called each other, or Midlanders, like we were the inhabitants of some magic land.

Okay, I need to backtrack here. I mean, I don't want you to think this is some awful Lifetime Movie or something. *A house divided faces a common enemy. What happened next united them forever.* Cue triumphant music.

No, no. Even after the mice and before that summer, there was still some strife, some drama. Angela and Nirvana had started fucking while the mice scampered. One night, she rushed to his room after seeing a furry ball run under her desk; she then continued to rush to his room every night after for different reasons. She started mentioning his name more frequently when he was away on his trips in that way that girls do when they like someone. This should have been enough to tip us off right away—Scotty knew, I'm sure—but it took us a while.

Also, the reason we were eventually one short of the house's full occupancy was because we threw out one of the tenants despite her surviving the “Time of the Mice” with us. This was Sandra, owner of the infamous ramen noodles that had attracted the rodents in the first place. Also, owner of a liver that never gave up, owner of obnoxious friends who came and tested said liver at odd times of night, owner of a nimble step with which she leapt onto our neighbour's roof one night and stomped out a choreographed
dance to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* while the aforementioned obnoxious friends recorded her on their phones. They uploaded it to YouTube. You could see loose roof tiles flipping in the air and flying to the ground as Sandra danced. The shit went viral: “Drunk Girl Does *Thriller.*” 1.2 million views. One of these viewers was our neighbour Tim. *I know that roof,* he thought, and hit replay. Hell hath no fury like a neighbour trespassed. So, Scotty, Angie and Nirvana sat down our landlord one night, and made it clear: this girl gotta go, man.

Our landlord, Gerard, God bless him, was a small built fellow, intelligent dude, but the most non-confrontational human being I have ever met, and coming from *me,* you better believe that means something. Man couldn't ever evict a tenant. This is why most of us were two months behind on rent with nary an eyebrow raised. Every time we had a situation with someone at Midland, he'd end up inviting the problem tenant to rent at his place instead, a similar many-roomed house, two blocks away from us. Some of the hippies had ended up there. Eventually, Sandra moved there too. It slowly became a place of our rejects. The antimatter of 45 Midland.

Listen, I know how this sounds. It sounds like we were bullies, elitists, uptight snobs. Well, look, we weren't opposed to a bit of fun here and there, but that YouTube video, man. That fucking YouTube video. I mean, c'mon, we were grad students, working professionals, respectable citizens. We couldn't be part of this hooliganism no matter how pleased I'd felt by that *Shameless* reference.

When I finally did watch *Shameless,* I was disappointed. I realised when our visitor said our house was like the one on *Shameless,* he literally meant our house resembled the TV show house: the same multi-storeys, the same sloping roof, the same
planks, the same exact shade of paint. Where I thought he'd meant we were unapologetic, all he was saying was that our house was slate blue.

The summer that Scotty died though, we were shameless.

2.

That summer descended hot and hairy. It settled under our skin, made our blood bubble. We were restless, possessed. As a kid, when I was growing up in India, my friends and I would call this phenomenon keedas, which literally meant worms, but was used to describe the youthful impulse to create havoc. Keedas. It was this pure recklessness, mischief, a raging fire in the belly. I don't know what birthed our keedas that year. Maybe it was because the mice were finally gone, Finito as Vittoria said; maybe it was because it had been a particularly brutal winter. Maybe it was the pack mentality that came with finally being a cohesive unit, an extended family of 20-to-30-something-year-olds. I don't know. Something about that enduring summer light brought out in us a sense of debauchery; it made us thugs, goons. It unmasked our inner Sandras and we let her revel on our front porch in the glow of prolonged sunsets.

That porch, man, that porch was glorious. It was really more a huge ass front deck than a porch. We'd placed this long couch on it that our landlord had planned to throw out, but we were having none of that.

“The couch stays, Gerard,” we told him.

“You can't have a couch at the front of the house guys,” he said. “That's just really—”

“Really what, G?” Scotty interrupted. “You gonna say ‘ghetto’? You better not be saying ‘ghetto.’”
Gerard sighed. “Whatever makes you guys happy. But don't come knocking on my door if there's mould growing all over it, or if you find some hobo sleeping on it, okay? That's all I'm saying.”

We gave our assent though his was the first door we'd be knocking on if anything of the sort happened. He'd groan and roll his eyes, but he'd truck it away. That was Gerard for you.

We sat on that porch on that couch those summer nights. School was out, and Bridgette, Scotty, and I had time on our hands. Vittoria was usually around, too. We'd set up the grill and put on some music and lay out in the sun. Everyone else was working, but it was summer hours, you know? Short, sweet, second Fridays off. When they'd come back to the four of us on the porch, they couldn't help but join in. We chugged beers and Jameson like there was no tomorrow. We bought these mega speakers and blasted music into the streets: salsa for the Italians, though they kept telling us that wasn't their music, and hey, we knew that, we weren't ignorant, but hell if it wasn't fun to have Vincent yell, you want Italian music? Turn off this noise; I'll play you some Italian music. The real stuff. You want to tell me it wasn't a riot to hear Vittoria exclaim, Thees is not Italiano. Puerto Rico is not eetaly. Stop it, Terry. Why you laugh, Marty? We played a little bit of Dylan, a little bit of Top 40s, some Vanilla Ice, for the old times. A little P. Diddy, a little Tupac, yes, even some Micky J, who'd gotten Sandra in trouble with the neighbour (though Scotty told me no one ever called him that).

When Scotty graduated that summer, we went all out. We took the Path up to the Ironbound in Newark for a burlesque show, and Bridgette was so damn tanked she went up on stage and took her top off. The burlesque dancers thought it was a hoot. They were
clapping and cheering her on. Vincent had gone to the restroom, and, man, his face when he walked out and our resident Brit was on stage in her bra, all smiles and whatnot. You could almost see the what the fuck? scrolling through his brain.

We came home that night and rocked that porch. I made everyone dance to Bollywood, taught them all the steps, the bhangra, the light bulb, the dip, shimmy, shimmy, shimmy. Bridgette had a friend over that night who was visiting from the Motherland, this broad Cockney bloke, hair of sunflower. You should have seen him bhangra, a finger of each hand extended in the air, hopping up and down the porch so hard the whole deck shook. Bridgette was overwhelmed by the intensity of it all, and I kept yelling at her that chicken tikka masala was an English concoction. *What, it's not enough that you Brits took over our country? Now you want to colonize our food, too?* She laughed so hard that beer snorted through her nose and the next thing you know she was throwing up down the side of the stairs that led off the porch. Then, all that laughter turned to tears and she was wailing. *I'm going to die*, she kept saying, *I'm going to die.* *Somebody call my Mum. Somebody call the Queen. Tell her I love her.*

Finally, Scotty unhooked her fingers from the porch railing, scooped her in his arms and carried her three flights up to her bedroom, huffing and puffing all the way. He tucked her into bed and passed out on her floor, ostensibly to make sure she was fine through the night, but really I think we'd made him down way too many shots.

The rest of us kept it going, though, the music blasting. In between songs someone or the other would yell, *Somebody call the Queen! Tell her I love her!* And Vittoria would be in splits every damn time, her laughter rising above the music, above
our voices. Marty and Terry kept bowing to each other and speaking in faux British accents.

“Sir Martin, as a loyal subject of the Crown, I beseech you to pass on this fair message.”

“And what is it you want me to convey to Her Royal Majes-teh, Sir Terrance?”

Scotty's younger brother, Hesh, had been there, too. Scott may have cut ties with his parents but he was still very protective of his brother and, as a result, so were we. Hesh stayed over at the house often and we loved having him around, but, man, that kid never wore clothes. He was as ripped as Scotty was obese, and he knew it too. I'd walk into him swigging OJ out of a carton in our kitchen, stripped down to his boxers. And I didn't want to stare, you know? I mean he was this eighteen-year-old kid, but damn if he wasn't an ebony god, too. Those abs, I could write sonnets on those abs. The first time I'd seen the kid walking around in all his glory, I'd struggled to keep my face impassive.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then why so serious? Smile, sweetheart. Don't waste that beautiful face.”

The night of Scotty's graduation, Hesh had gotten high off boxed wine and was running up and down our street shirtless, whooping to all of eternity. Nirvana ran behind Hesh, trying to catch him. We hollered after them, whistled, catcalled, took bets. Nirvana's broad arms were shooting up and down like pistons, and this kid was a fucking gazelle, all long strides and smooth leaps and once even a pirouette—goddamn show off!

The neighbours complained and the cops stopped by. We placated them, but after they left, Marty and Terry went and placed Solo cups filled with cigarette butts and spit on
the front stoop of every house around us. That's what you get for reporting us, you motherfuckers.

Two weeks after Scotty's graduation, I left for San Francisco to visit this boy my mother had introduced me to, her friend's son.

“God, Ma. Not this arranged crap again,” I'd told her when she first brought it up.

“Stop acting like your sister,” she said. “Just talk to him once, na. What's the harm?”

I exchanged emails with him and we talked on the phone a bit and it turned out he wasn't half bad. Not that I'd tell my mom that; she didn't even know I was visiting him in San Francisco. The night before I left, Vincent had stomped on my phone so hard the screen had cracked.

“I'll set you up with a replacement when you're back, Special K,” Scotty had told me. “My last act of benevolence as an employee of the esteemed Best Buy.” Our man had found himself a job as an associate at a marketing firm in the city. We were so proud that it was almost like it was our accomplishment. That's what we'd been celebrating when Vincent stepped on my phone. I'd never seen Scott so happy, smiling so wide his face was all teeth. He set up his laptop and a mic on the porch and played all the classics, his voice booming out the words.

All nine of us were there that night, except Nirvana. He was in Iowa or somewhere equally flat. I don't remember. Angie had brought it up earlier in the night—Too bad Mac is missing this, she'd said—and I'd been distracted by the fondness in her voice when she said his name. It had finally clicked; I mean, she'd called him Mac for fuck's sake! I remembered her exploding at him once because he'd suggested buying a cat
to get rid of the mice, forgetting that Angie was allergic. *Are you trying to kill me?* she said. *Look, I'm telling you right now, if you bring a cat in here, I'm out. It's either me or the cat, okay?* I'd seen Scotty about to step in before things got any crazier, but Nirvana was already holding Angie in an embrace, rubbing her back, saying, *Hey, hey, hey. Nobody's trying to get rid off you, all right. I forgot, that's all.*

At that point I'd just pegged it as Angie overreacting and Nirvana trying to avoid getting his head bitten off, but hearing her say his name on the porch that night, I tried to catch Scotty's eye. He purposely looked away. He was good with secrets like that, a fucking vault. This was a good thing, I guess, considering how many confessions I'd made to him all those late nights we'd spent working in the basement and talking in my room during the mouse attacks—my secret crushes, how I felt my parents loved my older sister maybe just a little bit more than me, how my deepest fear was that one day I'd end up single and alone in this big country so far away from home. *Special K,* Scotty had said about that last confession, *you'll always have me, you hear?* A retort to his sappiness reflexively sprung to my mouth, but that one time, I bit it back because he'd sounded so damn sincere that it felt petty to say anything other than, *Thanks, Scott.*

The last song Scotty played that night was “Bohemian Rhapsody”. He wiggled his eyebrows and said, “Can't end a night without some Queen. Right, Ms Bridgette?” Bridgette cackled. We sang the crap out of that song, our voices a broken chorus of:

*Mama, life had just begun,*

*Now I've gone and thrown it all away.*

*Mama, ooh.*

One by one we stopped singing, until finally it was just Scotty, his vibrating tenor echoing in the night air. *Any way the wind blows.*

I'm telling you, that porch was glorious.
Three days after I reached San Francisco, I got a call. It was Bridgette, and she was crying so hard, that with her voice so thick with tears and the Yorkie accent, I could barely make out what she was saying. When I finally understood what it was, it hit me hard. It was a sack of bricks right on my gut. “Scotty died today,” she said.

“What? No. What are you saying?”

The hospital had called it cardiac failure, but let's be honest, most people die when their hearts stop beating. Calling something cardiac failure is usually a way of saying you don't know what the fuck happened. When the autopsy results were finally reported, we found out that it was a pulmonary embolism—a random clot in the leg that no one could’ve predicted. It shot its way into Scotty's lungs and sucked the breath out of him.

Vittoria and Nirvana found him. He was coming up from the basement to the living room to watch a movie with them and right there, at the top of the basement stairs, the clot had lodged itself into a nodule of his lungs, cut off the oxygen. He must have felt his breath waning. We concluded this from the tall glass of wheatgrass juice, still chilled and sweating, lying on the mail counter, a few feet from where Scotty collapsed. He'd started going to the gym. He was on a new diet. We gathered he'd felt faint as he rounded up the final stair. That he'd gotten on to his knees and stretched to place the glass on the counter, that he'd finally just let go. Vittoria and Nirvana heard the thump. They ran to the stairs, called 911, started CPR. But Scotty was gone, man. His lungs closed up. The blood stopped flowing to his heart. His organs shut down. His body shuddered as the last breath of air was expelled from it. The doctors tried to revive him at the hospital. Two hours
later they came out to Vittoria and Nirvana and solemnly said, “We think it's time you went in and paid your last respects.”

The funeral was a week later, and I got in on the night before. He was a decent man, the boy I'd gone to see in SF. He took me in his arms when I collapsed after Bridgette’s call. He took more time than he'd planned to off work and stayed with me. “Are you okay?” he said, and kept saying. I wasn't, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He didn't really know me then; he didn't know us.

The house I came back to was different from the house I'd left. Look, no matter what shenanigans we'd been getting into, we contained it to the porch, you know? Otherwise, we were clean, house proud. We did our chores, washed our dishes; the inside of the house was immaculate. But when Scotty died, it was like everyone just gave up. No one had entered the basement after Nirvana and Vittoria found Scotty on its stairs. God knows what was festering down there in our small secondary kitchen. Even with the basement door closed you could smell this rank odour when you passed by the stairs. As for the rest of the house, there were dishes piled way high in the sink; cigarette butts and broken glass littered the porch; dust bunnies floated all over our floors. The trash hadn't been taken out at all; there were empty bottles of wine and Fireball and towers of beer lining the kitchen tables and walls. Everyone had taken a week off from work and just gone on a bender.

Well, not everyone was drinking. Vittoria and Bridgette hadn't touched the stuff since Scotty died. People mourn differently, I guess. Vittoria and Bridgette drew into themselves, spent hours in their bedrooms, sleeping or Skyping with family and friends back home. The rest of the house, though, gathered even closer together. They cut off
communication with the outside world and spent that week only with each other, drinking, drinking, talking, crying, drinking, breaking beer bottles on the porch, slamming fists into the basement door, drinking, smoking. When I came back that night before the funeral they gathered me in their arms like I was a long-lost sibling returning home after years. We held each other like we were all we had left in the world.

What is it about grief that blindsides you like this? That makes even everyday events seem so significant? Your eyes meet your reflection in a toothpaste-spackled mirror as you're brushing your teeth and suddenly you feel a chasm open in your chest; you find yourself paralysed at a traffic light, watching the white silhouette of a walking man turn into a blinking red hand. People brush past you, the world keeps spinning on its axis, the hand keeps flashing, the seconds keep counting down, but you still stand there. Your eyes tear up at certain sounds, sights, smells: a deep voice on the radio cutting through the chorus of a song, a lone daisy swaying gently in an otherwise weed-strewn backyard, the earthy musk of an impending storm.

It rained the day that Scotty died. It rained again on the day of his funeral in Chinatown. This was supposed to be significant. Scotty’s brother gave the eulogy. Hesh wore a suit, and it took me a while to recognize him. “When angels smile, the skies break in cool relief,” he said. “Scotty is smiling down on us today.”

But was he really? Why did this rain suddenly carry so much weight for us? It was summer. It was New York. Of course, it rained.

If we'd had something bubbling under our skin before Scotty died, then after, our grief overwhelmed us, burst out of us. The drinking got worse, the music got louder, the house got dirtier. Fair or not, the way we figured it, the house had taken from us and now we
were going to take from it. After Scotty's funeral, we brought Hesh back to Midland. I held the kid in a tight embrace, told him how we'd all been lucky to know Scotty, how he'd been lucky to have an older brother who was always looking out for him. “Not everyone has that,” I said. “Trust me. I know from personal experience. Scotty could've vouched for that.”

My older sister Tara had visited from LA that summer and stayed with me at Midland. She had been there for one of our porch parties. She sat there silently, in her way, just staring. This is what Tara did. She watched. She observed. And then she distilled all of it into this blog she had about the immigrant experience in America, like every single thing about life could fit into one subject.

“You don't have to live here, you know?” she said to me finally. “If it's a question of money, I'm sure Mom and Dad would be willing to give you some. Or borrow some from me, if you need it.”

“I like it here,” I replied. “It's home. These people keep it real.”

She laughed.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just the cadences you've chosen to adopt are interesting. I've seen Indians try to assimilate all sorts of accents here, but this is the first time I've come across ghetto slang.”

I swear sometimes I hated my sister. I told her so that night. Scotty had intervened when things threatened to come to a head. “Calm down, Special K,” he said. “Your sister's come all the way from Hollywood to see you. Why you gotta fight?” He'd taken
Tara's hand, lifted her off the couch and twirled her around in rhythm to the music that was playing, and for a moment, even my usually jaded sister seemed charmed.

To be fair, when I called my sister about Scotty, she took the first flight to San Francisco and spent two days with me, cooking food, making small talk with my boy. But I said none of this to Hesh. Isn't that the thing when someone dies? You want to believe that there was no one like them, that they were exemplary: the best friend, the best sibling.

The night of the funeral we sat out with Hesh and watched the dark fade into dawn as we pored over Scotty's Facebook, cheering with shots of bourbon at every post someone had written on his wall. My Newsfeed had been inundated with these posts ever since he died. I swear, for a month, every time I logged onto Facebook, it was all Scotty. Old photographs of him people had unearthed, anecdotes, memories, and then as time passed, musings from people who'd randomly thought of him:

Bro, I had some exciting news today and automatically called you only to realize you were gone :(.

Scotty, I just found out what happened. It was so good to have you in that Market Research class. Wish we'd gotten to spend more time together.

Went to that little joint in Chinatown and was remembering the last time we got dim sum together. Miss you, brother.

I found myself addicted to Scotty's wall. I kept scrolling deeper and deeper back in time, until I rewound to a date when he was alive and posting. “Everybody's a hater these days. Why do people got to pull down other's dreams? Support the man who dares to dream, folks. A dream is a rare thing.” If Scotty had ever said this to me in person, I
would have rolled my eyes at him the way I did the night he told me everyone was free to have their own beliefs. *You have a dream, is it?* I would have said. *Thank you, MLK.*

But something about seeing this posthumously got to me. See, there it is again, that thing about grief. What a waste, I kept thinking. What a waste of a beautiful, intelligent life. I said this to Angela as we both cried on the porch one night.

“Sometimes, I'm just so mad at him,” she told me. “I always told him to take better care of himself. Eat right. All that damn greasy food, you know?”

“He was trying in that last month. He was doing good with the diet.”

“But it was too little too late, K. Too little, too late.”

I nodded. We both lit another cigarette. We both poured ourselves another shot. We both knew it was easier to blame the dead. We let the unvoiced thoughts in our head grow between us. All those nights we'd poured whisky down Scotty's throat. All that second hand smoke we'd blown into his asthmatic lungs. All the shit we'd done that summer. *Mama, just killed a man.*

When the silence got too heavy, we finally decided that we'd go to the gym the next day. That night, though, we couldn't move off the porch. We sat there, drinking and chain smoking and crying and talking. Finally, the cops came by. Angie went wild on them. “My best friend died,” she told them. “He was my family. My brother's dead, you assholes.”

I held her back, took her inside, pushed her into bed, calmed down the cops. *I'm sorry, guys. We're just going through a rough time.* Funny thing is, if Scotty were around, he would have been the first guy I called to handle the situation.
It was worse the day we finally cleared out Scotty's room, boxed his belongings for his family. No one had entered Scotty's room in a month-and-a-half at this point, and we had to step out for a bit once we did just to air it out. That smell, that heavy smell, it just took me back to an image of Scotty sitting on my floor mumbling about rats the size of kittens, and I swear to God, I completely lost it. Nirvana and Bridgette broke down later in the packing process, and we were just this huge mess. There was a lot of porch drinking happening that night, and I'll tell you this, we did not leave Scotty's room in a good state. We graffitied its walls with what we thought was love, spray painted messages and drawings all over it. We wanted to immortalize him, but really we'd just vandalized another part of the house. The house had marked us, and so, we marked it right back.

Soon the house began smelling rancid. It wasn't just the crusted dishes or our piles of unwashed clothes (the laundry room was in the out-of-bounds basement); it was something else. It was the smell of decay; it was the smell of death. I first thought it was in my head, but soon others began smelling it too. We thought that maybe it was the compost heap, maybe there were remnants of rotting food from the hippies' reign; but, a quick poke around in the backyard threw that theory to dust. The smell grew heavier. The house too was slowly disintegrating, caving in, tired of our abuse. One of the bathroom drains had clogged causing a mini-flood. A plank was loose on the porch and MartyorTerry had tripped on it, cutting open a knee. Then, one stormy summer night, Bridgette's room in the attic sprang a leak and we had to call in roofers.

3.

When the roofers came, one of them, the apparent leader, took a huge sniff and said, “You've got rodents.”
“We had rodents,” I corrected him. “No more.” Bridgette nodded.

The man raised an eyebrow at us. He grabbed the step-ladder from our kitchen and beckoned for us to follow him upstairs to Bridgette's room. Once there, he climbed up the ladder and loosened one of the ceiling tiles.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He didn't answer, handing the tile down to one of his men and loosening another one. He did this twice more, until finally, a furry blob fell down. The mouse landed on its back, limbs spread apart, belly exposed. The man loosened a few more tiles and two more bodies dropped down. A few more tiles later, it was raining mice, each frozen in different positions—sleep, terror, agony, surprise, open-eyed shock. I looked away from their glassy gazes. Bridgette retched and ran out toward the bathroom.

The man stopped pulling down tiles now, satisfied at proving his point. “You mighta killed them,” he said. “But you sure as hell didn't get rid of them. There're bound to be a couple more up there. Some in your walls too, I would reckon.”

That motherfucking exterminator had lied. Or maybe the winter had been colder than he'd imagined. It had frozen the mice's bodies, preserved them. With the onslaught of summer, the corpses had slowly begun to thaw and fester in the heat.

“We're going to have to do major renovations,” Gerard told us. “Walls and ceilings will be broken. I think I may get the front porch redone and the house painted as well while they're at it. It's going to be a mess. If you guys want to move out, I won't blame you.” This was his polite way of evicting us. There had already been several complaints from Tim and the other neighbours that summer. We had completely destroyed the house.
I was the only one who argued. The house wasn’t the only thing that had been tearing at the seams; things had slowly been breaking down between us as well. Scotty’s death might have initially brought us in tighter, but soon people went back to their jobs, went back to the hassles of their daily lives. Bridgette went on multiple job interviews and with each unsuccessful one she became more and more withdrawn. With no Scott to man the grill, our afternoons on the porch slowly petered out. I sat there by myself, some afternoons, feeling lonely and resentful. But really, how could I blame them? We’d become mirrors of each other’s grief, and who wants to keep staring at such an ugly reflection? Many of the Midlanders began coming home later. Nobody wanted to come back to a broken down, putrid house after a day’s work. We’d made the mess, but none of us could deal with cleaning it up.

We had been nine; then, we were eight. Now, Bridgette's grad program had ended. Her visa was expiring and with no job in hand, she was set to leave. Vincent had been getting a lot of gigs in Brooklyn and he and Vittoria had been talking about moving there. Angela and Nirvana had broken up. Angie had crashed after Scotty's death. She was the closest to him and had taken it the worst. Her breakdown was too much for Nirvana to handle and Gerard's “suggestion” was an easy exit plan.

I called the first house meeting I’d ever called. “C’mon guys,” I said. “It won’t be that bad. A few renovations and then, hey, we’ll actually have a better-looking house.”

Vittoria came over and gave me a hug. “Kari, we would. But New Jersey to Brooklyn on a train, it is too long. Maybe if there was no renovation we would try. But, how you say? ‘It is what it is?’ Maybe this is a sign, no?”

“Well, what about you, Bridge? Surely if you keep trying you can get a job here.”
Bridgette shook her head. “It’s nothing personal, K. It’s just the economy, you know? Even finding a proper job is rough. Visa sponsorship? Forget about it. I don’t have to explain this to you, lovey. You understand.” She looked at me like we were supposed to be on the same page. Fucking Internationals.

Marty and Terry just shrugged in their ambiguous white-boy way. Only Angie nodded.

Later, defeated, I had a cigarette and a beer with Nirvana on the front porch. He’d been the most impassive, so I was as vehement with him as I could be. “Can you believe it?” I asked. “Nobody even wants to try to stay together?”

Nirvana took a long drag. “I don’t know,” he said with his exhale. “I kinda understand it. I mean, I’m 32. I’m thinking maybe it’s time I had a place to myself. Vincent and Vittoria? Hell, maybe they need that too. They may want to start a family soon, right? Can’t do that here.”

“Aren’t we family, Mac?” I never called him Mac. I was pulling out all stops.

“We’re not family, K. We’re just a bunch of people who ended up in the same place. And this place, I mean let’s be honest here, it’s a glorified frat house. How long can you keep living like you’re still some college freshman?”

This meant about as much to me as the Shameless reference had. I only knew of frat houses from movies and books. I’d lived with my parents in Bombay, and then I’d lived at Midland. Maybe grad school had been nothing like my picture of the American college experience, but I thought there was no denying that at least the house was special. I watched Nirvana coolly sipping on his beer, leaning casually against the porch railing as if he hadn’t just cheapened everything we’d had into some awful TV trope, and I wanted
to shake him. Instead I sipped my own beer and said, “Scotty used to say we were family. Doesn’t that mean something?”

“Scott’s gone, Karishma.”

I could’ve punched him.

“Well,” I said. “If it counts for anything, you guys were my family.” I tried to mask the quiver in my voice with a long gulp of lukewarm lager. “The closest thing I’ve had to family over here, for sure.”

Nirvana looked away. He took another slow puff. I could practically see the wheels turning in his head, see him editing himself so he came across as more generous. “Look,” he said finally. “I like you, kid. So don’t take this the wrong way, okay? What we had here was a good thing. But surely you didn’t think it was going to last forever?”

When someone looks at you with that much pity on his face, you’ve got to have the self-respect to shut up and stop talking.

In the end, I convinced Marty, Terry and Angela that the four of us should move in together. We found an apartment about a mile away. We called ourselves the Core Four. Six months later, Angela left for a new job in Ohio (fucking Ohio, man!), and we were three. Three soon fractured into two plus one, when one day, I walked into to find Marty and Terry necking in the living room. I thought they were bros, and so did they, but life throws you these little surprises all the time, you know? They’d increasingly start spending more time without me and I’d find myself standing in front of a stranger in a house I’d once called mine, my fist clamped tight over a set of keys, its metal serrations imprinting the flesh of my palm.

“The keys,” the girl was saying to me, holding out an open hand.
I loosened my grip and dropped them in. For a moment, I could still feel their weight. Then, only air.

**Epilogue**

We tried to meet after that summer, all of us ex-Midlanders, on and off, at various bars around Jersey City, on each other birthdays. And, for a while, we did. But, as time passed, people began to drop out. We got busy with our new lives and drifted further apart; the crew disintegrated. I completed my degree and decide to move to San Francisco, where the teachers were more unionized, to be with my boy. He’s still as good a man as he was the first time I visited him. Still always there, still always making sure I’m okay, just as he did after Bridgette’s call that summer. Maybe, that’s when I first fell in love with him. We married shortly after I moved.

One day, I came home and expressed how much I loved teaching the kids at the middle-school where I worked. How even on the days they drove me crazy, they still surprised me, made me laugh. “Is there any responsibility bigger and more scary and more wonderful than shaping the life of a child?” I asked my husband. That night, we made a child of our own: a beautiful daughter.

Tara and I are closer, too, both geographically and otherwise. Not as close as we could be, but it’s progress. She got married as well. She has two kids. Of course. My sister will always one up me. But we see each other more now. Children have softened both of us a bit. We take turns visiting between San Francisco and LA so the cousins can get to know each other better. The fear I expressed about ending up alone never materialized. Yet, I still think of the Midlanders as my first American family, still think
of mice every time I hear a floorboard creak, still think of Scott every damn time there’s summer rain.

Here’s the thing. Even before Gerard summoned me to give up my keys, I went to the house by myself. I never told any of the Midlanders this, even though many of us were still in touch, and I met some of them that very evening.

It happened a week after I moved with Marty and Terry and Angie to the new place. I realised I’d forgotten some of my stuff at Midland, so, I took my set of keys and went to the house for what I thought was my last visit. It was completely deserted. It was a Sunday and the construction crew had the day off, but various tools lay strewn around the place, hammers and drills and such. I went up to my old room and dumped my few forgotten belongings unceremoniously into a backpack and took out a can of beer I'd carried with me from it. I went to the porch, sat on the couch (Gerard still hadn't thrown it out) and popped open the can. This was supposed to be my goodbye: my last porch beer. I thought it fitting. Fifteen minutes tops, rip off the bandage and move on. I didn't know then that I'd be back at Midland six months later dropping off my keys and being monitored by a redhead as I visualized a phantom glass of wheatgrass juice that had become the stuff of myths; I didn't know that it was only then I'd realise that this was no longer our house.

Sitting on the porch with my beer, though, I was still connected to what I had left behind. The loss was still fresh. With each sip, I made myself recollect all the times we'd spent together there, us nine. The depravity, the debauchery, the love. That time on my birthday, when I'd come back from campus, exhausted, only to walk into a hallway decorated with balloons, everyone awake, waiting for me, a bottle of champagne in
Nirvana's hand; Scotty's graduation; the night before I left for Bombay when we spent hours out on the porch celebrating our last day together as a group; our stupid laughter over Bridgette standing over a bucket, smearing a can with peanut butter. I smiled at this last memory. It's done, I thought. One more cigarette, two more sips and I'm out of here.

And, I swear to God, then, right then, the heavens broke. It started pouring, no warning at all. My Samsung started blaring a fire-alarm bleat. “Flash-flood warning!” the message on my cracked screen read. The downpour was so bad I could barely see two feet in front of the porch, just this crazy cascade of water, rushing down the roof in sheets. Fifteen minutes became three hours before things were decent enough for me to leave. I just sat there. I laughed. I played some music on my phone—some salsa, some P. Diddy, some Bollywood. I laughed some more. “Oh, Scotty,” I said. Oh, Scotty.

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