

THE MUTAWA KILLERS AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis by

Suraj Kunnath Shankar

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a major in Creative Writing.

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Richard Spilman, Committee Chair

We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:

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Margaret Dawe, Committee Member

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Peter Zoller, Committee Member

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## STOP ALL THE CLOCKS

December 3, 1992

Zahir had been enjoying himself at the dinner party, held by the Malayali set his parents belonged to, when Anju turned the conversation to the Mosque.

“Daddy got the latest ‘Eyewitness’ report,” she said, and Zahir stiffened. Television programming in far-away India resembled that of Saudi Arabia, where they lived—State controlled—and ‘Eyewitness,’ a privately-run Indian news program, reported news that the government mouthpiece Doordarshan didn’t. “It’s horrible,” Anju said, and shivered dramatically, as if she were ten instead of fifteen. She sat with her legs swinging off Sanjana’s bed, with the younger girls, including his sister Zabi, seated about her like fawning little courtesans. “You should see it, all these men in saffron, shouting, chanting. And there are only a few policemen and soldiers. If those men really wanted to, they can tear the mosque down.”

“And I suppose the soldiers will just watch?” Sanjay drawled. “Let a bunch of idiots do whatever they want. The INC government is just going to forget their secular roots, let the right-wingers do whatever they want, and forget that they’re the party the minority support?” He kept his eyes fixed on the ground as he spoke, watching his finger trace patterns on the carpet, where he lay next to Zahir.

Anju shifted and settled once more, with her legs tucked in under her. Zahir remembered his older cousin Babi sitting that way, wearing skirts that revealed her long Bombay-girl legs. Anju’s were encased in blue denim, which she tapped as she spoke. “I dunno. Maybe the soldiers don’t listen to them. Maybe they think the Hindutva guys are right. No one has been using the Mosque after all. It’s only when we asked for it that the Muslims got all worked up.”

*The Muslims.* Zahir opened and closed his mouth, itching to retort. Strange, his father had begun talking like that too. The Hindus this, the Hindus that. He looked to his right and noticed Sanjay watching him. Sanjay turned to Anju.

“Oh, shut up,” Sanjay said as he stood and looked down at Zahir. “You want to go to my room?” Zahir could hear Anju sputtering as they exited the room.

Sanjay’s bedroom was one of two rooms on the second floor, the other a study that looked like an Ikea catalog display with wood everywhere: wooden tables and chairs, and even a miniature wooden house, a larger version of the plastic Barbie houses Zabi had, only this one housed the framed pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses, and a little brass lamp lit only at dusk and dawn. They had to pass through this room to get to the bedroom and as they entered the study, Zahir’s eyes moved, as always, to the little god house. He found the pictures all tipped down.

“Your god pictures,” Zahir said.

Sanjay shrugged and knelt down in front of the prayer house. “Had some maintenance work done today, Paki workers. Ma always turns them down when strangers come.” His tone was sharp and bitter, like when he talked about Firdaus. “Can’t even pray in our own bloody homes.” Sanjay took his time straightening the pictures, his long fingers moving them around after some deliberation. “There,” Sanjay said once he’d put the last one in place. “Old Vishnu likes being in the center of things.” He frowned, then reached for the large frame in the center, with the doe-eyed blue god staring serenely out at the world, and scratched at the glass as he picked it up. “Hell. Ma’s going to throw a fit. The glass has cracked.”

“Get a new one,” Zahir said kneeling by Sanjay, as Sanjay ran a thumb across the frame, caressing around the figure of the multi-limbed god.

“Not so easy, is it? You always have to hide them in your luggage, in among the clothes, and hope they don’t search too closely. And now, with the shit going down in India, well—” He placed the picture back in its place, askew. “Let’s go.”

Inside the bedroom, Sanjay closed the door behind them, and jumped onto his bed and Zahir followed. They’d lain next to each other on this bed for years. They’d known each other since they were practically babies and now, at sixteen, Zahir feared that they were beginning to drift apart.

“Thanks,” Zahir said. “I was going to say something stupid.”

Sanjay laughed. “Dear Anju. I like her so much better when she has her mouth shut. She’s pretty. Too bad she’s rather stupid for someone our age.”

Zahir gave his friend a startled look. “You think she’s pretty?”

“She’s got nice legs, and nice—Name someone you think is pretty.”

He shrugged, evasively, and Sanjay smirked.

“Who do you think of when....” Sanjay motioned with his hand, and Zahir blushed.

“Please tell me it’s a girl.” Sanjay looked half-serious.

“I like girls,” Zahir said, feeling defensive.

“Wouldn’t notice, the way you’ve been hanging about with *Firdaus* recently.” He spoke *Firdaus*’ name in a slightly breathless way, imitating Anju.

Zahir had wondered when Sanjay would bring that up. It wasn’t as if Zahir had gone out of his way to win *Firdaus*’ friendship, the way other boys did. In fact, when *Firdaus* had first noticed him at the beginning of the school year after Asma Madam, their English teacher, had changed the seating arrangements, placing some of the better students next to the weaker ones, Zahir had been petrified. *Firdaus*, who played on the school football team, captained the debate

team, and was on his way to being valedictorian. Firdaus, whom the pretty girls at the parties always asked about, whose fair face and dark eyes he'd heard cursed uncountable times by his best friend. That Firdaus, seated next to him, smiling and holding out his hand to Mr. nobody, wanting to be friends. He'd felt Sanjay's gaze burning into him even as he slipped a limp hand into the other's warm grip and he'd spent days convincing Sanjay that he was just being polite.

Zahir stretched across Sanjay and snagged the large picture frame from the bedside table, the one with a collage of photos, mostly of the two of them: Sanjay and him as toddlers, as twitchy hard-to-photograph preteens, as gawky teenagers crushing cake into each other's faces during birthdays. He had a copy that Sanjay's mom had given him sitting on his bedside. He looked over at Sanjay to point out how much taller they'd grown, but Sanjay was staring up at the ceiling. When Sanjay finally spoke the words came out rushed.

"You know his charm is fake, right?"

"My cousin Babi, I think she's pretty."

"Bombay Babi? I thought she was cool, when we met."

Zahir nodded, and closed his eyes. "She's not just pretty, she's smart, and fun to talk to. And really open minded. But she's my cousin you know."

"You're allowed to marry cousins, you know. Quranic law."

Zahir hadn't known, but then, he didn't consider himself a very good Muslim. Sanjay was Hindu but knew everything, and if he didn't know something, then he was always reading about it. "I suppose this is where having a bookworm for a best friend comes useful." He felt the playful punch and smiled. "You hit like a girl."

"Best friend, huh?" Still that, am I?"



Zahir opened his eyes and stared into Sanjay's brown ones, framed by horn-rimmed glasses. "Forever."

December 6, 1992

The Mosque Fell.

Wapa had come home, as always, a few minutes after seven and had turned to the radio in the dining room—the only way in Saudi Arabia to get instant news about India. Zahir had been snuggled in the sea-blue living room sofa, the one that Umma wouldn't allow them to sit on because, she said, her children weren't civilized enough to use sofas on a daily basis. But she'd been busy: with school closed for winter break, Zabi had sleepovers coming up. Umma had been busy making carrot cake for her to take along and Zahir had snuck into the living room, leaving the lights off. The apartment wasn't as large as some of his friends' houses—certainly not as big as Sanjay's Villa—and soon the smell of the food frying in the kitchen reached him and he'd been dreaming lazily of nicking a few when Wapa had uttered "Damn! Damn!" through the crackle of noise from the radio, followed by a hushed "Allah" and Zahir had known instantly that something had happened to the Mosque.

New Year's Eve, 1992

Zahir lay in his dark bedroom watching the fluorescent green hands of his clock come remorselessly together, and cursed the Mosque. This was his first time spending New Year's at home. He settled deeper into the blanket and considered going over to Zabi's bedroom to wish her. His sister had sulked most when Wapa had stated that they wouldn't be attending the dinner

at Sanjay's house. It's not *fair*, she'd pouted: All her friends would be there, it wasn't right to be spending New Year's at home.

Zahir had agreed with his sister and they had waged a pitched battle at the dinner table, as they had when they were younger and wanted Wapa to buy them something: a bike, or two of those Korean-made plastic blue remote controlled cars sold at Al-Balad. When he'd seen Wapa's lips thin and the frown creasing his brows, Zahir had given up. But Zabi, mouthier than he had been at twelve and less skilled at reading Wapa's face, kept pushing until Umma, standing near the stove, rapped her wooden ladle against the stovetop edge and told them to finish their dinner and go study.

Though Wapa had told them only a week before New Year's, Zahir knew he'd been ruminating about it since the sixth. The Mosque, Zahir thought as he watched the remorseless march of the second hand, that old decrepit, unused mosque that nobody had wanted for forty years, now being fought over by right wing Hindus, who claimed it as the birthplace of their god, and the mullahs, who had finally decided they needed it.

Wapa had never been a great follower of the news. But that had changed around May when the Hindu *kar sevaks*, servants of God, had made their first aborted attempt to storm the Mosque. Wapa started to come home from managing the accounts of the shipping company he worked for and listen to BBC reports on the radio for hours, still in work clothes; and, as the Hindu rhetoric in India grew more heated, Wapa, dapper Wapa who dressed in starched-white Van Heusens and constantly worried his tie, grew more bitter, more faithful. They'd always been good Muslims in a way, his Wapa and Umma, but rather lax ones as parents: while they prayed a few times a day, they'd never pressured Zahir or Zabi. Zahir had grown up believing that fervent faith was the hallmark of the North Indians who populated his high school's halls and swore

*wallahi*, by God, on the most mundane topics, clutching their throats fervently, the boys who had read the Quran completely by the time they reached twelve or thirteen, said everything—the date of Neil Armstrong’s moon landing, the recipe for the Atom Bomb, *every* thing—could be found in the Quran. So when Wapa came home from work for days after the Mosque’s razing, saying with secret delight tainting his voice how office rumor had it that this or that temple had been razed, Zahir had felt afraid. Wapa had changed, and he’d tried explaining this to his sister. Zabi, however, was still peeved that he hadn’t held his ground in their dinner war. “No guts,” she sniffed as they had made their retreat and she hadn’t said a word to him for the next few days, hadn’t bothered him in his room, or even peeked at his diary.

Enveloped in the stifling constraints of the blanket, he hummed until he realized the song was a New Year song. This is stupid, he thought as he tossed off the heavy blanket and moved his feet to the carpetless floor, shivering at the cold contact. So what if Wapa had suddenly decided that it wasn’t right for good Muslims to be celebrating New Year’s, and Umma had gone along with it? He could still wish Zabi.

He padded softly over to her bedroom, careful not to wake his parents. A sliver of light from the nightlight slipped through the crack in her door. She was asleep as he slipped into the room and moved to her bed, her face slack, mouth open, revealing the crooked teeth she always took pains to hide, now hidden behind metal wires. “Zab, Oi Zab,” he whispered. “Happy New Year.” She gave a slight whine and made gummy smacking noises with her mouth, her hands swatting him away. “HAPPY NEW YEAR.” He spoke a little louder, but she rolled over onto her stomach and her short, lank hair fell away from her neck and onto her face, obscuring it.

It was just as well. She’d just be miserable. Right now, at the party they would be eating the New Year cake. Even Sanjay. Zahir could almost see Sanjay’s thoughtful frown behind horn-

rimmed glasses as he took another bite, chewing with the same abstracted air with which he tackled math problems. Sanjay would be chewing cake and he should've been there, talking with him, teasing Anju, subtly though; he should have been there, whispering in the corner with Sanjay while Anju, shrill-voiced, complained to his mother that "the boys" really had no manners, and no control over their tongues.

But instead, he was sitting on Zabi's cold bed with no one to wish a Happy New Year. Feeling an uncommon burst of affection for her balled-up form, frail in sleep, he leaned over and kissed her lightly on her brow, moving away before he woke her, proud of his own thoughtfulness. When he was back in his own bed, cocooned between the blankets once more, he wondered whether Sanjay was thinking of him.

January, 1993

The first day of class, he was running late, the late morning sun burning hot on his back, and the prayer was already halfway through when he made it to the morning assembly in the U-shaped school's courtyard. The rows of navy-blue students were arranged by height, and tall, lanky Sanjay stood at the end of their class' line, determinedly staring down like the other Hindus while the *Surah Fatiha* was recited and repeated by the Muslim boys. Zahir had to wait in a corner until the prayer concluded, and in the pause between the prayer and the national pledge, he quickly sidled through to the middle of his own class' row, just behind Firdaus. As if sensing his presence, Firdaus leaned back until their shirts brushed, until he could breathe in that mix of perfume and starchy collar that was pure Firdaus.

"Good holiday?" Firdaus asked, turning to him. A few students conversed with heads tilted sideways and back, like spies in T.V movies. Firdaus, however, had no use for subterfuge.

In his prefect's white shirt and black pants, he stood out. His casual ease was in stark contrast to the military erectness of the rest of them, and he had a drowsy, defiant air that gained him admiration among the rebellious students even though he was beloved of the teachers.

"The pledge," Zahir said, hushing him just as a small boy, a sixth-grader, stepped up to the mike with the wide, frightened eyes of a startled cat.

"India is my country" the little boy intoned, almost in a whisper.

"India is your country," Firdaus repeated, in a bored drone.

"All Indians are my brothers and sisters," the boy continued.

"Who're you going to fuck, then?"

Light sniggers from around them greeted this pat, oft-repeated, reply.

Zahir strained to stand even more upright as some teachers glanced his way, past Firdaus, with irritated looks. Always past Firdaus, he thought with fond irritation, watching the back of the other boy's head, the way his light-brown hair escaped his kufi skullcap and curled like seraphim wings.

When the pledge was done and the little boy had scuttled off stage with barely veiled relief, the national anthem was sung to a sullen silence by a group of five seasoned veterans. The Hindu boys mouthed the words, but a few Muslim kids defiantly eased themselves into lax postures. Firdaus sang the Paki anthem. The teachers, mostly Muslim, ignored them. This had never happened before. As the last strains of the anthem died away, the Headmaster Khan Sir stepped up to the podium. "Remember what I said," with reproving emphasis and nodded at the P.E. Teacher, standing like a sentry to his right.

"Assembly dismissed!" the army veteran said, thrusting out his chest and glaring at them. The boys retreated to their classrooms with ill discipline, some hurrying forward, others waiting

and talking to old chums, hugging, lacing proprietary fingers though the hands of close friends. Zahir followed Firdaus and his cronies—Yasser the soccer star, Salman the other prefect, Insha, a year their junior, but Firdaus' cousin, and others—to a corner of the courtyard, and arranged himself in the semi-circle surrounding his friend.

“Always have to get away with everything, don't you?” Zahir, closest to Firdaus, said. “Bloody teacher's pet.” No one laughed.

Firdaus smirked at him as he leaned against the wall. “You missed Cancer's opening speech. What oratory, ha? Telling us not to touch the Hindu shit. *Things in India are not yaar prablem.*” There were murmurs of agreement. “Our seniors met with the Paki seniors, planned to trash a few of our buses, give those Embassy bastards something to think about, God Willing. Cancer told them they wouldn't sit for the boards.”

“Bull! He can't do that, can he? I mean, it's the boards, *yaar*. Can he?” Insha said.

Firdaus shrugged. “The Seniors are worried. Saying we shouldn't touch the Hindus. It's their future.”

“Bull!” Insha repeated, in his high, frantic voice. “Cancer wants something done too, I bet. Or maybe, he just doesn't care. South Indian, isn't he?”

Zahir had the fleeting urge to punch the Insha when Firdaus looked his way. He relaxed when Firdaus smacked Insha, and almost smiled at the satisfactory crack.

“South, North. We're all Muslims. That mosque was *ours*. We all care,” Firdaus said. Zahir nodded when Firdaus locked eyes with him and smiled. “So we can't beat them. Doesn't mean we can't hurt them in other ways, does it? They took down one Mosque and we've destroyed how many temples?” The others laughed fawningly. Zahir had to admit, after tearing down the Mosque, the *kar sevaks* seemed to have lost interest: the Muslims were doing all the

temple-razing now, winning the little riots that had broken out in a rash across Northern India. Maybe it was true that vegetarianism turned Hindus smart but weak.

“You! Boys!” The P.E teacher came striding toward them. “No classes?”

Firdaus broke away from the group. “Good holiday, Sir?” he asked.

Ali Kutty relaxed on seeing him, then turned to the rest of them. “Classes!”

So they fled, except Zahir. Kutty nodded at Zahir, but said nothing as Firdaus pulled the older man aside. The P.E. teacher knew Wapa, and they got along well, the way most Malayalee Muslims did. Zahir had always been given a lot of leeway in P.E classes. As Firdaus laughed, Zahir looked up at the right wing of the third floor, in the direction of his class. He could see a few navy-blue sleeves near the railings, but couldn’t make out faces. Was Sanjay there, he wondered, watching him wait for Firdaus? He almost took off then—he could’ve excused himself to Firdaus later—but the fair-haired boy finished with Ali Kutty and beckoned toward him.

“Class?” Zahir asked as they left the courtyard and headed to a stairwell.

“Not yet. Asma can wait,” Firdaus said as they jogged upstairs, nodding at the few stragglers who ‘Oye, Firdaus’ed him; some of the youngsters gawked shamelessly and Zahir knew how they felt. Before they’d become friends, he’d always watched Firdaus, been envious. Not of Firdaus himself, but of the golden aura that surrounded him, the golden boys that fawned over his words, his slim, strong form and the casual arrogance that let him own the halls. He’d been jealous of the look of the other boy’s father at P.T.A. meetings. He’d resented the fact that Firdaus was both intelligent and sunny, while his genius best friend brooded like a Communist. And Sanjay had taken to hanging about with the other nerdy Hindu boys even during lunch, discussing the intricacies of FORTRAN and assembly language cycles and other things Zahir

didn't understand. Zahir was always invited along, but he had little to add to such conversations. So when Firdaus had caught him on the way to the cafeteria one lunch period in October and asked Zahir to join his group in the school parking lot for *Rusbukhari*, he'd agreed. And the other boys—the monitors and jocks and thugs and party animals—whose gazes had always passed over him quickly in class and in the hallways, smiled at him a little unsurely when introduced and shared the yellow rice dish they'd cut class to buy. Sitting there, tearing into whole chickens and eating rice off a communal plate, he'd first felt the delirious, addictive wisps of the pleasure of belonging. He'd begun spending more time with this group, at first at the periphery, but Firdaus had taken to him and, though the others like Insha still kept a wary distance from him, the English-speaking Southie who never wore a skullcap or attended prayers, they never questioned his presence.

Which was why he was with Firdaus in the boy's bathroom while Asma was taking roll, probably ready to ask them for their holiday homework.

They stood in the bathroom, Zahir leaning on the wall next to the stalls, Firdaus inspecting himself in one of the mirrors. Zahir could never understand Firdaus' fascination with reflections: sometimes, Firdaus would drag him from his spot against the wall and stare at the mirror, watching their entwined hands and Zahir's fidgety figure gazing back at them. Zabi spent hours in front of her mirror too, throwing Umma's shawls on her head and sending coy smiles and batting her eyelashes at her image. But Zabi, fiery, loyal Zabi wasn't (though Zahir would never admit it aloud) as perfectly molded as Firdaus, didn't have the dark eyes or fierce cheekbones or the consciously lazy smile, didn't have fingers that fit perfectly in Zahir's or whichever boy was lucky enough to be Firdaus' best friend then.

“Seen your old friend yet?”



Funny, the way Firdaus avoided using Sanjay's name while Sanjay was always bringing his up and cursing it. "Not yet."

"They want to kick his ass, you know. He pisses people off, thinks he's better than us. Probably laughed as the mosque was razed."

Zahir breathed out, and watched his breath ruffle Firdaus' curls. "No one hurts him," he said, surprised at his own ferocity. "No one touches him."

"I'll make sure they don't," Firdaus said, sighing. Their gazes met in the reflection and Zahir nodded gratefully. "But he's a Hindu snake. He'll bite you before you know it."

Zahir was no fool; he didn't believe that all Hindus didn't hate him. Once, on a trip back home to India, Wapa had gotten into a fight with a taxi driver who'd run into their car after prayers, and the man, full of spluttering rage, had eyed Wapa's prayer cap disdainfully when Wapa said he wasn't responsible—then called Wapa a *Mukkala*. Zahir didn't know what the word meant, only that it was something terribly derogatory, from the way Wapa has stared sightlessly beyond the man and rushed back into their car.

But that man hadn't been Wapa's best friend.

"He's not like that," Zahir said, finally.

Firdaus shrugged, fidgeted with his hair some more, then turned with a grin. "Let's go."

Zahir got to Khalid Sir's apartment building for his Chemistry lesson that evening feeling frustrated. The Assembly's rigid form had lulled him into thinking that little had changed, but Firdaus had made him realize otherwise. And the rest of the day, he'd seen little things, the way the skullcaps usually used for prayers never left people's heads, the way people sat or talked, who they sat or talked with. The way some Hindu boys stepped out of the class after every

period, as soon as the bell rang, and returned just behind the teacher. He'd noticed something that had never caught his attention before—that in the class of thirty, the five Hindu kids occupied the first three benches in the middle column, always sat together, always moved together. He had used to sit with Sanjay when they were younger, but when the teachers had noted Sanjay's cleverness, they'd pulled him to the front of the class, away from Zahir, who had rather happily haunted the back benches. Yasser the soccer star sat next to him now that he was part of Firdaus' crowd, which suited Zahir well. Yasser's presence marked Zahir as one of the in-crowd, gained him a little notoriety among the teachers who had overlooked him all these years, and best of all, Yasser, sublime god with leather, was quiet and awkward off the field, content to let Zahir study Sanjay and Firdaus today.

When the history teacher, Jameel, ineffectual and old and oblivious to the class tension, had asked a question, Firdaus, leaning back expansively, reached for the air, along with a few tentative Hindu students, but Jameel's gaze went, as always, to his favorite. "Sanjay?" he said.

Sanjay answered in an abrupt, irritated tone. He hated attention, Zahir knew, and today he probably hated having the class reminded that he was present.

"Exactly," Jameel sir said, smiling foolishly. "In this battle Tipu showed—"

"Wasn't Tipu, it was his father, Hyder Ali," Sanjay said, leaving the unspoken *you idiot* hanging in the air.

"Thank you, Sanjay," Sir said, the fond-foolish grin never leaving his face. "Of course, while the French were busily massacring innocent Indians, at the same time in America they were—" As always when he made a mistake, Jameel talked about events not on their syllabus and none of the students—save Sanjay, who chased knowledge for its own sake—could tell

whether he was babbling. Watching Sanjay wince at something Jameel said—wrong again, obviously—Zahir was glad some things didn't change.

Zahir had watched Sanjay because, as the most visible minority member in class, he served as their unofficial leader; the other Hindus mimicked him. Others had been watching too; the rivalry between Firdaus and Sanjay had been brewing for years, and if Firdaus was beloved of both teachers and students, Sanjay's aloof arrogance and conscious superiority had won him few friends. After lunch, when it had become obvious from the way Firdaus ignored Sanjay that Firdaus wouldn't pick a fight, Sanjay and the other Hindu boys relaxed enough to sit through the breaks in between classes, ignoring their bristling classmates. By the end of the day, the Hindu and Muslim boys even mixed with strained civility. But, Zahir thought as he rang the doorbell of the first-floor apartment where his daytime Chemistry teacher taught tuition classes at night, Sanjay had not talked to him, and, not wanting to draw any more attention to his friend, Zahir hadn't sought him out.

Firdaus let him in; when Zahir had touched on his difficulties with Chemistry earlier in the year, Firdaus had suggested their chemistry teacher, Khalid Sir. Zahir hadn't understood how tuition with a teacher whose explanations he couldn't grasp in school would help him get better, but Firdaus explained that it wasn't about getting better, really: it was about his grade getting better. Zahir had joined, and much to Wapa's delight, his grades had improved dramatically. "Just needed that push," Wapa said, "the one-on-one touch." Sanjay had mocked him for bribing his way to good grades.

Khalid Sir's apartment was much smaller than Zahir's own, with both the living and dining rooms visible through the doorway and the other areas of the house, where Khalid Sir's wife and daughters maintained a silent vigil through his classes, curtained off. Zahir had strained

his ears many times but never heard a peep, no indication that they existed. He tried to imagine Zabi's explosiveness stilled to where even the rustling of her clothes weren't heard. Northie Muslims were simply different.

A dozen students were already seated around the dining table, those of Zahir's grade to one side, their juniors, the tenth-graders, ranged against them. Khalid Sir nodded as Zahir sat next to Firdaus, to the teacher's right. "Where's Insha?" Sir said, looking at the other side with disapproval. "Boy has no sense. *Chal*, we'll start without him."

They'd covered the chapter on organic compounds—that is, Sir described it in vague terms and asked Firdaus to help them through the problems while Sir tackled the tenth-graders—when the doorbell rang again, and Sir himself went to answer, muttering softly, but instead of the expected harangue, they heard his surprised—and polite—tones and following that, the grave tones of Mr.Naqvi, Firdaus' uncle and Insha's father.

Insha walked in to the room, quivering with excitement; Sir still stood at the door, talking to Mr.Naqvi. Firdaus raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Bomb. Blasts," whispered Insha as he took his seat, and Zahir gripped the table, hard. "Bombay. Said it was the Muslim Mafia. Revenge, yaar. Revenge for the Mosque." His nervous face shone with glee, and he sat back only when Sir re-entered the room.

"Well," said Khalid Sir, shaking his head and tut-tutting as he took his seat. "Back to our lessons." He looked them over with an inscrutable expression. "Be glad you're all in a good Muslim country, safe." His grave face tempered their urge for further conversations, but Zahir only half-listened to Firdaus' explanations.

Afterward, the students gathered next to the gate. Most, like Firdaus, lived nearby, but Zahir and a few others had to wait for their drivers or fathers to pick them up. Usually, the

neighborhood boys dispersed as soon as class was done, eager to be home, to play football in the sandy grounds behind their apartment buildings. But the faint buzz of excitement carried over from the class and they milled about, as their fathers did at Embassy gatherings and P.T.A meetings, and more neighborhood boys stopped by, adding the second-hand rumors they'd heard. Hindus had finally begun retaliating in Bombay, one said.

“Girls, *yaar*, picked up off the street. They tore off their hijabs.” He didn't say what else they tore off, but they could guess. “Hunting around for Muslim men too, asking people to drop their pants and prove they aren't Muslim, those fucks.”

Zahir thought of quiet hijabi girls like Khalid Sir's daughters being plucked from their homes by angry, greedy men, and felt glad he was from a different place, had a sister who didn't care for the hijab or even Allah much.

“Still,” Insha continued, “We proved a point. Showed them we wouldn't take it lying down. We'll blow them all up, by God, even if we have to die.”

“Jihad,” Firdaus said, dreamily.

At home, Wapa's pleasure at the dinner table was even more pronounced. “Talked to RK today,” he said, and Zahir sat up straighter at the mention of Sanjay's father. Wapa's gloating look made his heart sink. “Going on and on about how these bombers need to be punished, expecting me to agree with him. No, Sir. I told him—I told him exactly what I thought. That if the government wouldn't protect us, then there was little wrong in Muslims protecting themselves. That shut him up.”

Umma frowned at that and whispered, “The children.”

Wapa waved his hand impatiently. “Old enough,” he said.

“Does that mean we can’t go to Sanjay’s birthday party? I promised Sajini I’d be there,” Zabi said, as always getting of the heart of the matter.

Wapa frowned a little and looked over at Zahir. Zahir felt Zabi’s fierce gaze burning into the back of his head, willing him not to back down this time.

“Sanjay asked me to come today,” he lied.

Umma laid a light hand on Wapa’s, and though he showed no indication of having felt it, the frown eased off his face. “They’re children,” she said.

“Fine. Fine, of course, you can go. They’re your friends,” he said, then talked about what others in his office thought about the blasts. Umma, looking a little worried, hoped Babi was O.K in Bombay and Wapa scolded her for worrying too much, so Zabi scolded him for not worrying enough and Zahir flicked her forearm, and she laughed and complained. It felt a little like before the Mosque.

Next Day:

Zahir hunted Sanjay down during lunch. The Hindu boys had congregated in a corridor on the fourth floor of the building, which housed the sixth and seventh graders, and were playing footy with a crushed Pepsi can. Sanjay wasn’t playing; he was crouched in a corner, watching and commenting.

“As bad with a fucking can as you are with a ball, Divesh,” Sanjay said and scandalized giggles at the obscenity erupted from the sixth graders running by. Divesh just grinned and tried unsuccessfully to flick the can to a teammate.

“Hey, Sanjay,” Zahir said and waved at the other boys. Divesh ‘Oye’ed him and promptly got the can picked off his toe.

Sanjay looked up at him, then away. “Finally talking to me, are you?”

Zahir thought this rather unfair since it was Sanjay who’d avoided him yesterday.

“Firdaus called me Hanuman’s ass today. Stupid effing northie, doesn’t know shit,”

Sanjay said. “The monkey-god isn’t mine.”

Zahir scuffed his toe, marking out an invisible line, over and again. Firdaus had only promised no physical violence. He’d always insulted Sanjay, and since the demolition of the mosque, it was only to be expected that Sanjay’s gods would be brought into it, against Firdaus’ own. My own, came the fleeting thought, and he quashed that almost immediately as he kneeled next to his friend.

“Wapa said we can come to your party.”

“How come you weren’t at the New Year’s thing?”

“Wapa didn’t feel great.”

“My dad said he seemed to feel great yesterday, now that our people are dying. Is that why you’re hanging out with Firdaus, because your dad tells you to?”

Zahir gaped. “He’s my friend.”

“Yes, he is. And he’s Muslim too. Don’t need me with him on your side, do you?”

“Sanjay,” Zahir pleaded, grasping at his friend’s sleeve. “Nothing’s changed.”

“You want me to pretend he doesn’t insult me every time I walk by him? Want me to pretend it’s all right? I don’t get it. When did your family become so faithful?”

“Wapa’s just going through a phase—”

Sanjay rose up in jerky movements, shrugging off Zahir’s tugging arm, and brushed off his pants. “Divesh, I want in,” he said. Divesh stabbed the can towards him and it smacked against Zahir’s thigh and fell still at his feet. Sanjay didn’t even look at him as he scraped it

along with his foot then stabbed at it viciously with his toe, sending it hurtling toward the other boys.

Later that afternoon, P.E found Zahir stuck in a stall in the boy's bathroom, leaning against the wall and trying to avoid touching as much of it as possible, as Firdaus sat with his feet on the seat of the toilet and smoked, emitting sporadic, guilty little coughs, when two boys walked in speaking Malayalam.

Zahir recognized the low tones of his best friend.

"...laughing," the other boy—Divesh, he recognized—said. "Bloody Paki-lovers."

"The *Mukkals* will pay," Sanjay said carelessly, and that shut Divesh up. "Kings here, paupers there. You watch. A lot of Muslim mothers will be crying by the end of the month. I mean, look what happened last night." Divesh laughed, and Sanjay sang a derogatory little ditty.

Zahir stilled when he heard Sanjay say *mukkala*. Firdaus stopped smoking long enough to give him a quizzical glance, and he knew he'd let the shock show in his face.

"What did he say?" Firdaus asked after Sanjay had left, still in full flow, the song echoing off the porcelain fixtures.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head. "Nothing."

Zabi went alone to the party that night. "You should've come," she said matter-of-factly when she returned balancing three bulky packages, carefully wrapped, containing the gifts she'd won. "Sanjay sulked all night. Told us to shut it when we were talking, too." She clucked like a disapproving mini-Umma. "Doesn't know how to behave, that one. Didn't even ask why you didn't come." She smiled at him inquisitively; They'd been surprised at his gruff refusal to go, but Wapa and Umma hadn't pressed.



They seemed preoccupied and spent a long time on the phone and listening to the news: violence had flared again in Bombay. With the bombings, it seemed, the tide of Hindu hate couldn't be contained and Bombay was burning, burning, burning away. Even if they hadn't been worried, he doubted his parents would have questioned him. No one but his sister had the audacity to pry.

"Anyone ask about your braces?" he asked, to shut her up. It did the trick. She huffed "eeediot," and left, clutching her treasures. What could he tell her? That he'd heard his best friend use a word he had heard just once before, the only time he'd seen Wapa looking lost and small. From his bedside desk, his best friend smiled up at him. He tipped over the photographs so he wouldn't have to see the careless laughing gazes.

Next morning, he got up nursing a headache, to find his father still home; Wapa usually left around seven, dropping Zabi off at the same time. Wapa and Umma were in the sitting room, whispering agitatedly, the phone cradled on Wapa's lap.

Zabi, he thought. Something must have happened in school. "What's wrong?"

Wapa, who'd thought him old enough the night he discussed RK's anger, looked over at Umma and shook his head, but she spoke anyway. "Babi's missing."

They'd stayed at her Bombay apartment for a week and Wapa had spent every night telling her that it wasn't right for a girl in her mid-twenties to be unmarried or even living in a big city by herself. People will talk, Wapa had said. She'd smiled sweetly, turned to Zabi and told her never to marry a man that Wapa chose. "Find your own," she said. Zabi, who at ten thought all boys icky except her brother, had solemnly promised her she wouldn't listen to Wapa.

"Missing, how?" he said.

“You don’t worry—” Wapa said, but Umma glared at him.

“She isn’t at her apartment. Allah knows what is happening in Bombay.”

“I told her, it isn’t safe for a young girl to be living alone,” Wapa said. “And all her neighbors, those boys? Hindus, Christian, others. *Friends*, she said. I wonder what that friendship is worth now.”

“But Wapa, she’s never been religious. Why would they care?”

Wapa gave him a look of overwhelming pity. “Muslim is Muslim, Hindu is Hindu. You can’t hide it. I told that foolish girl.”

Umma reached over and clasped Zahir’s right hand between her warm ones. “You don’t worry. Go to school. It will be O.K, God willing. Everything will be all right. Just like it was.” She kissed his hand and told him to go get ready for school.

Roles had reversed. Today, the Muslim boys looked fearful and the Hindus smirked. Asma Ma’am scolded Sanjay and Divesh for their furious whispers the first hour. Zahir noticed them glance Firdaus’ way occasionally. At lunch, as Firdaus left the room, Sanjay flung an obscenity his way. Zahir was too far away to hear it; he only saw Firdaus’ amazed face as he turned back to glance at Sanjay, then him. Sanjay stood up and Zahir watched them, dark, light; thin and tall, strong and small; separate for an instant before Sanjay threw himself at Firdaus.

Zahir was up on his feet in an instant, but the rest of the class was faster and he had to push his way to the center of the scuffle, where Firdaus stood clutching Sanjay’s collar, left hand raised to deliver a blow. He pushed ahead right up to the two of them, meaning to put a stop to it, only Sanjay, who hadn’t seen him, said *fucking Mukalla* while struggling against Firdaus’ hand. Sanjay’s lip bled freely, but his look was crazed and contemptuous as he kept repeating the word

to the uncomprehending Firdaus. Contemptuous, like the taxi driver's. Crazy like the looks of those Zahir imagined attacked Babi. Zahir pushed aside Firdaus and pulled tugged Sanjay's collar into his hand. He saw the other's eyes widen.

“What are you doing?” Sanjay said, looking back and forth between Zahir's clutching knuckles and his face.

Zahir punched him, so hard that his hand hurt, but he kept hitting and it was only when Sanjay's head cracked against the table that he realized what he'd done, only when Firdaus grasped his shoulder and said, “That's it, kill the bastard.”

He could hear the catcalls and the exhortations in the background—“show the Hanuman-fucker”; “give him one more”—but faintly, because of the buzz in his head, because of the warm grip of Firdaus' hand, because of the look on Sanjay's face. One of the Hindu boys crouched at Sanjay's side as if to shield him and Divesh and the rest fanned out behind Sanjay, staring at Zahir like they didn't know who he was.

## FENG SHUI

She'd been deciding between two models of washing machines, an earthy brown front-loading one and a Krishna-blue top-loading machine, when the phone chimed with the first text message.

Amma where r u? Amma Im scared.

“Madam would like to hear some details?” asked the salesman, a scrawny boy, barely out of his teens, with a wispy-thin mustache he kept smoothing down importantly between questions.

“Yes, Yes,” Revathi said distractedly as the phone buzzed again.

Amma. Amma can I come home?

“This, Madam, is a new one. Godrej, domestic. Top class.”

The top-loading machine was less efficient considering her needs, Revathi knew, but it reminded her of the soothing blue walls of her home, the blue of the deity—

Amma, Call me. Please.

Amma please call.

“This is unbearable,” she said, startling the boy. “I’ll have to come back later. Tomorrow, perhaps?” she said hurriedly and, seeing the fly-trap pose of his mouth, embarrassedly. “What time do you open? Will you be in?”

“Of course, Madam. Tomorrow nine we open,” he said, still ingratiating, and Revathi knew he’d sized her up. Her silk Kanchipuram sari, the thick gold bangles jangling on her wheatish arms, and the plump Gucci bag her son had sent over from America kept the salesman’s smile pleasant. “Ask for Raghu, Madam.” He tailed her to the door, clutching it open as she braced herself and stepped out of the well-ventilated store into the muggy heat of late-April Mangalore, air thick with humidity from the nearby ocean.

She strode a few feet and came to rest under the shade of a clothes-store's canopy, away from the door. The phone had buzzed three times in that short walk, and when she pressed the only number in her cell's phonebook, Sanjana answered on the first ring.

Revathi eyed her watch. 11:30: What class was the girl supposed to be in? Orthodontics?

"Amma?" Sanjana's voice quavered and Revathi wondered why in times of distress her daughter regressed into her child-voice.

"What is *wrong*?" Revathi winced. *Be gentle with her*, RK had said, *be calm*. "Is something the matter?"

She heard a whimper over the crackle of the line, then a barely stifled sob. "Can I come home?"

"What's wrong?" she asked again and closed her eyes against the pressure arrowing through her forehead. She tried imagining she was teaching (but she had quit, for the girl) and talking to a particularly slow student. The pressure inside her skull grew, and she couldn't bring herself to open her eyes, even though she was afraid she'd draw attention.

Orthodontics lab, she heard. Someone hadn't been cooperative, something. Can't do it, won't, don't want to. Revathi pressed the fingers of her free hand to her forehead.

"Sanjana, stop it. Stressing doesn't help," Revathi said. "Papa talked to the dean, remember? He said any help you need, he'll give you." But, on the other end of the phone, Sanjana had stopped trying to hold her tears in. "All right, okay. I'll be there, soon. All right?" Revathi pretended her words were to her son, Sanjay, four flights away in America, and that this was the one phone call she got from him each month, and her voice came out falsely mild, the way it did with him. When the girl sniffled a yes, Revathi hung up.

Revathi opened her eyes to the snarling mid-morning traffic: tooting cars; auto-rickshaws and bikes maneuvering through the spaces between the larger vehicles; and buses with their destinations scrawled in Kannada, which, despite her six month long stay in the city, Revathi could barely read. She wished, not for the first time, that she'd sent her daughter to a college in their own state, Kerala, where Revathi could navigate more freely, could understand the language. Or that she'd done as Sanjay suggested and let Sanjana continue in a Saudi University in Jeddah. Perhaps if the girl had been allowed to continue in the city where she'd been raised, the city where she'd been happy—No, it was no use getting caught up in the past. Revathi clutched her purse closer, moved to the edge of the pavement and hailed one of the passing three-wheelers. Seven rupees minimum plus mileage—how far to the college? She tried calculating as she flayed her hand furiously, and one of the rickshaws slipped through the slow-moving traffic to her side.

The wiry driver barely noticed as Revathi struggled into the open back seat ahead of two teens who'd decided her rickshaw was fair game. She glared at the boys once she seated herself, and they frowned back insolently, in a way that would have earned her son a clipping on the ear.

“Sidhaganga Dental College,” she said. “Hurry.” The word had barely left her mouth before the driver revved up the vehicle, causing her to jerk and clutch at the back of his seat and a little of him—the sweaty brown back of his shirt.

The journey took twice the time it should have because the driver stopped at one of the small roadside temples with her, his first customer, in tow to ask Lord Ganesha's favor for the day. Revathi would normally have been pleased at his piety (though she noticed that he hadn't turned the meter on—a sure sign that he would overcharge), but as she waited for him to finish propitiating the god, smashing a coconut in front of the temple and applying yellow sandalwood

paste to the windshield, she thought of her crying girl with impatience, and immediately after, guilt and fear rushed in. She silently begged forgiveness of the elephant-god, and when the driver got back in, she didn't, as she wanted, ask him to hurry.

“Wait,” she said, when he finally pulled past the gate of the college and sputtered to a stop right in front of the administration building.

“How long? Meter will keep running,” he said.

She didn't point out that he had never turned it on. “Five minutes, ten minutes.”

The girl was seated on a bench outside the Dean's office, hands folded primly in her lap, and though she was older, and much taller and broader now than Revathi herself (far too tall, Revathi fretted, worrying about probable grooms), Revathi remembered the knobby-kneed five year old who had sat in just the same sullen way for the school bus every morning.

One of the peons dawdling outside the Dean's door nodded deferentially. Revathi had become a familiar fixture over six months. “Sanjana,” Revathi said when she stood just in front of the girl and the dull gaze fixed on her. “Come, come. Let's go.”

The girl slouched to a stand, and hunched under the weight of her bag till her face was almost level with Revathi's own. “Stand straight,” Revathi snapped, adjusting the bag's straps against Sanjana's shoulders, and wrinkling her nose at the sour smell. “My God, how can you stand to be like this?” This morning the girl had been particularly bad-tempered and had refused to even take a shower.

“I want to go home,” Sanjana said.

*Control yourself, don't snap at everything she says.* Revathi shut her eyes and let the memory of her husband's measured tones calm her. “Yes, let's go.”

They didn't speak on the ride back, didn't touch. Revathi thought the driver frowned at the smell. It was nearly one when they pulled up in front of the apartment complex, and Revathi's makeup trickled down her face in salty, chalky drops.

"One hundred rupees, Maydum," the driver said.

Revathi urged Sanjana out of the rickshaw. The watchman, watching bemusedly, approached them with a smile. "Go, go upstairs. I'll be there soon," Revathi said to her daughter.

"Eighty five rupees, Maydum," the driver said, wary gaze now flickering to the watchman, who stood close enough for Revathi to smell the coconut oil slicking his hair.

Still too much, but she could do nothing. "Could you make sure the girl gets on the elevator?" she asked the watchman when the man's soft belly grazed her elbow.

"Yes, of course," he said, with an ingratiating smile that didn't reach his beetle-black eyes. A thief's eyes, Revathi had told Sanjana. She hadn't liked the man from the minute they'd first visited the apartment complex, but RK had been in a hurry to get back to Saudi Arabia and the apartment had been the best they could get on such short notice.

By the time Revathi had paid the driver and got upstairs—having thanked the watchman and felt his gaze trace her steps to the elevator—Sanjana sat slumped against the door.

"Get up," Revathi hissed. The halls lacked privacy. Every morning she could hear the newly-married couple opposite them coo happily to each other as they left for work. Again, she had to heft the girl up, straining against the other's inertia, while trying to stay aware of the sounds about her. With one hand holding Sanjana up, Revathi fumbled and unlocked the door, shouldering it open, and half-carried Sanjana to the lone couch at the center of the room, a worn blue one the previous occupants had left behind.

"Sit," Revathi said. "I'll get something to eat."



Revathi had cooked lunch before she left—chappatis, because rice made the girl sleepy, and, as a treat, chicken curry. The girl constantly complained about the vegetarian fare but she'd gained weight since she started taking her medication. Revathi brought the food over and placed it on Sanjana's lap.

Sanjana eyed the plate with little animation, and Revathi, who rarely had to pester Sanjana to eat, grew irritated. "You want it. You're not that sick."

The girl reached out hesitantly, tore off a flat strip of chappati and dipped it in the thick brown curry. "You don't know how it is," she said as she brought the hand to her mouth.

But I do you silly child, Revathi wanted to say. I know the pain tearing your head apart, I know how everything—your husband's not noticing, the children being particularly ill-tempered—seems like an excuse to spiral out of control. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"With you?" The girl arched an eyebrow.

"Don't be stupid, of course you can talk to me," Revathi said.

"I am not stupid," Sanjana said.

"You just behave that way then." *Don't don't don't*, her husband's voice intoned, and she could almost see him, touch him, his wiry graying hair, curled into silver springs, thinning in the middle, could almost feel the wet, insistent mouth against the back of her neck.

Revathi said no more but watched the girl eat at her snail's pace until Sanjana held out her plate, half-full. While Sanjana slumped deeper into the sofa, Revathi devoured the rest in the kitchen by the sink.

"I'm going to take a nap. It'll be better if you do too," Revathi said when she was done, and placed the plate in the sink before pressing forward to the bedroom at the end of the hallway.

The girl didn't follow and Revathi stormed back into the living room.

“C’mon,” Revathi snapped in her teacher-voice, holding out a peremptory hand. “You need some sleep.”

“Are you angry?” Sanjana asked timidly when Revathi loomed in front of her.

Revathi stilled, shook her head, and traced the curve of Sanjana’s jaw lightly. “No darling, I’m not angry with you. You are sleepy, no? Come.”

When Sanjana finally fell asleep—she’d tumbled straight onto the bed, without brushing, changing or showering, so that Revathi would have to change the sheets later—Revathi pressed her lips to the girl’s damp forehead, then eyed the ceiling fan with annoyance as it swished on without prompting. The power was back on. Living in Jeddah they’d gotten soft, used to the casual comforts of Air Conditioners and uninterrupted power service, and now Revathi felt the summer keenly.

Revathi crept out of the room, to the old couch, sighing as she sank into it, straight onto the TV remote. Nothing in its proper place, she thought as she clutched the remote, even in a place this bare. Other than the couch and TV right in front of it, the only notable item in the room was the god-house near the screen-door on the right of the room, the one where all the gods charged with her family’s welfare resided: Krishna, Ganesha, Ayyapa, Shiva. She murmured their names, looked at the wall-clock, then around at the emptiness and thought, bare necessities.

This wasn’t how she had envisioned things two years earlier, while living in Jeddah with her husband and daughter. Sitting at the high school graduation ceremony, gracefully inclining her head at fellow teachers and friends as Sanjana, Head Girl, bronze medalist, strode onto the stage to receive her medal and graduation certificate, Revathi had felt content. It was all a blessed surprise.

When they'd first let Revathi see her daughter after the delivery, her tiny torso, arms, and legs covered in bloody bruises in place of missing skin, Revathi had believed the worst, even though the doctors comforted her by giving the ghastly sight a name—Aplasia Cutis. She'd flown home to deliver her child and RK had been stuck in Saudi Arabia, saying he couldn't leave in the middle of the last month of the financial calendar. Afraid she would lose her child despite the doctors' reassurances, and secretly fearing the blood-red flaws and missing navel owed to the medicines she'd consumed, Revathi had begged her father to visit the Namboodiri, the astrologer who had predicted Revathi was destined for outward prosperity and inward turmoil—long before a mental health physician said the same.

Father had told Revathi the story so often, she felt like she'd been there with him. How he'd rushed to the Namboodiri's house at lunch time, forgetting propriety, yelling, "Namboodiri, Namboodiri, will she die? Will my granddaughter die?"

How the curtain separating the living room from the inner sanctum had been pushed aside as the Namboodiri, tall, gaunt, imperiously fair, had stepped into the room, wiping his mouth, looked at her father and said, "*Marikum*. She will die."

Revathi, though she knew how this story ended, still felt her heart speed up, even now, whenever she thought of the pale old man whose familiarity with the fates she'd been in awe of.

"She will die," the Namboodiri reaffirmed, "but not yet. Not for a long time. I studied your daughter—her children will outlive her." And he disappeared behind the curtain once more, leaving her drained father to make the trip back to relay the good news.

The doctors had continued to work furiously over the next few days grafting skin, fashioning a navel, making her daughter whole, and even though at night, her mind, sick since

the birth, played tricks on her, Revathi had latched onto the Namboodiri's words. *Not yet, not yet, not yet...*

The girl had not only survived, she had flourished, a happy, mostly healthy child, who never backed off from fights with her brother, or from stating her jutting-jawed opinion. Sanjana at seventeen had been more worldly and cosmopolitan than her sheltered mother had been even after her eldest child's birth. So Revathi had been blindsided when, three months into her college career, Sanjana proved to be just like her.

Every week, they'd call the girl up at least twice at her hostel. The first time she failed to answer their call, RK had dismissed it easily, saying she was off somewhere having fun with friends. Revathi had felt troubled. "Something is wrong," she had said. "I have a feeling."

"In thirty years, darling, have you ever had a positive feeling?" RK had laughed.

But she'd been right, hadn't she?

She did admire her daughter's resourcefulness. The girl had managed to hide her hospitalization for almost a week.

"Stress, it must be," the doctor, a fresh-faced man, had said when they met, an hour after their hastily-arranged flight had lodged them in Mangalore. "Moving from a sheltered home to a hostel, from a metropolis to a smaller city, the stress of adjustment." The girl had been found in her hostel room the week of her first sessional exams, hysterical, and when a tense lady warden had accosted her, she'd felt the full force of the girl's physical strength. Afterwards Sanjana had stopped speaking altogether. "No history, yes, of stress related illness? For her or the family?"

"None," Revathi had lied, while her husband sat beside her, stiff and silent. He hadn't seen the point of not telling the doctor—"the man is a doctor, Revathi," he had said, enunciating

slowly—but the hospital was part of the medical college, and word would spread, and Sanjana’s friends would know, and she wouldn’t be able to return and pretend that nothing had changed.

RK didn’t see the bigger picture. He said times were different, and hiding illnesses did no good: Had it done any good for them? Wouldn’t it have helped *him* if he’d been told before their marriage? Revathi, however, believed in her father’s mantra: husband-wife-children. Family frailties could be displayed to no one else. She would make a concession, she told RK. Unlike him, her future son-in-law would be told of the girl’s problems, all the problems, from the beginning. RK then said there would be no future son-in-law with Sanjana’s illness and they’d fought and Revathi had wept until he agreed to do things her way. They had ended up traveling to Bangalore by train and visited the renowned National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences. The doctor had been patient, kind, and reassuring.

“Mental illness is like any other illness,” he’d said, “treatable and curable. But in our country...Still, you’re doing the right thing, coming for help. You don’t know how many families just pretend not to see what’s under their noses.”

Revathi had smiled primly at the doctor and shot her husband a triumphant look. She *was* a good mother. Her daughter would get treated and no harm would come to her reputation from the wagging mouths of well-wishing gossips.

It was so much more than she’d gotten, and the doctor’s gentle, firm voice had convinced her that everything would be fine. She’d quit her job, packed a few bags (leaving most of her treasured possessions behind) and moved into this apartment with the girl. Just as the doctor had said, she would make everything fine.

But sitting on the bare sofa while the girl napped, Revathi didn’t feel quite as cheerful as she had. As the yearly finals approached and class pressures grew, the girl had morphed once

again into the depressed being Revathi had heard described by roommates, the one that preceded the hysteria. The illness had only subsided, waiting its chance to rise again. Even advanced medicine seemed unable to cope with the girl's fears, unable to get rid of them once and for all. Instead, every little stress served as a potential trigger, and Revathi wondered if this would be the girl's fate, lurching from episode to episode, the real, laughing, cheerful girl forever haunted by the fear of the next recurrence.

Adding to Revathi's problems, RK, reliable, rock-like RK, had run into trouble. The Danish company Maersk had bought out the shipping company where RK worked, and in absorbing the department into their own, had decided they didn't want to keep a man two years short of retirement age. Two years short of retirement age, with an unmarried, unhealthy daughter, and a son of marriageable age with no degree and no prospects.

Revathi let her fingers dance over the remote as her troubled gaze fell on one of the few fittings in the room—the clock. And then it struck her. “Feng Shui!” She'd almost forgotten her favorite show.

Ravinder Chadda's square grinning visage greeted her as the TV clicked on. The camera zoomed back from him and, in the background, Revathi could see an extraordinarily furnished room—the polished wood tables holding glittering knickknacks, the curving white staircase, and human-sized, bejeweled bust of the yellow elephant god placed at the curving foot of the staircase. The room reeked of ostentation, belonging no doubt to some rich business family who wanted still more happiness. Which explained Chadda's presence: to use his ancient craft to better their fortune.

She'd tried describing the show to Sanjay, with little satisfaction.

“People are dumb enough to fall for that? Moving crap around gives you luck?”

“It is tradition,” she’d said, and explained about her own childhood home and how it had been built. “Vaastu Shastha, we call it in our tongue. And watch your language, don’t speak like a fishmonger.”

“So what does this charlatan do? Mix East and East-er? Indo-Japanese?”

Revathi knew Feng Shui was Chinese. “You think all people are fools who don’t agree with you. These are educated, well-to-do people, and he’s on TV. If he was a charlatan, don’t you think he would have been found out?”

“By those *educated well-to-do people*?” He’d repeated her phrase with disdain and to placate her she asked about his furniture, eager to provide an example of Chadda’s work. “Furniture?” he’d scoffed, “I can’t afford furniture, Mother.” He seemed almost proud of breaking her heart, the foolish boy whose education and expenses they were still paying for, and she hadn’t tried to persuade him anymore.

Chadda was a handsome man, with a strong, sure jaw and sharp eyes. One had to watch him in the act, see the confidence and passion, to perceive his power.

When she’d been six, her father, on the verge of building his house, had consulted the *ashaaris*, traditional carpenters, on the floor plan. Revathi had watched the *ashaaris* work on the land, their purposeful strides and gazes, musing frowns, the way they searched for that point, the one point around which everything else had to be built. There was a science to it—No, something even greater than science, which took into account Nature, her grand immutability and the hands of gods in everything.

She hadn’t tried explaining, not to her son or her husband, who’d only agree with her to make her feel better.

As Chadda turned to the camera and explained the discomfiting aura caused by the arrangement of items and colors in the room, Revathi let go of her concerns regarding her family, and let the rich, reassuring voice bind her in its spell.

A week after her unsuccessful shopping expedition, Revathi still hadn't gone back to pick a machine, still had to depend on the bent old woman who'd come to the door with a gapped-toothed grin to take clothes off for washing, washing that never attained the thorough cleanliness Revathi longed for. As for the girl—she stayed home the rest of the week, medicated, and alternating between tears and a stillness that scared Revathi: Even as a child, sickly and sullen, Sanjana had always been noisy. In sleep she would mumble and toss and make incoherent little noises. But now, Sanjana slept motionless, and if it weren't for her drawn-out breathing, Revathi wouldn't know the difference between her daughter and a corpse. Used to RK's sputtering snores Revathi found it hard to fall asleep in the stillness. She had taken to clasping her daughter's warmth to her fiercely. And the medicines ensured the girl never knew.

RK called regularly to check on them, but Revathi, knowing the stress he was already facing, tried to keep her words light and pleasing, even when he told her with a defeated voice that the sofa set they'd bought two years ago with company money would be bequeathed to the next tenants—the sofa set she'd selected, and the one they would have been allowed to keep if he'd held onto his job another two years. Revathi couldn't leave the girl alone so every day she watched reruns of her show on TV, compared her bare accommodations to the clutter that Chadda lovingly molded, thought of her own lovingly cluttered home back in Jeddah, with the cream cupboards full of her little trinkets—her favorite crystal figures, her collages of the children from birth till awkward adolescence, the tiny mementos friends brought back over from



their trips abroad—replicas of Mickey and Lady Liberty among others, places she'd wanted to visit but deferred in order to cater to her children and her husband.

A week, and other than the washerwoman, Revathi's only visitor had been the delivery boy from the neighboring grocery store. Restless, and seeing the girl had grown a little more animated, Revathi cajoled Sanjana into going back to school. She promised to keep her cell on her at all times, just *in case you feel like coming home*. Finally, with only a few muttered protests, the girl had trudged off to the bus stop, the few defiant looks and words she tossed her mother's way pleasing Revathi, because they harked back to better times.

Despite her eagerness to get out of the house, Revathi spent the morning scrubbing the floors, folding and refolding the clothes the old crone brought, and then watched a new episode of her show—a “New Year special,” because of the approaching Hindu New Year. Revathi gasped when Chadda, forehead adorned with three streaks of yellow sandalwood paste, preached the importance of having a god-mask near the entrance to the home, positioned as the first item one would see on entry. In Jeddah, she'd had the face-masks of Kathakali dancers on the living room wall, because she'd been homesick at the beginning of her marriage and every time she glanced at those heavily made up, multicolored faces, she'd brooded less. Here was an example she could relay to her son! She only hoped to remember it till his next call.

“The color of the mask is important,” Chadda said. Each color had its own meaning, its own mood. “Yellow, for example, is a cheerful color, not only in Feng Shui, but our own faith. Yellow is the color of the sun, of our crops and of course,” he added with a gentle, embarrassed nod as he ran his fingers near his forehead, indicating the streaks, “faith. So a yellow picture of a god for the entrance, a wonderful addition.”

Chadda continued giving advice and Revathi listened greedily, stopping only to call Sanjana's cell and making sure she was all right.

After the special, Revathi hustled to the appliance store, selected the washing machine in dark blue ( because, as Chadda said, it was a strong color) and decided the pleasing upturn of events warranted a temple visit. While living abroad, she had had to restrict herself to squeezing all her temple visits into a month's vacation time. Now she had easier access, but the unfamiliar city, the girl's health, and her own hesitancy had ensured that visits rarely took place. After a lifetime of having had men—her father, her brother, and husband—ease her expeditions outside the home, taking the initiative didn't come easily. Only in the last month had she begun to make visits to places other than her daughter's college.

The temple felt remarkably busy for a workday afternoon, perhaps because of the approaching Hindu New Year. Revathi was enveloped by the expected, almost mindless chants of old women seated in corners; the commands of morose priests; the shoving and pushing by those, workers and students, on their lunch breaks in to quickly propitiate the gods; or, in the case of some boys, to view the pretty girls. Usually the familiarity of these sights and sounds would ease Revathi's mind into the welcome tranquility she needed to pray, but today she found herself finding fault with everything: the raucousness of the chanting old women, the impatience of the harried priests who tore her money from her hand and didn't bother glancing at her as she recited her daughter's details—date, year, time of birth—for the special prayers. When the priest recited the prayers, instead of praying by him, Revathi took in the almost rote way he said the words. Even the idols looked too much like the priest, fatly content, eyeing her impersonally. Chadda, she thought, seemed more interested in people, and he was watching from a TV!

She got home later than expected, the sun a sinking red in the horizon as she made her way to the elevator and when she opened the door to the apartment she was struck by the dead stillness of the flat. The god-house sat unlighted despite the hour, and Revathi, in a confused corner of her mind, realized that for the first time since moving in, she would miss the evening prayers at home. With a presentiment of doom, she hurried to check up on the girl.

Sanjana wasn't there.

"Sanjana," Revathi said, hoping to miraculously hear an answering voice. She hurried back to the living room, walked past the god-house to the screen door, pulled it open and stepped into the balcony. Downstairs she could see the little children from the apartment building playing, their laughter light and airy. But she caught no sight of her daughter's tall frame or bobbed hair. Where could she be, she thought and looked up towards the roof. Her heart froze. The end of a familiar yellow scarf blew in the wind.

Revathi ran.

In her haste she forgot to close the screen door, the front door, forgot that the apartment building had an elevator and took the stairs instead. As she tore open the door to the terrace, her heart hammered in her mouth and she clutched at the stitch at her side.

Sanjana stood where Revathi had hoped she'd be, at one end of the roof, hunched over the parapet, the ends of her yellow dupatta whipping about her, slapping her shoulder and back.

"Sanjana," Revathi said. "Sanjana."

It took an inordinately long time for the girl to turn. Her eyes looked feverish, her skin flushed, her smile wider than Revathi had seen in a long time.

"Ma," she said. "It's so nice here. So nice and windy." She laughed, a laugh full and peeling and strangely discomfiting. "I don't know why I was afraid of heights."

“Come here,” Revathi said, failing to temper the anxiety in her voice.

“You come here Ma. Don’t be afraid.”

“This *Instant*.”

The girl shrugged, turned away and dipped her body over the waist-high concrete.

“Please.” Revathi heard the word quicken and break at the end.

“No!” Sanjana dipped even lower and raised her hands above her head.

Oh, where were her men when she needed them? RK or Sanjay, who could just stride over to the girl and pull her back. Revathi inched forward, not looking out at the expanse of city in front of her, concentrating only on her daughter. When she gripped Sanjana’s arm, the girl looked over her shoulder at Revathi with a pleased expression. “Look down, Ma.”

“We’re going downstairs,” Revathi said. The girl looked angry and Revathi clutched her even tighter. “*Now*.” For a second, from the look on Sanjana’s face, Revathi feared her “loud voice” hadn’t been enough, but the girl straightened and turned, shrugged her arm free and walked ahead of her to the door that led back downstairs to safety.

“Why are you acting like this?” Sanjana said. “I simply wanted some air.”

Revathi wrapped a protective arm around the girl’s back. Her daughter was much stronger than she was. “My fault. I’m foolish. I worry. Please come down.”

The girl gave her an injured look but let Revathi lead her back to the apartment.

Revathi got Sanjana to undress and climb into bed with difficulty. Sanjana paced about, claiming she wasn’t tired and didn’t feel like sleeping and Revathi coaxed and threatened until Sanjana climbed into bed. As Sanjana lay there, Revathi curled by her on the bed and ran a soothing hand over the short, curling hair on her daughter’s head. “How were things in school? Did your friends ask why you seemed so happy?”

“Good. I just got bored sitting, so I went upstairs. ” She batted her mother’s hand away.

Revathi prayed that Sanjana’s friends hadn’t noticed her state. “Sleep,” she said, “sleep, sleep.” She intoned the words like a chant and Sanjana gave her an insulted look at first about being babied, but soon Revathi could hear nothing but the rise and fall of her daughter’s heavy breaths. Revathi cursed herself. Having spent all her time worrying about the girl’s depression, she’d forgotten the other danger—the manic stage, the Gemini twin.

Revathi had lost her best friend during a crest of her own mania. A girl she had taken under her wing in Jeddah, the wife of a protégée of her husband’s. Feeling manically happy, she’d called her friend up and talked, talked of things she could only half-remember—vituperations against her husband for not understanding (poor loving R.K, how could she even think such things of him?); her father for not getting her treatment. What still made her blush, however, was what she’d said in the end—in the deluded high she’d felt like a goddess, and she’d claimed to be so, said she was the reincarnation of Saraswati, goddess of wisdom. *I am god*, she remembered saying. She didn’t know if it was that statement which had cost her the friendship or something else, some words she couldn’t remember. It was the knowledge that someone else thought these horrible thoughts—against husband, father, and gods—were actually her own that kept her from trying to fix the rupture.

She got off the bed and walked into the living room, feeling a false calm envelop her. She would complain to the watchman about the door to the terrace being left unlocked, and cite safety for the small children. She would be called a busybody but her daughter would be safer.

Revathi’s head ached the next morning, and Sanjana, still feverishly chirpy, said as she slurped up her morning bowl of cereal, “You sound slow, Ma.”

“I’m not slow, you’re in overdrive,” Revathi said. “Stop laughing. Please stop laughing. You’re staying home today.”

The girl wouldn’t hear of it. Her spoon clattered into the cereal bowl. “I have to go to school, it’s almost exam time.”

“I say you’re staying home, and that’s that.”

“I can’t! I’ve already missed too many days and the teachers—” Sanjana broke off and stared at her mother, eyes pleading. Revathi, knowing that forcing a decision could only result in a swift descent into the silence of the prior week, consented unhappily, after extracting the cell number of one of Sanjana’s friends.

Once she’d seen off the girl to the bus, Revathi got out her prayer book and sat down in front of the god-house. The elephant-god eyed her complacently, and Revathi broke off her chanting. If the girl had jumped, really jumped, while she’d been out *praying*....She placed the book down in front of the god-house. There was no comfort to be found here. Whenever she told her children to pray, she’d tell them to picture a still flame or a favored deity in their heads, but the pictures that rose in her mind when she closed her eyes were of her daughter, of peeling laughter and of a yellow dupatta fluttering over the parapet; instead of silence, her own voice, charged and excited, proclaiming, I am god, I am god.

The bell pealed and she rose quickly, grateful to be freed of such horrible thoughts. The watchman stood just outside, smiling ingratiatingly. “Maydum, workers have come with washing machine.”

“Of course,” she said, “please show them the way.”

The elevator proved too narrow to handle the machine’s girth, so the men, with the watchman acting as cheerleader and sergeant, wrestled the unwieldy metal box up the three

flights of stairs. Revathi, standing at her door, could hear the muffled curses and oaths of the men hefting it to her apartment.

As they carried it to the storeroom and installed the various fittings, with the watchman standing back, watching them like the man of the house, Revathi dialed the number she'd gotten from her daughter. A boy's hesitant voice bade her hello, and quickly assured her that Sanjana was all right. She needn't have kept him on the phone longer but the presence of the workmen, with their coarse muttering, their strange earthy smells, and insolent stares unnerved her, so she continued to question him, minutely, till the boy politely rung off. Fortunately the men were almost done, and in any case they didn't look to her for answers. The watchman imperiously commanded them, and saw them to the door when they were finished, pocketing half the tip she handed over to him to give them.

The watchman turned and she smiled tremulously. The gods had deserted her the day before and now she was alone with a man with the eyes of a thief. His little eyes took in the vast bareness of the room, and Revathi noticed disappointment in those calculating orbs. "Maydum, if you want good place to find furniture, I can tell."

Revathi felt her smile freeze in place.

"This is no good," he proclaimed as he stepped out the door. "Should be a proper home."

Revathi closed the door behind him and shuddered as she turned. The place stunk of sweat. She crossed over to the screen door and opened it to air out the room. Proper home.

She disliked the watchman intensely, so why did his words sting? Because it was true. They hadn't had time to do any shopping, buy anything and at the time Revathi hadn't minded. But what if, what if Sanjana's misery grew due to the utilitarian bareness, the Spartan flatness of this apartment? She thought back to the lush carpet in Jeddah, where she could catch tufts of

soft-gold thread in between her toes. She thought of her little crystal swans and toads, the bronze little Statue of Liberty and the coffee mugs Sanjay had brought over featuring the names of men he claimed were the funniest in the world—Conan and Jon something. And her beloved sofa set. RK felt bad that their not getting the sofa set made her unhappy. He didn't understand the time and love she'd invested in poring over brochures and materials—the best color to complement her carpets and cupboards, the best texture. Sanjay sometimes grew irritated with her descriptions of furniture, cost, look. He thought it was materialistic, but then, he had grown westernized and didn't understand love for objects had everything to do with love for self in the world.

When Sanjana arrived from school, less chirpy but still smiling, she was met by a mother with the hard glint of decision in her eye. “We're going shopping. Go change,” Revathi announced, grabbing her daughter's hand in order to hurry her.

She could've chosen the newly opened mall, with its glitzy familiarity, but Sanjana insisted they go to the bazaar.

“Think of how fun it'll be, Ma.”

If Revathi weren't in a hurry, she would have marveled at the calm balance conveyed by her daughter's tone. Sanjana, like her father, thrived off of haggling, something Revathi had no taste for, the reason why she usually avoided the bazaar.

“C'mon,” Sanjana wheedled, clutching her mother's arm, and Revathi noted, despite the smile, how strained her daughter's eyes looked.

“Fine,” Revathi said, and her heart sang as her daughter squeezed her arm.

They needed to change buses twice before they reached the bazaar. The place was crowded with bodies and stalls. Everywhere they moved, people pressed in on them and Sanjana



grasped her mother's hand and clung tight, looking around in wonder at the raucous vendors chanting the names of their wares.

“Look Ma,” Sanjana said, “your show has its own shop.” Squeezed between two busy stalls, an empty shop: Feng Shui Furnitures. Excitement coursed through Revathi as they stepped through its threshold. The store's interior was lit by oil lamps and suffused with the smell of incense sticks. The lone salesman stood near the sofas and smiled distantly at them, his austere face at odds with the brightness of the furniture and potted plants about him. Near the door were many little masks, of different deities, from Hindu gods to Jesus.

Revathi chose a smiling mask of Shiva that seemed popular in Mangalore, partly because the picture was so different from the heavy-lidded, stern-lipped incarnation prevalent elsewhere, but mainly because the moon-faced god with a sunny smile and well-groomed black moustache reminded her of RK.

The salesman, seeing their serious intent, approached them. “I'll take this,” Revathi said, “How much?” When he quoted an amount that Revathi would've found exorbitant normally, she said “fine” before Sanjana could begin haggling. The wounded expression on her daughter's face didn't deter her. “Why do you have these plants?” She gestured with a sweeping movement of her right arm and the jangling of the row of thick gold bangles on her arm caught his eye.

He explained the connection of plants and Feng Shui and Revathi wondered aloud which one she should get.

“You don't have a green thumb, Ma,” Sanjana said.

“A little watering I'm capable of,” Revathi said dismissively. “I have all the time in the world now.”

The sofas came next, and here Revathi was disappointed at first, finding none of the same quality as her beloved set, but she finally settled on a green one. Green, she remembered Chadda saying, was a calming color. Green would help the girl sleep better, not toss and turn worried, about class, about friends, her mind, her brother, her son, her husband or the roof, yes green it would be.

The man quoted a sum, too high once again, and Revathi found it rather amusing that she didn't care. As she whipped out her checkbook, she thought how surprised RK would be. He always accused her of penny-pinching.

The salesman stepped closer to her and lowered his voice to a confidential whisper, "If Madam will pay cash, I can reduce the price."

Revathi eyed Sanjana in triumph. See, she didn't need to haggle to get good prices. Sanjana was busy poking and prodding the sofa, with pursed lips.

As she rummaged through her purse, however, Revathi grew dismayed. She didn't have enough money. "I'll go get cash and be back" she said.

The shopkeeper looked hesitant, afraid to let a promising customer out the door.

"Don't worry," she said in a bracing voice. "I *will* be back." She grabbed a hold of Sanjana and dragged her out.

"Ma, those sofas suck. They're not strong, won't last. What are you doing?"

Revathi's eyes were drawn to a stall bursting with richly textured oriental rugs. "We need to get some of those too."

Sanjana's eyes widened. "Ma, the banks will be closed now. We can't get all this today."

"Yes, we can," Revathi said with a pleased smile. "I'll pawn these." She raised her arms and shook her gold bangles. "Come reclaim them later." Revathi, ignoring her daughter's

protests about those being her wedding jewelry, pulled at Sanjana and started into a run, not bothering to apologize to those she accidentally hit, and she had just started to feel the quickening thuds of her heartbeats when Sanjana pulled her to a stop. The girl looked frightened.

“Amma, stop it.”

“*What?*” Momentarily, the chatter around them lowered to a murmur, and Revathi blushed under the startled, mildly curious eyes turned her way.

“Amma,” the girl said in an urgent whisper, “let’s go home, *please*. We’ll buy the all this later, we’ll come later.” Revathi stared. The helpless terror on her daughter’s face was so different from the mild puzzlement on her husband’s or the irritation on her son’s, and Revathi felt tears flood into her eyes even though the last thing she wanted to do was lose control in front of the child who most depended on her. The last burden she wanted to place on her daughter’s deceptively broad shoulders were tears, but she couldn’t help their overflowing, couldn’t help wipe out the helpless look on Sanjana’s face.

I’m sorry, she said, and now it was her voice that cracked. I’m so sorry, but the words didn’t come out right because alarm turned to fear in the girl’s eye. Revathi could see Sanjana mouthing something but all she heard was the rushing in her ears and all she saw were the black spots dancing in her eyes before she fell, limply, into her daughter’s cradling arms.

## THE MUTAWA KILLERS

The plan, the way Pummy put it, was to trail a member of the Religious Police till we caught him alone and unaware, then bludgeon him, over and again, till the slick blood matted his hair and seeped through his white headgear, punch him till the shears hidden beneath his white thobe clawed into his flesh, slam shoes and hands and knives into yielding flesh till he begged—not to Allah or the Prophet or to any angel, but to us—and to slice his head off when he'd finally been humbled.

It started with one of Pummy's disastrous ideas. He'd wanted to visit the beach, with his father out of town, driving the boss some place cooler; and his mother, tired belly swollen for the ninth time, blind to his doings. So instead of waiting till lunch as usual, we cornered some sheep—sixth and seventh graders—to arrange funds for our trip, and scaled school, all four of us. We were on our way to Pummy's house, through the heart of Aziziyah: past the ashen buildings proclaiming "God is Great" in black, flowing script on their sides—cafes, water stores, and other businesses on the ground floor, and dinky apartments on the others—past the dried-out stragglers braving the fierce heat of a Jeddah noon.

The sun burned so bright that I couldn't look heavenward. We staked out the sidewalk by height, Khalid's long frame closest to the stores and me, Muslim, the smallest, at the edge where I felt the vibrations from the cars speeding too close every few minutes. Pummy, a half-step ahead, was unnaturally quiet, smiling wolfishly at the cracked pavement—probably savoring the thought of driving his father's rusty Mazda without the old man's knowledge—and next to me Salah, who had really girly hair, long and straight and tied up in a ponytail, kept sweeping stray, damp locks back from his eyes. Khalid alone strutted, hands in pockets, whistling while studying

the passersby of our mostly *desi* ghetto with the same curiosity they showed us, four boys dressed in the checked blue of the Indian school, so obviously cutting class. Khalid could strut, he didn't live in Aziziyah like the rest of us, but I kept hoping no one recognized me and tattled to my father. Once out of Aziziyah we'd be okay, no one cared. Saudi cops never noticed us. We weren't Arab or White. But this was our ghetto, and those passersby believed themselves our brothers, so they stared and censured us in their narrow minds.

We passed the Rusbhukhari cafe, where the Afghanis had chickens on rolling spits outside, sizzling golden-brown in the noon heat, and the succulent aroma brought water to my mouth. I said, "Why not get something to eat—make it a picnic?" (Just think, us seated on a blanket, like the happy families at the beach on weekends, with boiled yellow rice and seasoned chicken spread out before us, the spicy red sauce that gives the bhukhari-rice its sting drowning the yellow grain. And us, hunched over, eating shoulder to warm shoulder, with the sun baking our necks and hands, laughing and tearing at the food, swallowing in great gulps because the desert sand tries to become part of the feast. Sounds nice, no?) But Pummy sneered and said, "Bloody idiot." And the others laughed. Well, Khalid laughed. Salah giggled.

We turned south at the intersection that divides Aziziyah into the areas of influence—north and west, Paki; south and east, Indian—and hurried past the empty sand-lot that had once housed the crumbling remnants of old buildings, where we played cricket in the evenings when the sand wouldn't scorch our feet. We were just ten minutes from Pummy's house, swear by God, when we ran into the Filipina, walking our way on the sidewalk with no one in sight.

I don't know when Pummy first saw her, he never said. One day we were talking about girls and he said, "There's this Filipina I've seen around, an ayah or something. *Very* trim." And he smiled his cocky, crazy smile, with his eyes crinkled and his brown irises dancing and he

looked all friendly except for the pointed canines that gave him this snarling look. That sharp, vicious smile had gotten us out of trouble countless times, and into it even more. Like when Salah's brother, Ali, the religious one, tried harassing me in the school corridors because I was teaching a bratty seventh-grader manners (bastard Ali, flanked by his moral warriors, telling me I was a bad Muslim, though that is my name, though I was teaching that little brat *Islam: Submission*). Pummy stalked up, smiling, and Ali turned away, mid-rant, with all his wispy-bearded, cap-wearing followers. Scared, the fuckers, which pleased Pummy. But Salah told me later, when Pummy wasn't around, that Ali had thrashed him in retaliation.

Pummy was sure the Filipina would do *it*; after all, Filipinas are whores. No choice, really, poor shameless, powerless things. They come over as nurses and servants, without their men, and if the Arab boss tells them to lose their clothes and get onto their knees, what are they to do?

She was some ten feet from us, in this long, fluttering black cloak that hid everything but her throat and face, butterscotch fair and small-featured, and Pummy turned to us, grinned, and said he'd ask her to do us—all of us. He'd said this the other time too, talking about her, and Khalid had laughed, and Pummy had walloped him so hard that Khalid hadn't uttered a yip afterwards, or even spoken to Pummy for days. When Pummy said this with the Filipina in sight, Khalid went quiet, and Pummy kept glancing at the woman and grinning back at us like we should thank him. "Well?" he said to all of us, but he stared at me: slow Salah never questioned him; Khalid always did, as a rule, testing for weakness.

"Pummy, this is wrong," I began. "How will you feel—"

"Feel? *Really* good. You're not my conscience, Muslim," he said, his grin now a closed smirk, making a joke of my name.

God knows what my mother was thinking, saddling me with that name. All my life, it has been a bane: Ammi coddling me as she whispered that God had a special place in his heart for his little Muslim, friends mock-calling me “great believer,” disapproving teachers always looking me over with resigned eyes. *If you’re the good one, God help us.*

When Pummy mocked me I blushed, and he bounded off to the Filipina. Khalid cursed under his breath and said Pummy was posing, that there was no way he’d go through with it. Salah told him to shut up, said Pummy would too (*you just watch!*). So we watched, and Pummy had no sense of space, just got in her face, till she could feel his warmth and smell his peppery breath, and the woman jerked back with a startled look, clutching her cloak in tight little fists. I tensed, muscles readying for flight the moment she screamed, but she didn’t. Instead, Pummy’s firm brown hand grazed her fists as he leaned in even closer, the way I had with a girl only in dreams. His sun-paled shirt brushed her black cloak, and I wondered if he worried about her smelling his sweat and if he could glimpse the hollow of her throat or smell her perfume—rosewater, I imagined, because it tastes so *pure*, so sweet, because it was what Hagar fed dying Ishmael when Ibrahim abandoned them on God’s orders in Mekkah. After two minutes, the Filipina said something sharp and indistinct, gazed over at us with burning eyes, then turned back the way she had come, striding back into the row of buildings in the distance.

My Allah, I thought, aching with relief and disappointment, until Pummy, whose gaze never strayed from the shrinking figure till it disappeared, turned with a smile and a thumbs-up, and motioned us forward.

“See,” Salah said, with that smug loyalist’s smile. “He did it.”

“She’ll be back. Has to make sure her boss won’t miss her,” Pummy said and clapped Salah’s shoulder. We stood baking in our pressed uniforms, sweat dampening our backs, our

arms, our thighs, everywhere it touched skin or cloth. Khalid's arms hung limp by his side, as if he didn't know quite what to do with them, but when he noticed me watching, he tightened them into clammy fists, tapped them together, and glared. Salah avoided my gaze and looked a little ashen. He didn't even bother brushing off the fat drops of perspiration rolling down his lean cheeks. I knew then he was a virgin like me.

I spent the wait wondering if I could get out of it—because of my name, Allah watched me especially close, damning me for betrayal—hoping the Filipina wouldn't show (hoping she would), knowing Pummy would get his way, and worrying about the niggling details. Like where Pummy planned to do this. Khalid was the only one who had a working mother and empty house, in a Western compound far from Aziziyah, where no one knew us. He realized this too because he stopped hitting his fists together like a prizefighter and turned as gray as Salah.

I didn't want to imagine the act, but I couldn't help looking over at Pummy, at his football-hard body and how he alone didn't seem to sweat much. Salah, despite being pretty in a soft way, had girls cooing over him, even my sisters. And though Khalid's hooked nose dominated his face, he had a deep, *filmi* voice, more money than us, and parents who indulged him in everything, even love. And then there was me.

Pummy would go first; he always went first. Khalid was experienced too: he lived around Americans, whose girls didn't wear veils or cover their hair and who sometimes bared even their pale arms and long legs. He was never tongue-tied about girls, never nervous. Then Salah, and then me. And we didn't have protection.

I was about to bring this up when Pummy said, "Here she comes." We all saw the danger at the same time. But it was Khalid who spoke.



“Mutawa,” he whispered, and though I had been skittish and sweating and worried before—about the details, about Allah knowing, about burning in hellfire for betraying my name, Muslim—I stopped that second. Stopped being worried, stopped being skittish, *I just stopped*. My bloody heart came to a thumping halt. All the heat left my body.

A few feet behind the Filipina, his simple angel-white thobe flaring above the ankles, tapping a thin cane before him, so innocuous looking, God’s wrathful hand walked. Tall, full-bearded and hawk-nosed, with deep-set moral gaze—a religious Enforcer my father’s age.

“Let’s leave,” Khalid said.

Pummy just shook his head, as if he could will trouble away. “He’s no Mutawa. Where’s his backup? Just some Saudi,” he said. “It’ll be okay.” Salah looked like he wanted to pass out but would never move without Pummy’s say-so. I glanced at his dangerously long ponytail and back at the Enforcer of Virtues. Pummy was right about the backup. Usually the Mutawa’een traveled in packs. But no ordinary Saudi would fix his implacable gaze on the long brush of offending hair on Salah’s head, bristling to run his hidden shears through it. An ordinary Saudi would shield his ankles from the sun, not display them to the heat in the Prophet’s way. And no ordinary Saudi had reason to roam our streets at this time of day.

“He *is* a Mutawa,” I hissed. “Salah’s hair, he’s eyeing it.” Pummy said nothing, his gaze staying fixed on the Filipina ‘til she was close enough to make out the sharp lines of her small, pointed face. Her gaze kept darting to each of us in turn, and then she bent her head forward slightly and at the same moment the Mutawa pursed his lips and stared deliberately past us. But when Khalid uttered an involuntary oath, the Mutawa stopped pretending.

“You, come here,” the Mutawa said, his stride firming and Khalid cursed again and glared furiously at Pummy.

“She fucking sold us out,” Khalid said, as we stood still, our insides parched with fear.

“Do something, Pummy.”

*Run.* The whisper came so low I almost didn't hear it.

“Run, you bastards,” Pummy said, and just like that, with his voice prompting, menacing, some survival instinct kicked in. Khalid tore back down the way we'd come. Salah, who'd ask “how high” when Pummy said jump, ran straight past the startled Enforcer, whose grasping fingers closed a second too late, and ponytail flapping with his steps, Salah headed into the maze of buildings ahead of us, our ghetto. My heart, all dried up, had just pumped back to life and it took a third, vehement “Run” from Pummy to get me moving.

However, the Mutawa was already upon us, the bitch Filipina standing a few feet behind, meek as a mouse, watching with greedy eyes. I am not sure why, perhaps because Pummy showed no signs of fleeing, but the Mutawa reached for my throat first.

Dead. I knew I was dead. When my father found out what I had been caught for, nothing, not Allah, not the Prophet, nothing would save me. *Allah knows, boy, I have tried my best. God knows, a dog's tail can never be straightened. The Devil and his take you.*

The Mutawa raised me like a rag doll, making me whimper. Then something heavy slammed into my side and tore me from the Enforcer's grasp. As I fell, the Mutawa's face, so stoic and sure the minute before, looked momentarily vulnerable, like my father's when startled. I felt Pummy at my side, pushing against me. “Run,” he said, as he swayed to his feet before me and took a swing at the Mutawa.

Perhaps it was because I had heard that command so many times, or because I had already been poised for a getaway, but this time I did run. Just pawed off the ground and loped forward in the direction Salah had taken, and I swear I felt a gust of air whipping behind me, like

someone slashed at me. I didn't look back until I was sure I was safe. Pummy—cool, calm Pummy—lay writhing and snarling about on the ground, trying to get away from the Mutawa, who stood over him, cane in hand, bashing him like a stray dog.

I wanted to help Pummy, I did, especially because he'd saved me. But he'd told me to run. And there's no helping someone who has fallen to an Enforcer.

Really.

My heart pounded throughout my dash back to school. In some heated part of my brain, I felt sure urgent sirens would shatter the air and gleaming white Chevrolets with "Police" written across the side would materialize in front of me. Or worse, I'd come across the rusty old Ford trucks the Mutawa'een rode, with the Mutawa and his brethren tracking me down. But I reached school safely, a few minutes after lunch hour, and found Khalid there, panting and wild-eyed and even a little euphoric at our escape, and we howled out desperate laughs of relief. When Pummy and Salah didn't show, however, my giddiness lessened.

That evening, the occasional, sharp trill of the telephone made me jerk and Abbi noticed and narrowed his gaze at me. "What trouble have you gotten into, bastard?" he asked while running a meditative hand through his beard. I said nothing, showed no anxiety even when Salah called, saying he was safe, but had I heard from Pummy? At night, I dreamt of violent pounding on the door, and brown-shirted policemen rushing inside, surrounding the lean mattress in front of the TV where I slept, with the Mutawa and the meek-as-a-mouse Filipina grinning expectantly at the door. I dreamt of a bloody Pummy at their side, apologetic, un-Pummy like, saying, "Sorry, couldn't hold out."

When I woke up, I told myself it was a dream, and that Pummy wouldn't betray us. But then I remembered that Pummy had hit the Mutawa. I hadn't expected Pummy to do that either.

Salah panicked when Pummy didn't show at our usual spot before school. "Shouldn't we tell someone?" Salah said.

Khalid shrugged. "Was his own fault, wasn't it?" Salah glared. "What?" Khalid asked. When Pummy didn't make the assembly, Salah kept craning his neck about, until finally that busybody Asma, our class teacher, stepped up and scolded him.

We half-ran up the stairs to class after the assembly, Salah muttering what happened, what-has-happened all the while, only to see Pummy in his usual seat at the back of class, with a baseball cap on his head, his face bruised like a plum.

"Did you tell? About us?" Khalid asked as we took our seats, just ahead of Pummy.

Pummy said nothing. Up close, the bruises were large and clear, and his jaw had swollen so that he looked like he had the mumps. Salah reached over, soft-like, and felt the bruises.

"Beat you, did he?" I said, stupidly.

Pummy tilted his face away from Salah's caress when Salah reached for the cap. His mouth remained stern and thin.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," I said, almost wishing I hadn't submitted to my fear and had stopped to help him. "Bloody Mutawa."

By lunch, Pummy hadn't said a word. Salah giggled and talked in a loud, hollow way so our classmates wouldn't scent the difference, and I wondered what we were supposed to do. Pummy always decided where we ate and what student got the honor of paying for our meals, so it was a relief when, a few minutes after the bell rang for lunch and we were the only ones left in class, he gestured for us to follow him.

He led us to the spot where we usually smoked, behind the building and next to the school wall.

But we didn't smoke this time. Pummy just clambered up the wall and hunched down, regarding us from above. Then he flipped his hat off.

Khalid laughed.

Pummy's hair, his defiantly curly black hair, had been sheared clean through the middle, leaving a stripe of swelling redness. Salah tugged at his own ponytail. I felt like laughing too, with relief, thinking, was this the worst that had happened to him?

"Think it is funny, do you?" Pummy asked and Khalid shut up. Something had changed; the fearless eyes looked muted, darker, as though someone had branded them with cigarette butts.

"What did they do?" I asked. After all, we knew the Mutawa'een's powers. In Dammam they beat someone to death on the street for making alcohol, occasionally they stopped men and women on the street, asking for marriage licenses and such, they could command the police, and even the King wouldn't stop them.

And Pummy beat a Mutawa.

Pummy crouched lower and sized up the three of us with his gaze. "What does that matter? I didn't matter to him." I looked up at him, uncomprehending. "After he was done with me, his brothers came swooping by, and they pulled me into the back of their truck and took me to a police station and dumped me." He paused, and looked away. "Like garbage." I still didn't understand, so I waited for him to explain.

And that's when we first heard the plan—as it stood then.

“I want to follow him everyday. Follow till we know his routine. See how he does things, when no one will miss him. Then we’ll corner him and — ” He jumped off the wall and landed in front of us, kicking up little clouds of hot sand. Now I could see his head close up: a long black gash clawed into his skull near the back.

“Stalk a Mutawa? You’re mad,” Khalid said, and Pummy slammed his open palm against Khalid’s throat and clutched, choking till Khalid stumbled out of his grasp and onto the ground.

“Then we kick him,” Pummy said. Khalid howled when Pummy shoed his ribs. Again, then again. “Kick him till he begs. No, kick him on the head till he bleeds.” He kicked, and Khalid’s head snapped back like he’d been shot. “Till he begs.” Khalid begged and Pummy stepped away. Khalid curled up head-to-knee, like he was praying sideways. Pummy knelt beside him and grabbed his hair. “Still think it’s funny? Think I’m weak, a nobody?”

Khalid didn’t say a word. I tried to intervene but Salah grabbed my shoulder and shook his head. Pummy straightened and we could see each cut on his face, the bruises that burned with blood.

“He must beg for mercy, not from the Prophet or God, but us.” He smiled at the heresy — but it didn’t reach his eyes. We nodded, numb, staring past him at Khalid and he shook his head, satisfied, and walked away, Salah trailing after him. I went to Khalid.

“You okay?” I asked.

Khalid muttered, “Kick him, punch him, hurt him, fucking knock his head off.”

The first day Khalid stayed home in Saudia City, recovering, he told his parents, from the injury he’d suffered in a football game. Pummy, Khalid, and I didn’t play cricket as usual after school. Instead, we dawdled outside stores until prayer-time, waiting for the Mutawa’een

rounding up people in their rusty trucks, waiting for him, but he didn't show and all we did was miss prayers. The second day Pummy made Khalid tell his parents he was staying over with friends, and we prowled the streets, but nothing. The third day we jumped after lunch and retraced our earlier route. This time there was no bitch Filipina and no Mutawa.

The fifth day Khalid pulled me aside as lunch ended. Pummy hadn't worn his hat, and before lunch he had bloodied three idiots foolish enough to wisecrack.

"Abbi found out what happened to him," Khalid said, affecting boredom. "Seems Pummy's mother got this call late, telling her where he was held. She called some neighbor, and they called the Principal. So Khan Sir and some Embassy guy had to go talk the police into releasing him. The Mutawa let the police 'treat' Pummy after he was done." Khalid stopped a moment, as if savoring that thought. "They did a good job on him. They didn't want to let him go despite his age. Because the Mutawa he hit, that one is a true hero. Fought the jihad against the Russians. They had to beg."

Another week of patrolling the scorching streets and we were no closer to finding our Mutawa and I grew more frightened. When Pummy spoke of hunting down and beating a Mutawa, I'd agreed because Pummy made you believe in him. But as time passed, and I had more time to envision it, I knew I wanted no part of it, no matter how justified it was.

I prayed for Pummy to lose interest, to realize the folly of his thoughts and to shift his worries to something, anything else. But his rage grew, and I was too afraid to stop his attacks on the smaller children, which grew more vicious, more arbitrary, the way he would drag one into a deserted school corridor and draw out the hurt. That didn't, however, shift his attention from the Mutawa.

That's why the Friday after the second week, Khalid came over a little before noon and we headed over to the mosque on Medina street, the small mosque with the chop-chop block, where the Enforcers usually gathered on Fridays before heading out to herd those shirking their obligations to God. We made it in time for *Jumma*; the *Khadi* was Saudi, unlike the one at Aziziyah, and his sermon was mostly incomprehensible to us—of the four of us, only Pummy's Arabic extended to more than Quranic verses.

After prayers, we trailed after the other worshippers, who milled outside in the mosque's courtyard, whispering excitedly.

"I'll be back," Pummy said, and he slipped into the crowd, quick as a dog on a scent, leaving us gaping. The throng was one you find only at prayers — Arabs, young and old, and immigrants, mostly *desis*, mixing on a ground of illusory equality. A few minutes later, Pummy extracted himself from the masses. "Boys, we're blessed." He looked over at the growing gathering and curled his lips as he eyed the *desis*. "Sheep have developed a taste for blood."

"He here?" Khalid asked in a low voice. "The Mutawa?"

"No, We get to see an execution."

"What?" Salah said.

Pummy slashed a hand across his neck, his thumb grazing his Adam's apple.

"Let's go," Khalid said, and Salah, looking ashen-faced, quickly agreed. I opened my mouth in support but Pummy spoke first.

"We're staying," Pummy said. He wanted to watch, the damned fool, wanted to watch some bastard meet his Maker.

I'd never been to an execution before, none of us had. You listen to the news and think you can't miss one: so-and-so was executed for murder, and later so-and-so joined him for



selling drugs, sex, or hope. You expect to step outside your house and stumble across a killing. But you could go your whole life here without seeing one. I now know some power guided us there, to put the thought of death in our heads. We had never thought to kill until that afternoon.

I had never thought my submission wrong before.

We waited some time, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, I don't recall. Pummy led us into the belly of the crowd, and warm, eager flesh pressed up against and around us on all sides. Finally, into the middle of the courtyard stepped this *takrooni*, this brawny black man in a white thobe that didn't reach his ankles, with large arms swinging freely at his sides, the right one grazing the golden scabbard that hung there. The man walked to this big rectangular block, black too, a miniature of the holy *Kaaba*. "Come," Pummy said, pulling me forward by the sleeve. "Move up front."

Ghoulish bastard. Why I loved him, I don't know.

Pummy took the lead, pushing past people, easing through them, but while they usually ignored us, now they jostled back, cursed. Salah cringed when one angry old Arab raised a hand at him, but Pummy stepped in between them and caught that arm, as though the incident with the Mutawa had never happened, and he hadn't been taught the consequences of not submitting.

"Pummy," Khalid said, "don't be crazy. He's a fucking Saudi."

And we are *desis*, I thought, looking over at the *takrooni*, envisioning the mob turning on us, bleating for our blood, for standing up for ourselves.

But a miracle happened. These old Arabs, they think they own us because we are poor, brown, and in their country. But he backed off. He tottered back a step, said *Shaitan* in a hiss and sank back into the crowd. Backed off, an Arab. From a *desi*.

First Pummy beat a Mutawa, then he scared an Arab who shrank from him like from the devil. I felt euphoric: I'd glimpsed a new world, a new meaning, where the rules of submission meant nothing. But I was also scared because, though Pummy hadn't cared to remember his place, the Arab shouldn't have backed off as if we were dangerous. Some thing meant for Pummy to win. And it wasn't God — though he loved us, he never picked our side. After all, God never interfered when *djinns* climbed inside our fathers from time to time, turning them, despite their daily study of the Quran and their moral beards —

We got to the front. From there I could see the block had this curved chunk cut out, where the head would go. The *takrooni* unsheathed his sword, repeated a swiping motion over and over, testing his arm, contemplating the block all the while. When he revealed his sword, those herded around him broke free from the trance: people murmured and the excitement rose once again. Near the front we saw a few pale faces, Americans, no doubt, allowed to pass through unmolested. Front row seats without fighting or receiving abuse.

Finally, just when the murmurs turned into distinct grumbling on the part of the Arabs, up rumbled a van, nothing marking it as special, followed by one marked with a red crescent. The crowd parted to let the vehicles pass. The first van backed up towards the block and two of the cops standing about to control the crowd sprang forward animatedly. The back doors of the van swung open and out tumbled a man clothed in sandy brown, followed by two other policemen, who looked about in desultory fashion and closed the van doors behind them.

He was tied up like a lamb at *Eid*, the prisoner, and he didn't seem to mind being on the ground, so the two cops who'd sprung forward moved to either side of him and helped him up, then half-carried him to the block. They had to carry him; he seemed out of it, and from where I stood I could see his vacant eyes, older than his face — the face of someone with only a few

years on us, a boy still. The poor bastard was fair and sandy-haired and slightly built, and despite the deadened eyes I could see he was handsome, and more importantly, he was one of us, a *desi*. And they carried him gently to the block — the only time they're ever gentle to us.

Pummy's eyes had a thoughtful look to them, and then, to my horror, he smiled. Salah, however, watched like he had seen a *djinn* and I could tell why. The man, when they set him down with his head on the block facing us, had features lean and long and fair and a Kashmiri sort of beauty, soft like a painting, like Salah's.

The *takrooni* stopped his ritual swings, and the cops, after they had finished arranging our brother on the block, stepped back respectfully. Then the loudspeakers of the Mosque came alive and a voice, the same voice that summoned us to prayer, said something in Arabic.

“What is it?” Salah asked Pummy.

“Name, age, crime. Drug courier. A mule.” Then he motioned for us to shut up, his gaze shifting between the cops and the crowd. I understood: Some poor village boy who probably didn't even know he was hefting drugs.

The big *takrooni* bent and whispered into the man's ear, telling him to ask for God's forgiveness, to recite the *shahada*, but the poor fuck, with his eyes glazed, didn't seem to hear.

“He doesn't even know what's going on,” Pummy said. My blood rushed straight into my head: to die without knowing, without asking for forgiveness.

The *takrooni* straightened, stepped back, brought his sword up to his forehead, and then swung down.

He took three hacks to kill that poor bastard. The first swipe cut through quite a bit, but the head was still attached to the torso. The second went through everything but some tenacious membrane; the body slumped to the ground, and the head — attached by a sliver of skin —

almost dragged down with it. The third blow separated the head and torso, and the head rolled down, ending up near a gutter drain.

Salah puked after the first blow, Khalid whispered “fuck” and turned after the second, but I saw it through to the end. I kept reciting the *kalma*, over and again — there is no god but God, no god but God — as if my reciting the article of faith would save that boy’s soul. Maybe it was the drugs or whatever they gave the boy to get him so meek, but there was very little blood. I have seen lambs slaughtered at *Eid* before and believe me, blood flows as thin as water.

Then the *takrooni* stepped back, still grave, not watching the crowd at all, reconciling with his Maker perhaps, and three *desi* sweepers stepped from behind, heads bowed and unobtrusive, to clean up the little blood and maybe the puke from Salah and the Westerners.

The two cops now moved up to the chop-chop block, and the van doors opened, ready to cart the parts away. The red crescent van, too, rumbled to life and Pummy turned to us and waved airily to leave. We remained silent until we were back safely in Aziziyah, though Pummy huffed from having to half-carry Salah.

Khalid spoke first when we reached the spot where we’d first seen the Mutawa. “Pummy, please, are we still going through with this?”

Pummy didn’t say anything. He had his head bowed against Salah’s chest. I wondered if he was trying to back out without relinquishing his authority. “Did you watch them?” he said abruptly. “Those whites and Arabs, looking so fascinated. Bet it’s the first time they’ve really noticed one of us.” He breathed in once, twice, deep, as if his chest couldn’t get enough air. “We’re not stopping now.”

Salah moaned and only Pummy's arm around his waist stopped him from meeting the ground. "We'll die," Khalid said. "We beat up an Enforcer and they'll kill us." I must have gasped, because Pummy's gaze met mine rather than Khalid's.

"We'll die anyway, someday, maybe for something we didn't do," Pummy said, still watching me, but his free hand caressed Salah's face. "Time one of them died for a change."

"Died? *Died?*" I shivered, despite the afternoon heat and the sun scorching my back, and I thought of the head rolling sadly near the gutter drain.

"They never see us, never notice. About time they did."

"Died?" I repeated. The black bastard whispering into that boy's ears, knowing full well he couldn't fathom a word, damning his soul to hell.

Pummy looked at me the way Asma did, slightly exasperated. "We're not going to stop at a beating, are we? See how they chopped that boy's head off? Looked just like Salah, didn't he?" He turned into Salah and brought his hands up to cup Salah's face, then rested his warm forehead against Salah's. "He was a man, made a choice not to be a coward like our fathers. You don't have to come. I'll do it alone."

"No," Salah whispered.

Khalid shook his head, furious, as we watched them, Pummy and Salah, foreheads touching, conversing with their gazes. "I don't need that choice," Salah said, more firmly. "You won't be alone." Pummy smiled, then turned to me, his hands still cupping Salah's cheeks, his eyebrows raised in question. I remained silent.

"They're fools if they think they can keep us in line with executions," Pummy said, his eyes searing mine, life in them for the first time in weeks. "What am I supposed to fear? Death

without pain? It's almost like being put to sleep, with all those drugs. But when we kill the Mutawa — oh, he'll hurt, he'll *feel*. And everyone will see that they can't dismiss us anymore."

Beating a man for revenge, God may not hold that against you. True, Pummy had been freed, but the Enforcer had changed him and hurt us, so God would forgive us for a beating, even though a Mutawa is his angel, his agent on earth. But *murder*? That was too full a revenge.

The instant Pummy spoke, I understood how wrong he was. I had to save our souls from damnation. I had to remain firm and choose not to submit to Pummy for once. But I thought, too, about that boy, who had probably done nothing, and had died without being able to recite the *shahada*, died so full of drugs that he couldn't ask God's forgiveness.

It was as if someone had pumped my insides with water: my head felt lightheaded, my heart swelling to burst. And then it came to me in liquid thought, an image: The Mutawa, on his knees, begging for his life, beginning to recite the *shahada*, head bowed, bare neck offered for my swinging sword. This was the first time, even after Pummy had said time and again that we were going to hunt the Enforcer down, that I had actually envisioned God's moral hand humbled. And I felt a vicious stab of pleasure, bursting through my chest, flooding my exultant heart. This scared me, that evil should so please me.

We found our Mutawa two nights later. We were trawling Aziziyah, Salah, me and Pummy, wasting time till dinner, when we came across a commotion near a grocery store. A crowd had gathered, like at the Mosque, mostly our brethren this time. Two cop cars were parked in the middle of the street, their lights painting the faces in the crowd, and the cops were keeping them off the road.

"What's going on?" Pummy said.

We heard guttural Urdu, begging, and there was our Mutawa. When he'd beaten Pummy, his face had been impassive. He still wore that dry look as he savagely thrashed this cringing man rolling about on the road, yelping and howling and begging for help from the cowed people on the street. The cops watched with indifference, only occasionally turning to the crowd and pointing their guns at us, teasing us with their strength.

"Fool was supplying alcohol," one sheep in the crowd finally answered Pummy's question, and he looked both sorry for the man and pleased at his fate.

Pummy wasn't listening though. Gaze still on the Mutawa, he reached into his pocket and drew out something half-way, a metallic, gleaming something. A knife. A great big, bloody retractable knife that our fathers had used on the sacrificial lambs on *Eid*. I grabbed Pummy's arm to keep him from withdrawing his hand completely and letting others glimpse it.

"You'll never reach him," I said, wrapping my other hand around him.

But Pummy kept leaning back to free himself from my hold. "You said they don't notice us, that we are invisible. Why not take advantage of that?" I said. "We'll snare him when no one else is around, get away free. We'll have a laugh about it."

The thought had been going through my head ever since that first surge of liquid joy had coursed through me. But I would never have said it aloud if Pummy hadn't pulled out that knife.

Pummy turned furiously to me. "What's the use if they don't know it was us?"

I thought of the dead boy's limp form as the *takrooni* whispered in his ear; I heard the liquor seller's whimpers soften. "But he'll know," I said, as the Mutawa stepped back from the moaning, sniveling creature. "He'll know, just as he dies. Isn't that better? Getting away with it, and him knowing?" The same watery image from Friday afternoon reemerged, and it set my heart racing unnaturally again, even though I tried to clamp down on the feeling.

Pummy stonily said, "I'll find out where we can get him alone." He let his hand slip into his pocket. When the cops lifted the whimpering beast from the ground and dragged him into the back seat of a waiting car, we dispersed like the rest.

Pummy didn't show up at school the next morning. I tried to forget what I had said, but as the three of us walked to lunch Salah repeated the story to Khalid with an awed sort of pride in Pummy. "If Muslim hadn't stopped him, that Mutawa was gone."

"You'd be dead too," Khalid pointed out, unimpressed.

"You have no faith," Salah said sullenly, then he smiled. "Pummy!"

Pummy panted as he came up to us, his eyes shining with the fierce joy of old. "Salah, come on. Need your help." And he was off again, leaving Khalid and me behind.

"This is crazy," Khalid said, watching them disappear. "He's crazy, don't tell me you want to go through with this."

I could see he was scared, but instead of soothing him, I laughed. "Is the rich boy soft?"

Khalid stiffened. "I am *not* soft. If you're in, I'm in."

When Salah came running up a little later, saying Pummy wanted to meet behind the portacabins, Khalid and I walked stiffly, staring forward, Salah between us.

Pummy was padding about in circles. He greeted us with a wolfish smile. "I know where he'll be tonight." His voice came out gloating.

"How?" Khalid asked, and his gaze flickered to mine, for my reaction.

"What does that matter? Where we saw him the first time, that's his beat tonight. There'll be no one near the field at that time. Nobody to hear his screams." He closed his eyes, savoring that thought. "You're right, Muslim. This is so much better."



I thought again of the curved, submissive neck of the boy on the chopping block. “I’m ready,” I said, and, feeling a little sympathy, turned to Khalid. “You don’t have to come.” He looked grateful for the out.

“He’s coming,” Pummy said before Khalid could speak. “We’ll go around nine. You need knives?”

“I’ve got my own,” Salah said, looking awfully pleased.

“I—I’ll need one,” Khalid said, and he closed his eyes and sighed.

That night, we took the same path we’d taken the first time we had met the Mutawa. Aziziyah looked different, boisterous, with the heavy heat of the day having dissipated. Men in long, lean shalwars and women with lightly painted faces framed by light hijabs, talking and touching in the way of husbands and wives, wandered from shop to shop as though it were just another day. Their little children, boys and girls in bright-colored clothes, played about their parents’ legs, too young to care about the world outside Aziziyah, the Mutawa’een stalking the streets, the injustice of it all. And with Pummy whistling, Khalid’s eyes glued to the pavement, and Salah nervously chattering, I was only too happy to reach the deserted lot by the sidewalk where we had first seen the Mutawa.

“He’ll be by soon. He cuts through here at night,” Pummy said as we made our way to the middle and crouched low to make ourselves small and unnoticeable. Pummy pulled out his knife and toyed with it, scratching deep lines in the sand, and Salah pulled out one of his own. The dagger Pummy had given me lay in my clenched fist, its cord-wrap handle marking the flesh of my palm red and white, the slender metal, longer than my palm, pointing up at the stars. I wondered how quickly it would slice through a neck.

“What in the hell is that? A butter knife?” Khalid said, looking over at the one in Salah’s hand. It looked like something he’d swiped from his mother’s kitchen.

“It’s good enough,” Salah said. “If it can skin chicken and beef, it can skin a Mutawa, right?” He glanced over at Pummy anxiously. Looking at that sliver of steel in Salah’s hand, it seemed a stupid dream.

“Quiet,” Pummy hissed, and a white thobe appeared in the distance. My heart began to thrum against my throat as I tucked the knife beneath my shirt.

We crouched quietly as the Mutawa approached, stayed quiet even as his impassive gaze took us in and dismissed us, remained still as he walked past, till he was a few feet away and right in the middle of the lot. Pummy had been right: Pummy had hit him, he’d held Pummy for six hours, and the bastard didn’t even remember.

“Now,” Pummy whispered, and we rose warily, Pummy and Salah in the lead, Khalid behind me. Only the liquid cold of the knife I held kept me aware that it wasn’t a dream as we narrowed the distance between us and our prey. We were only a few feet from him, and I was sure he knew we were there, that he could hear our harsh breaths, our hotly hammering hearts, or Khalid’s oh-God-oh-God.

The pounding footsteps came as a surprise. One minute I could hear Khalid behind me, and the next he’d taken off, his feet slapping sand like they did during games, loud and furious. Pummy seemed to forget where he was for a second. “Coward!” he said. The Mutawa turned, and his gaze traveled over us, flickered to the knives.

For an instant Pummy’s face housed a vulnerable, fearful look, but then he tightened his grip on his knife, and nodded at Salah to move in.

I was a coward, I freely admit. When the Mutawa turned a struggle became inevitable, and I wanted no part of it. My Maker, I prayed, a miracle, deliver us, and I will spend my life repenting. Deliver us.

Pummy and Salah were dancing about the Mutawa, and the Enforcer had a slightly strained look on his face, like he wasn't sure whether to take us seriously.

Then Salah reached forward and thrust weakly at his chest with the little blade, and that bearded face regained the impassive look of unconcern, but his gaze narrowed. "We've got to get out of here," I said, as I moved in behind them. Pummy didn't listen; he leapt forward, his lithe form embracing the Mutawa's bearish frame, the knife swinging in a graceful little arc to the soft flesh beneath the white robe. The Mutawa struck his elbow out, into Pummy's swinging hand, deflecting the blow, but Salah, yelping, sank his little knife into him from the other side. The Mutawa shook himself like an angry animal, and Pummy, whose grip on his dagger had slipped, tumbled to the ground after it. Salah's knife was lost somewhere in the folds of the Mutawa's thobe and he kept taking ineffective swings with his hands, scratching and even biting at the Mutawa. I was almost on them when the Mutawa conjured a knife in his hand — the one Salah had stuck in him or his own, I'm still not sure. He didn't swing it the way Pummy did, in a luxurious arc; instead, he just thrust to the hilt, straight into Salah's gullet, and Salah gurgled a little, his eyes wide and raised to the sky. The Mutawa didn't even spare Salah a look as he dropped down; that unconcerned gaze fixed on me, even as Pummy screamed and clawed at the sand for his dagger.

I watched Salah's blood run like rusty water onto the sand, thinking: my fault. I knew then that my Maker wouldn't deliver a miracle; God never took our side.

I would die, but I would not die one of the sheep. As Pummy stumbled to his feet, still howling Salah, Salah, I unsheathed my own knife and joined him.

Pummy ran head-first at the Mutawa, but he was finished I knew that, because the Mutawa didn't look concerned, and Pummy's crazed eyes were still on Salah's limp form as he bayed and snarled and leapt at the Mutawa. I moved around, to the Mutawa's blind-side, waiting for him to deal with Pummy, so I could cut his throat.

I am going to die.

After all I killed a Mujahid, one who'd fought for God. Killed him when he was defending himself from another. Killed him like a coward.

From now till my death, all the Mutawa'een will visit me, try to break me, convince me I was wrong, so the press can blare my repentance to the papers. But I won't repent. God may be on their side. But I am not in the wrong.

## GREENCARD BOYS

It is Asher who drags me along to the reception at Delhi Palace. I know little about the bride or groom, only that he is Pakistani, she is White Trash, and Asher played matchmaker.

The only *desi* restaurant in Mobile, Delhi Palace serves lunch from eleven to two, dinner from seven, and Asher, Punjabi like the owners, has wangled the floor for our use from three to six. The dining hall appears different: the rich red carpet remains, but with the tables that normally obscure its deliberate oriental patterns pushed off towards the walls, laden with food, the chairs arranged in neat rows, facing away from the entrance—all except two. The bride and groom sit facing us, near the liquor cabinet display and the cash register, like keynote speakers at a conference. The groom, tuxedoed, just out of his teens, retains a swagger his guests have long lost. In today's out-with-Johnny-foreigner world, I'd be nervous if seated so conspicuously, but he just smiles rakishly when we go over to congratulate him, shaking my hand and embracing Asher, pulling him into their conversation. I sidle to the edge of the room and wedge myself between two tables: I'm Tamil, they're all Paki and at times like this, I feel the difference.

I've been to this restaurant often, especially in my early days in Alabama, when homesickness was like an unforgiving migraine, constantly recurring. The sight of ghee-soaked rice, the smell of spice-colored curries, and the bhangra beats of the Punjabi music playing at a low volume, though foreign to my home life, helped calm me for a couple of hours. The menu hasn't changed much in eight years. The same fried-red chicken tikkas and curries are on offer, though today, for a *desi* wedding party, they're less bland. The music playing in the background without inhibiting the happy chatter is the melancholy Urdu love songs of the sixties. Conversations flow in Urdu, peppered with occasional English words, mainly cusses, about

motherfucking managers and weekly hours and tips and the mileage squeezed out of cars, older Japanese ones—the guests are mostly delivery drivers, like Asher, the groom, and me.

Asher struts about with the air of a content father-in-law who has seen the dowry—and approves. He fancies himself a fixer of problems, and as he sidles up to me after hobnobbing with the other guests, holding two plastic cups brim-full of cola, I know he views me as a problematic case. “He’s set. Two years, *harra-pattha*, and if he wants he can divorce her,” he says. “Services can’t touch him now.” The bride chooses that moment to look our way, and she smiles, a little nervously. A slightly plump girl, she is one of the few whites salting this sea of brown, no family on her big day, and few friends except those like Asher who know her from work. Asher waves warmly at her and thrusts a glass at me. “She’s a nice girl, a little too sweet for him. Be better off with someone more mature.” He claps me on the shoulder and grins. “So when do I get to save you?”

I smile as I sip Coke. I look at the bride once more, wondering if she has the slightest inkling of what she has gotten into. Greencard marriages are nothing new, but the way Asher says *harra pattha*, the phrase sounding forced and foreign in his tongue, makes it viler somehow. “Only a Brahmin girl for me, wheatish complexion, stars well-aligned,” I recite. Asher looks disappointed. We’ve been friends since the beginning, and every wedding we attend he seems to think I’ll change my mind. The *desi* matchmaking king of Mobile, he has been married once, to a girl who gave him two sons and a Greencard. When he has had too much to drink, he will say the children were his one mistake, because they mean he cannot quit his job managing the Demetropolis Pizza Hut, can’t afford to go back to school even if he wants to. And, worst of all, he can’t leave this city.

Everyone I know, the people I have met over the years, Pakis, Bongs, and Indians, want out of Mobile. Or, like Asher says, they want the “real” America, the one sold to us in movies: Times Square nightlife, easy excitement, and easy money. Instead, we get soft-spoken Christians at our door, clutching worn Bibles with colored bookmarks lurching out of them, wanting to save us. They don’t understand: We’ve given up even on the gods that raised us.

*Appa pulls me aside as the taxi to the airport pulls into the gravel driveway. Ma is busy in the kitchen, fixing idli-sambar to keep me from getting hungry during the long journey. She doesn’t know that the airport screeners will frown at the package as it passes through the X-ray machine and throw it aside. Cooking is my mother’s respite from anxiety every time we journey, whether we take the train to Madras to visit her sister or a taxi to Thiruvulla in Chengaloor, my parent’s hometown, a little over an hour away.*

*Appa looks me in the eye, and though I am taller than he is, have been since tenth grade, no one will mistake me for anything but his son. “Take care of yourself,” he tells me, reaching up to ruffle my hair, surprising me, because that is something my mother does, not him, the accountant who asks about my homework and my plans and worries about balancing the little brown envelopes that contain the monthly bills. “Study hard, get good grades. We’ll be with you, always,” he says, and his voice wavers. I turn a little; I don’t want to see his pain. Especially because I am excited, eager and cannot feel his sadness. But as his hand settles on my head, firm, and I hear the whisper, the sing-song chant of a mantra, for protection, for blessing, I can’t help the fat tears that slide down my cheeks, can’t stop him from pulling me close, his stocky frame warm against mine.*

One of the groom's friends comes up to Asher, and as they talk I slip away, my eyes on the bride. Whirlwind courtship, theirs. The groom was raised in Saudi Arabia and that, and his part-time status in school, is enough to get him on the INS' radar. They raided his apartment a month ago when he was at work. Now he's got a missus and I don't know how. It would have made sense if it had been one of those barter things—Greencard for ten grand, or a rent-controlled apartment, like in that movie with the big, fat Frenchman and the *Four Weddings* girl—but no, this is one of the Asher specials, the instant love marriage popular among the *desis* in Mobile now, and no matter how many leave their wives, mock and mistreat them, there are always girls foolishly waiting to fall in love, and I don't know why.

I would understand better if all the Pakis looked like fair-haired Bilal, who steps up behind me and curves his arm around my slighter, darker torso, playful smile plastered on his face. “Didn't expect you,” he says. “Smells and sounds like home, doesn't it?”

“Home isn't a Northie restaurant.”

His laugh ruffles my hair. We used to be roommates before his marriage, and he has often heard me lament that the only *desi* restaurant in the city features only northern food. All soft, spicy meat and steamy *biriyanis*—nothing my strictly vegetarian mother ever made. I twist out of his grasp and turn to face him. He looks the same as he did seven years ago, retains the teenage softness of his face.

“Alone today?” I raise the cup to my face as I ask the question, because I can't hear the high pealing laughter of his *harra patha* wife. I've never liked her, but unlike most with the Card fever, Bilal seems genuinely fond of his albatross. When we hang out, the three of us, sometimes Bilal and I switch to Urdu, and Bilal always takes the time to translate, to keep her in the loop. Asher used Urdu as a weapon in his own marriage. His wife would be sitting next to us, his gang,



and he'd call her a *randi kutiya* or something equally demeaning, and the others would laugh, hard. I'm sure she knew from the pointed laughter that Asher wasn't saying anything complementary. But then again, Asher's a bun-kebab type of guy, the first in his family to go to college, celebrated for it even though he never earned a degree.

Bilal, like me, has centuries of refinement and expectation drilled into him. I ask again about his wife, but Bilal shrugs distractedly as he catches the song. His eyes slide shut as he begins humming, then singing, latching onto the singer's lamentations mid-song, opening up with each word, tapping his hand against his side.

By the end of the song, he is pulling every bit of loss out of the last word—a haunting, unending 'No'—and those nearest us freeze and turn, smiling awkwardly, and I know how they feel. Bilal has the rich, resonant singing voice *desis* love, and the imagination to imbue each melancholy lament with a piece of him, to make each lyric part of his story, his heartbreak.

He opens his eyes, irises green like moist marbles, and the onlookers clap lightly. He gifts them an abstracted smile, then turns to regard me, seriousness tightening his features once more.

"All right?" I ask him.

"So, so. New manager is a real horror. You guys got any opening, *yaar*?" He's only ever used that endearment towards me, not even Asher, even though they were once thick as thieves.

"Not now. Ask Asher." Bilal stiffens a little, eyes narrowing like a cat's. I take another sip of cola. "You have to talk to him sometime."

He looks away with a brittle laugh. "I might," he says.

I know he won't, though I don't know why. After all, Asher had arranged his marriage.

"What about you? What's an esteemed priest-son doing here?" Bilal adds.

"I've come to watch," I say.

“And judge.” The smile is as frail as his laugh. “Watch the Muslim hypocrites drink water and coke while yearning for a good old beer.” The queer smile doesn’t leave his face when I protest. “Want a ride home? Asher won’t be done here anytime soon. Has to give everyone a chance to kiss his ass.”

I look back at Asher, like a peacock in the midst of a few eager newcomers. “Why not?” We make our way over to the bride and groom and congratulate them again, and they thank us again, fervently. No one gives us much notice as we make our way to the exit.

My apartment complex is all *desi*, a ten-minute walk from school, and it feels almost like home. Almost, because we play cricket, but on a tennis court where the linseed coating of the bats is chipped away by hard concrete; because we talk in our native tongues, but less of Tendulkar or Sania Mirza, and more about H-1Bs and Greencards the INS.

We drive towards the eightplex that houses my apartment, and there is a crowd converged next to it. I have four housemates, all Pakis, the bun-kebab types, and they’re standing nervously in the crowd outside the apartment, near the stairs, staring up at the apartment above ours when Bilal rolls to a stop and I jump out.

Shafi, who stands next to the stairway leading upstairs, sees us first and waves, and Bilal teases the crowd apart, leading us forward.

“What’s going on?” Bilal asks Shafi, who’s staring at the apartment directly above ours.

“INS,” he says. Just a word, but enough for a dizzying numbness to shiver up my spine. I listen more closely and hear the thuds and thunks of things being thrown around, together; and soon, far too soon, they clatter down the stairs, INS officers, a couple dressed like cops in brown,

two others in suits and in between them, four unwilling boys toting bags and sagging under the combined weights in their hands and of our gazes.

The INS guys barely spare us a glance, except the last one, a pink, bullish man whose watery eyes take us in, the three closest to him. When his eyes fix on us, Shafi, who has been dangling an unlit cigarette in his hand, slips it into his mouth with a nonchalance I can't fake. I avert my eyes, keep them fixed on the ground even as car doors open, suitcases get carelessly tossed into trunks, and car engines shudder to life. Only then do I turn my head and watch the black cars, like those of drug cops, wheel away from the parking lot, little vampire bats fleeing with four of ours.

Conversations erupt around us, and most everyone seems infected with my sickness: voices vary between too loud and too low, too sharp and too frightened. Shafi lights his cigarette, coughs and moves under the stairs to our apartment door and Bilal's motions me to follow.

"What in the hell happened?" Bilal asks again, once we're safe inside. Shafi walks up to the TV and turns it on, and soon the apartment door swings open again and my other housemates troop in and, like wind-up toys, march to the sagging couch and plop down. Bilal perches himself on the broken armrest, and Shafi finally turns to the door where I still stand.

"Call in sick. There was a raid at the mall today—jewelry stores. They got a few, Thothre, Taparia and Lodaya." Shafi can't hide the lilt of satisfaction in his voice. They're all Hindus, Indians, and even though we're all in the same boat here, the little wars still play out—India and Pakistan; Hindus and Muslims; Northies and Southies; Brahmins and the dregs.

"Why? What happened?" I ask. I am Brahmin, Hindu, Indian.

"No one knows," Shafi says and hands over his half-smoked cigarette to Bilal. "The INS guys brought them here, made them pack their things and you just saw—" He snaps his fingers.

Gone. He seems the least concerned among us, but then again, he has a valid F-1 visa and a pristine student record.

We watch the television avidly, hoping for an explanation, hoping perhaps it's national, headline stuff: INS makes sweep of all malls—illegals safe till the next tri-annual inspection. But no, it is a local thing, tired-of-scratching-my-redneck-butt random. Lodaya, Taparia—they were unlucky. The INS has been especially testy in the wake of the war: Motels, gas stations, jewelry stores, even West, the telemarketing company with its legion of illegal employees; everything they turned a blind eye to before, they make up for now. So far they've lain off the delivery drivers, maybe because we bring them the pizzas they munch as they terrorize others. Soon, though, it will be our turn.

My roommates are still watching the TV when Bilal bids goodbye. I move to my bedroom and sink onto my semi-deflated air-mattress. Like fat flies beating against the inside of my head, the thought: *When do I get to save you?*

I always feared the INS would catch up to me, from the moment Asher helped me doctor my social security card for my first not-so-legal job, but the fear had receded through the years even as the last vestiges of my legal status disappeared, as classes and attendance turned into a footnote, an irritant, and I dropped out of school. I taste fear again in all its sharpness as I pick up the phone to call in sick. Then I dial Asher's number.

I didn't arrive a refugee. I paid—my parents paid—my way here.

I try pinpointing where things went wrong, and I can't. It happened, the way my life happens now, just one event after the other: jobs lost and gained; classes passed and failed. I drifted away from my friends, my fellow Tam-Brahms, upper-caste Hindus like myself, and into

this new, mostly Paki, crowd of shared mediocrity and low expectations. I dropped out of school and became this man I don't recognize—a delivery boy with no future. I can't go back, not without the degree I came for.

Asher calls me up three days after I ask for his help, on Tuesday. We're going out to dinner Friday, he says, with a friend of his new girl, Shelly, a manager at Luigi's on University Boulevard. "It's just a dinner to feel out the situation," he says. I hear him drumming his fingers over the phone, something he does when thinking, on tabletops at school, against the hood of his car, on the porcelain of urinals. "Shelly has to close that night, so we're going to the restaurant at eight. Come around seven."

Thursday, I hear that Lodaya and Taparua are on a flight back home. I spend all Thursday night and Friday morning choosing the right clothes and doing laundry.

Asher has roomed with a Nepali for two years now, occasionally sharing with grad students who use Mobile as a pit stop and transfer out to bigger universities and bigger cities. They live in an apartment block a few miles from school, a two-bedroom much like mine, but neater, with cheap but cautiously selected furniture that complements the full gray carpet, a sink that isn't overflowing with a week's worth of greasy dishes, and walls that don't smell of cigarettes. Asher is on the phone when I walk in and holds up a hand—part greeting, part demand for silence—as he talks, his voice lower and huskier than normal, the words Punjabi I notice as I take a seat opposite him. I've been told that he has a fiancé back home, a cousin of his who's still in school. I wonder if it is her he is talking to, voice low and loving, telling her how much he misses her and wants to come home, all the while worrying the buttons of the blue shirt he's wearing to go meet a girl that his fiancé's cloistered upbringing would condemn to hell.

I wonder if he feels the lying: the little burn as you tell it and the longer, slower ache in your chest as you lie down to sleep afterwards and replay the conversation in your mind, replay her quiet desperation and love that is unmistakable, even over the crackling line and the hollow echo of a poor connection.

*“Cheda, who knew this retirement would be so difficult?” Appa sounds like he has a cold, but his tone is amused. “I rediscover my longing for accounts ledgers each and every day.”*

*“Come, come. Stop scaring the child, it isn’t that bad.” Ma’s earnest voice takes over. “He’s healthier now, stress free. We went to a wedding last week, and everyone remarked how much younger he looks.”*

*“That’s the wonder of hair dye,” Appa laughs. “And the kindness of those whose stomachs are full of wedding food.”*

*“We met your friend there, Rhondhi,” Ma says. “He’s coming over to America, Wisconsin. I’ve given him your number. Is Wisconsin near you?”*

*“Not close,” I say. “What’s he coming for? School?” Rhondi’s excitable, just-breaking voice plays in my head, urging me to run down the wicket during our pickup cricket games. I’m in high school, and he’s the much younger neighbor I indulge.*

*“No, no. He’s working for Infosys now.”*

*Rhondi—Rhondi working.*

*“He asked about you, what you’re studying, when you’re coming. I didn’t know what to say.” She sounds sulky by the end.*

*“Soon, Ma, soon. I promise.”*

Asher glances at his watch as he talks, a roguish grin on his face. He doesn't drum his fingers once. Perhaps it is possible for the burn to die, for the duplicity to become commonplace. Finally finished, he hangs up the phone, handling it gently, as if the speaker were in it.

"I can't do this," I blurt. He doesn't look surprised, merely arches one eyebrow. "There has to be some other way."

Asher drums his fingers against the phone. I wonder if his parents even contemplate that they're grandparents, or that their blood flows through *kafir* veins. Would they care? Don't-know-to-do, I hear Asher muttering to himself. When he finally speaks, he frames a question. "You want to stay here or not?" He snorts impatiently when I don't answer, then startles me with his next question. "What was it like? Their wedding? Your parents'?"

"I've only seen pictures," I say. Studio photographs of a stiffly smiling couple, the woman, little more than a girl, in a blue pattu-sari she still has tucked away in the back of her cupboard, the man in a cautious white shirt that caresses his slight belly.

"No love marriage, ha? Some astrologer looked to the stars, matched her with him."

I nod, even though he is wrong. The star-charts trace one's life-route at birth, and are then closeted away in some cupboard till the right age. It was a broker who matched them, the same one, Ma teased me when I first started paying attention to girls, who would arrange mine.

"This is the same. I'm the astrologer, you're the groom, and the girl, if we get some girl, she's the bride. It isn't very different from the way we do things back home."

I've heard this argument before, from boys trying to convince themselves that their families wouldn't be horrified by their doings, by marriages made without parental supervision or consent. That after the money and the love and the years they lavished on us we wouldn't give them that much, their right to choose who we spend our lives with.

My lack of conviction must show on my face, because he continues in a conciliatory tone, “Tell you what, just go out today. It’s not like today is a date, just friends having dinner. Worry about the rest later.”

His eyes burn into mine, willing me to agree, and I give in.

I’ve never been to this restaurant that Asher takes us to, a mid-scale Middle Eastern place with Turkish students dressed completely in black, like mourning Shiites on Muharram, waiting tables. The place is sparsely peopled, and Asher leads us to a table at a well-lit corner.

Asher sits next to Shelly, and I have to sit next to the girl—not a girl, really, a woman playing at girlhood. I’d sat up front in the car on the ride over when we’d picked Shelly and Lyssa up from Lyssa’s place, and I hadn’t noticed much beyond her lanky frame and rosy arms.

Lyssa laughs lightly at something Asher says. She has large gray eyes, clear, with just a few marks of age about them. She talks easily; she’d just seen a movie she loved. She has a certain infatuation with the word *lovely*. It trips off her tongue more often than the *you knows* and *likes*, even more so when the waiter comes to take our orders.

Her laugh irritates me and that is disturbing. It has the sort of easiness I admire, and I can’t stand it, stand the knowledge that I’ve spent hours worrying about my shirt and khakis and teeth, and she’s having a *lovely* time.

“—Isn’t that right?” Asher says, peering at me. The girls look to me, and I nod my head weakly. Asher frowns a little and quickly steers the conversation to another topic, drawing their eyes away from me. I pull out a wad of tissue paper from the steel box next to me and lay them out on the napkin in front of me. I carry a pen with me at all times, a result of years spent delivering pizzas to doors where people wait with a checkbook and an eye on the clock.



“What is that?” Lyssa asks, smiling a little nervously, as I scrawl something on the napkin. My name, I say, in my language.

“Write my name in your language,” she says. I’ve always hated this, this lazy curiosity that Americans have about alien cultures, their simple-minded belief that we enjoy performing for them, providing answers because they are too busy to study, to read about us. But I pick up the pen. I remember even now, though Ma used to claim I was too young, the day of my commencement-of-knowledge ceremony. Sitting in the temple on my father’s lap, letting the priest lead my fingers over the heap of red and white seeds that look like glassy little ladybugs, inscribing the alphabet. I remember watching my fingers being urged on through the consonants and vowels, the priest intoning each alphabet as he, as I, wrote it. And I feel that way again, small and pliable, except it isn’t someone else’s hand leading my fingers this time, it is my own. I’m done writing, and I look up at her. Her eyes meander over the curves of the alphabet, over the dots and the little half-moons that give the words their intonation. “That’s my name?” She tilts her head, so that it rests on one fistful hand and leans over, her hair brushing against me as she runs a bony finger lightly over the cursive script.

I nod. “I can write it in Hindi too if you want,” I say, surprising myself. She smiles, eyes crinkling up so that the shadows beneath disappear into the folds, and at this moment I don’t resent her so much.

On the drive back, Lyssa and I sit in the back seat. We drop her off first and we drive towards Luigi’s with her number, scrawled in her slanting hand on a neatly folded napkin, in my pocket. I’ve promised to call soon, and actually feel good about it.

Luigi's on University Plaza is a little delivery-or-take-out-only place, sandwiched between the larger Supercuts and Chinese Chef King, that caters to the tip-free college crowd—and the only pizza joint in the city without a single *desi* shift manager.

We pull up between two delivery cars, their drivers standing with their backs facing us against the car to our right. Asher turns to me and speaks in Urdu as Shelly steps out. “I’ll be some time. Do you want to go home?” Home is only a fifteen minute walk. “If not, we could go to my place. I’ve got some beer.”

“I’ll wait.” I don’t want to go home just yet, not to the inevitable questions and bawdy comments. Asher smiles, and we get out on opposite sides.

“Oi, *yaar*,” says one of the drivers as I brush past him. Bilal. I’m not sure what he’s doing here. This isn’t his store. “What are you here for?” His eyes don’t leave mine.

“Just hanging out,” I lie, pointing at Asher, who follows Shelly.

Bilal looks a little disgruntled, and turns back to his friend.

I hesitate for a second, and head into the store. When I get in Asher is nowhere to be seen, only a Paki behind the counter running a leisurely cloth behind the clean counter, and two others, drivers, lounging on my side of the counter.

“Asher?” I ask. The one behind the counter grunts and wipes the counter with force. Behind him, and between the silver ovens, I see a blue shirt and Asher comes up behind the counter. The little clock behind the counter strikes ten and the Pakis, except the one buffing the counter, react as if a spring inside them has been unwound.

Asher gives them a resentful look as they leave. The counter boy conjures a pizza bag, adjusts his hat, and says he’ll be outside, smoking, if he’s needed.

“He’s the only driver on call, so Shelly has to take orders and work the kitchen,” Asher says as he heads back behind the counter. “I’ll help her a little, then we’ll leave.”

A little turns out to be more than half an hour. I share a smoke with the driver, but avoid Bilal. I tell the driver where I live, and he tells me he knew Taparia. I feel tired all of a sudden. Maybe I should go home.

Inside the store I don’t hear Asher or Shelly. I raise the flap to the counter and slip inside. He’s at the back, in between the silver equipment, and he’s laughing now, needling Shelly about something as she shapes dough next to a silver table.

“I have to work,” she says, but she doesn’t look as exasperated as before.

“Let me help,” he says, with a softness he never showed his first wife, and he sinks his hand into the dough she’s shaping.

“Gloves,” she barks, but her eyes are full of mirth and she drops the dough onto the table, removes her gloves, and sinks them back into softness. Their hands work through the dough, molding it, and I watch the fingers lace together, retreat, lace together again. They’re laughing, eyes locked in mirth, and I feel terribly embarrassed and guilty, the way I felt the only time I saw my parents kiss. I back away careful not to make a sound, till her sharp giggles and his gruffer ones meld together into indistinctness, till I’m past the counter and almost at the door.

Outside Bilal is lying down on the hood of his car, smoking. His friend is gone. Both the Supercuts and Chef King lie closed and dark, and the city looks asleep though it isn’t eleven.

“Hi,” I say when I’m next to him, leaning against the driver’s door. He shifts a little, and I slide on next to him. “What *are* you doing here?”

“Went in to work, they didn’t have anything for me. Thought I’d kill time.”

It feels a little like old times; we would lie next to each other on the sofa, or on the floor watching TV I tell Bilal about Lyssa, and he grunts and takes a long drag of his cigarette. “She’s nice,” I say. “She has a son. It may not work out but—”

“We’re pregnant,” he finally says. He couldn’t sound sadder.

Perhaps, I think, it’s his wife; she’s young, maybe she isn’t pleased. He turns to me, our faces inches apart, and I look into his eyes, fascinated, as always, by how the green stands out so distinctly from the white, almost like you could separate them.

The pleasure I had when laughing with Lyssa, in watching Asher and Shelly fizzles out, and the old fears come back. “Don’t you love her?” I suddenly blurt out, and I feel stupid, but Bilal doesn’t seem bothered.

“Yes,” he says. “Her family has no *tahzieb* and I can’t take her to meet mine, but yes, I’m in love with her.”

The door to the shop opens, and Asher leans out. “We’ll leave in fifteen,” he tells me, not bothering to acknowledge Bilal, and I can see his hands are dirty. When the door swings shut again, Bilal cusses softly.

“You should tell Asher, you know. He’s the reason you’re married. You should at least tell him you’re about to be a father, you used to be friends—”

Bilal slams his hand on the hood, then sighs, long and steady till I’m sure he’s out of air. “I was babysitting for him once, you know. His kids, they’re absolute animals, little bullies, and I had a hard time with them. So he comes home and finds me, totally exhausted, and I tell him the kids are *junglees*. You should have seen his look. Took me a minute to realize it was aimed at the kids, not at me.” Bilal looks puzzled, as if he is still trying to figure something out. “He called

them burghers, and thrashed one of them. Burgher, he always called me that when he mocked me, because of my hair and eyes. He thinks that's the reason we fought."

Asher has always joked about Bilal being a half-caste or a European's bastard.

"But that isn't it. This was just a couple of months after I'd been married you know. And I was wanting to have kids some day. Seeing him look at them like that—contemptuous, and something else, something worse than hatred—when he raised his hand a second time, I jumped him, and fuck, then we were rolling all over the floor, punching, kicking." He laughs lightly and looks over at me. "Kicked my ass, the bastard."

I know what is bothering him now. I've seen that look in Asher's eyes when he looked at his wife, and I'd never really thought about it. I remember too: I am watching Asher's children roll about on the gray-carpeted floor of his apartment while babysitting them one Friday, and that unreadable look in his eyes when he returns, fatigued and exasperated from work, to their roughhousing. Mixed in with the anger is something else, something that, at best, can be described as pity. Pity, because he does not love them.

I've never seen pity in my father's eyes, or resentment for keeping him from a different life.

I say, "You'll love your children."

"Yes, my children. What splendid little animals they'll be, with me and her raising them. What will they not learn and what will they not know?" He closes his eyes and smiles, the way he did at the wedding, while singing that love song. "My father would tell me stories—about his meeting with Gandhi and Jinnah as a kid. My mother's tea parties were the pride of Lahore."

When the regular priests were unwell or detained, my accountant father would, because of his learning and his twice-born status, stand in, both in the temple during festivals and during

rituals at homes. The lights were all turned off in our house from dusk till dark, and the only sound was the low murmur of my mother's recitation of verses from the holy books.

“They'll be fairy tales I can tell my children, stories from home.” He slides off the hood on a sigh. “Speaking of which, I should be getting back. We're running low on food.” I stand up as he comes to the driver's side. “Don't go telling Asher any of this.”

When Asher finally steps out of the store, I'm lying down on his car. We get inside the car, and I watch his hands as he turns the ignition. The dough hasn't come completely off his hands.

“Do you ever think of going back?” I ask. “Back home?”

He frowns at me. “To do what?” Then, unnecessarily, he adds, “I called, earlier today.”

He does miss home, else why would he punctually call a girl he can never be with when he's in love with someone else? I stare at him, maybe a little too long, because he looks irritated. “What?” he growls.

I turn and look out the window as he pulls out.

Things I believed I would never forget: the smell of the kitchen, the rustle of my mother's sari, the fierce strokes of the spatula in her kitchen—I barely recall them, and what I do recall, I may have made up—from movies, from reminiscing with Bilal and the others. Last time I talked to my parents, they mentioned the marriages of cousins my age and how people had asked about me at the weddings. Then they were silent for a while, and I heard the echo of other voices, other conversations ghosting into ours. Official voices, sharp, girlish voices.

And then Ma's voice, hesitant, “What about you, *kutta*? Do you plan? Do you think about the future?”

Of course I do, I'd said, of course I do.

## I AM A STRANGER HERE

If RK had his wife's temperament he would have identified his current situation as being in limbo, would have laughed at his image of a man frozen between ruinous worlds, and then wept with self-pity. If he were his eldest son, he would have critiqued the picture, ruminating that most men caught in limbo felt only horror and fear, not the humiliation that was his lot. Being a practical man, however, RK never thought of limbo, wouldn't have known what to make of it, the image or the word—in his now frequent talks with himself he used the phrase “no man's land.” Fifty-eight years old and steadily working toward retirement, and this—the company he worked for had been bought out, and he'd been told his services wouldn't be needed once the audit was completed, about a month from now. After thirty-eight years of eight-, ten-, fifteen-hour work shifts, this sudden expulsion into “no-man's land.”

If asked where he'd heard that phrase, he would have pointed in the direction of the BBC radio, which had been his greatest form of entertainment and solace on his drives to and from the office for the twenty-three years of his stay in Jeddah. When they were smaller, RK's children would announce at nine that “Daddy's news” was on. His wife and children loved stories, music, esoteric conversations, witty dialogue, but RK loved the news.

This love for the news, among his other characteristics, had created an image in the children's minds—of a stolid, terribly hard-working and boring though loving man. In the hands of his wife, Revathi, this picture turned into a weapon—she'd married a man who'd rather listen to the news than make any himself, his uninterest in literature, music or other forms of culture a reflection of his lack of imagination. Even now, separated by seas from her husband she ruminated on his many failings, constructed scenarios in her mind of potential disasters that could befall them, and wondered at the calmness of the man.

Today, as always, he was up at six, he headed straight to the kitchen and brewed a pot of coffee and, while drinking the bitter black liquid, called Revathi in Mangalore. He jested with his daughter and gladdened to hear the irrepressible warmth of her voice, his beloved youngest child, the most like him in her happy-go-lucky nature. As he waited for the coffee to signal the need for a trip to the toilet, he ate two slices of lightly toasted bread with the TV turned to Asiannet, which was running a program on Onam celebrations in the United States, and he reflected on his sons without the burning heartache his wife would have felt. While showering, he mentally organized what he had to get done at work—by the week’s end, the others in his office would be absorbed into the new company and he would be left alone with just one assistant to complete the audit. The list arranged itself methodically in his mind, and two items stood out—calling his bank to ensure they’d transferred his holdings to Sidhant’s account, and calling Appu once he got home. His older brother’s health had been deteriorating these last few months, the years of drinking, smoking, and unhealthy living finally taking their toll, and RK called all the time to make sure he was fine—and to assuage his guilt about Unni.

As he dressed and adjusted his tie strap and admired the way the dark blue tie went with the lighter Van Heusen shirt, RK’s thoughts dwelled with affection on his wife. When age began to show on his face and neck, she’d been the one who’d told—well, pestered—him to start wearing ties to hide the sag in his neck. He’d resisted at first because he hadn’t really felt old, but Revathi had not only convinced him to start wearing ties but also to dye his hair and moustache black.

He opened a green pot of Brylcreem and dipped two fingers into the cream to run through his thinning wet curls. He had to admit, in retrospect, that her idea had been sound. He was two years from retirement age, and the years of being harassed by angry co-workers, the lot of



accountants everywhere, had started to reveal itself on his face, hair, and gait. The stiff ties and dark hair had made him not just look but feel younger. And he'd needed that to keep up.

He worked diligently, put in longer hours than men half his age—including his good-for-little nephew—and had earned the respect he had commanded as the chief of the accounting staff. Whenever Revathi complained about his lack of ambition, he could point to this—a boy from a backward family in Kurumala, with unschooled parents, had ended up going to college, getting a degree, and had earned a company car, family status, and enough money to afford his children's education in the U.S. No, he thought with satisfaction as he brushed his pomaded hair, he hadn't done too badly.

Not that there weren't regrets. While he did have respect here, it was nothing compared to the status he would have had if he'd found the courage to stay on in his job at the Reserve Bank of India in the 70's—the friends and coworkers he'd once known were all retired now from jobs with respectable titles. But his elder brother had had no job, his younger siblings had needed support, especially the girls, whose marriages were being arranged, and he'd sacrificed his ambitions to save them all. If he'd stayed on, he would have retired at some upper-management level, with a regular pension. He would even have derived satisfaction from his work, not felt like a cast-off mercenary.

Revathi, ironically, had assured him that leaving the Reserve Bank had been the right thing to do because he could earn far more money here than at home. But RK had never believed in money; money served as the means to an end, and that end had been to help his family. As the only degreed sibling, he'd not only educated his nephews and married off the girls, he'd also helped them establish themselves back home—except Unni, Appu's eldest and brightest, whom RK had brought over to work under him. RK had believed that, with Unni earning the coveted

foreign coin, Appu and his family wouldn't have to depend on RK's help. God, how wrong he'd been.

RK moved to the little altar Revathi had created, with pictures of the trinity and other favored gods, lit the oil-smooth cloth, and muttered the few prayers he knew. Strange, how he'd first started praying to please his wife after one of her nervous tantrums, but now, even though she was no longer around, he stuck to the routine because he had started to derive some comfort from it. He wouldn't call what he had faith exactly, only the optimistic wish of a man who'd lived a good life that his goodness might have some reward.

Done praying, he extinguished the flame with the pads of his fingers, then pressed the slightly warm fingers to forehead and chest three times. He turned off every light in the house except the one in the living room, and locked the door behind him. He'd lived in this house for ten years with Revathi and one or more of their children, and despite their absence it never felt less than home.

At the office parking lot, he parked in the third column from the back entrance to the building. When he turned the ignition off, the car shut down with a pleasing purr. He'd miss this when he went back, he thought, these easy comforts.

The elevator had three other occupants, two Indians and an Arab with Egyptian features and western attire. All boys in their mid-twenties, and the Indians were obviously new to the country, still projecting the sallow, hungry look of those in search of their fortunes. Their clothes didn't flatter them—the pants had slipped despite their graying belts, the checked shirts were made of material women bought in large quantities from wholesalers, and the dark half-moons under their arms showed they had walked to work. The moon-faced Egyptian, in sharp contrast, fit into his clothes professionally and met RK's gaze with a closed-lip nod. The boys got out on

the fourth floor together and as the elevator doors silently slid shut RK watched the way the two Indians leaned into one another while the Egyptian followed closely, yet a million paces behind. In a few years, he thought as the elevator rose silently to his floor, the Indian boys would marry, and would, with luck, fill out their clothes as well as the Egyptian. They would work diligently, send money back home to poorer relatives against the wishes of their wives, spend too little time with their growing children, until finally one day they'd be told they were no longer needed.

Yes, they were probably good sons, wiring money into accounts back home every pay period—unlike his nephew. The elevator stopped on his floor, and RK stepped off and walked to the ghostly shell of the accounts department; while the five men under him occupied three-fifths of the room with desks jutting against each other's, RK had his own domain, separated from theirs by a screened glass partition.

The orderliness that had characterized the room and lent it its professional air was gone. Paper lay shuffled everywhere; the accounts boys, always deferential, now bristled with barely contained energy; they were all to be absorbed into the new company. He nodded to each of them, his smile slipping slightly when his gaze lighted on Unni. He didn't seem to note the coolness; he nodded and smiled.

Always smiled, except when RK tried to talk to him about home, about his parents. RK moved to his office and closed the door firmly behind him.

He dropped into his chair, pulled out his bulging wallet and slid it into the top drawer. Then he stretched, cracked each knuckle, mentally reviewed the things he'd planned to get done and released a breath. As he hunched forward and picked up the phone, a reassuring thought went through his mind:

Time to work.

At lunchtime he'd been assiduously going through a printout of old transactions with one of his assistants, Mushtaq, when his door banged open. The big, pink man standing at the door shouted, "RK" like a long-lost friend and rolled into the room, sliding into the chair opposite RK. "It's lunchtime. Time for a break."

"Collier," RK said, grinning. "Mushtaq, why don't you go eat?" When Mushtaq left, he closed the door behind him. Of all the men he'd worked under RK liked the Scotsman the best. Yes, there was something oily about his friendliness, an overplayed avuncularity, and at the beginning of the relationship the Scot had tried to persuade RK to help him with some truly creative accounting. But RK had made it clear he had no intention of thieving or in letting Collier thief on a large scale. Collier had forgiven him and they'd ended up forging a friendship. Collier had also been the only one to stand up for him after the buyout, had fought and lost.

"I've got my appointment," Collier said blue eyes twinkling, and RK felt a frisson of sadness. "Jeddah itself."

"Wonderful," RK said, and Collier hunched forward, clutching his meaty forearms close to himself.

"I wish I could take you. I want to. But—"

"Yes," RK said. "Nothing we can do."

"Still, you've worked hard all this while. You deserve a rest." Collier leaned even closer, till RK could see the coffee stains on those yellow teeth. "Well, I've still got to hire someone to help run my department and I was thinking of taking one of our boys with me. Which one would you advise?"

RK looked past Collier, through the glass partition at Unni, bent over his desk, tapping at a piece of paper with his pencil. Bent at work, Unni looked like a younger version of himself; the

boy worked well, but he buckled easily, too, to those who had power over him—which was why he still smiled at his uncle. RK could just pick him, but also he knew another worthy candidate—RK had hired Mushtaq at the same time he'd hired Unni. The boy was smart and ethical, and if Unni weren't his nephew, the choice would have been much easier. Collier probably expected him to pick Unni; that was Collier's parting gift to him. Perhaps this was why RK said, "Give me a day or two to think."

He treated himself to some Al-Baik that night, eating the fried chicken while watching a soap on Asianet. When Revathi had left, RK had assured her he would be all right, assumed he would be. After all, he'd survived as a bachelor until he married her, cooking lunches and dinners he remembered as being delicious. But his memory had betrayed him; the deliciousness, he now surmised, had risen mainly from the red chili, his most reliable spice. He'd been more energetic then, too, and now he felt too drained in the evenings to bother with elaborate preparations.

Done with the chicken, he called his elder brother. His sister-in-law answered the phone and her first questions dealt with her son. How was he, did he look well, and why wouldn't he call?

"He's doing all right. So is Smitha, and their little girl is doing wonderfully. I went to their place last week. She'd become very talkative." He didn't tell her that it had been his first visit to Unni's in months, and that his every overture to the boy and his wife had been rejected till then, politely, but rejected all the same. Only now, with his job in danger, had Unni seen fit to let his uncle—the one who'd hired him, the one who'd paid Unni's way through college—back into his life under the mistaken impression that RK had some control over who would stay and

who would go. Once RK had cleared up that misapprehension, Unni and the wife had lost interest.

“Ask him to send some photos at least,” she said. She no longer asked when Unni would visit. “At least some photos when you come.”

Appu sounded more tired than before but hid it behind a greater gruffness, talking about the mundane until they got to RK’s return. “It’ll be good, your coming back. Baby wanted to see you before she...walked. There’s only the three of us left now.”

Strange, he and Appu were the oldest, and they’d outlived all but their youngest sibling, though Appu was only sixty-four.

RK asked about Appu’s children, and those of the others. Appu asked about Sidhant and Sanjay. “He called a few weeks back, the younger one, Sidhant. Hadn’t heard his voice in along time. Seems to have forgotten our tongue.” His tired voice lightened with amusement.

“I have to call him a little later.”

“He’s a good boy. Good heart. What’d he see us for, a week a year for the first eighteen of his life? But he always calls and talks—tries to talk to everyone.”

“A good one,” RK agreed. They only ever talked of Unni obliquely.

“It’ll be good when you get back.”

RK didn’t speak and for the next minute he listened to his brother’s strenuous breaths over the phone. Then Appu surprised him.

“Tell the sonovabitch to call his mother, at least. She cries.”

He'd thought he'd been helping his brother when he'd hired Unni. He hadn't known that the boy would turn out to be so selfish, that once he married, he'd fight with his family and not speak to them for five years.

Marriage always had that pitfall. Occasionally, fights happened, often at some slight felt by the wife, and the newly married groom, in the first throes of marriage, ended up fighting with his family to support his wife. Revathi had been the same way; she'd sniped on and on about his spending for Appu and his other siblings. It was a woman's test; afraid of losing her identity with her name, she tested her husband to see how much she and her people would have to forfeit. If the husband played his cards well, her anxiety would be assuaged, and with time, he could go back to the old relationship with his family. Sometimes the fight ended up being permanent, the end result being that the children would bear their father's last name but have loyalty only to the mother's side. However, he'd never known of a couple who'd done what Unni and Smitha had—alienated themselves from both sides.

The galling thing was how content they seemed, spending their time with friends in Jeddah or attending functions. Unni had prided himself on his voice, and when they'd arranged his marriage, he'd asked for a girl who could sing. RK had known the girl had a good voice, but he hadn't known how good until some friends had informed him they'd heard her sing at a New Year function. He'd learned later that Unni had a lucrative side-business: He and Smitha would sing at functions the India community held, and in return for their duets, they were given gifts—sometimes money, sometimes jewelry. Not only was Unni content without his family, he seemed to be prospering.

RK couldn't tell his brother or sister-in-law that. He couldn't tell them that their granddaughter, whom they'd never met, called the couple's friends "uncle"s and "aunty"s. Fictive family had been raised over the real one.

Thursday being a half-day, they had a little goodbye party in the main office. The younger men, the ones who were being kept on, laughed, joked and enjoyed themselves while those who were being let go treated it, for the most part, like a wake. RK, after exchanging a few words with Collier, drifted off to the corner and ate and talked little until approached. Few of the enterprising young men he'd hired or mentored over the years bothered to speak to him; only Mushtaq enquired about his plans. So when people started drifting off, he beckoned his nephew. "We need to talk before you leave." And with that he made his way back, for the last time, to the accounts department. The hallway was empty, the clicking of his shoes the only sound.

Meticulous as he was, he'd boxed his belongings and taken them home earlier in the week, all except for his coffee mug and his nameplate. He would need those for another three weeks. He played with the letterhead as he waited for Unni, wondering what they'd do with the stationary with his name on it. Perhaps he should take some. Unni arrived half an hour later, and slid in easily into the seat opposite RK, looking everywhere but straight at his uncle's eyes.

"Do—are there any plans for you?" Unni asked at last.

RK hunched forward, hands to elbows, in an unconscious imitation of Collier's power pose. "What plans, boy? Pack up and leave. That's my plan."

After a pause, Unni said, "I suppose—I suppose Revathi chechi is happy," and RK felt the irritation rise in him. Revathi had been gone six months, and the boy had never enquired about her, even once.



“Not as happy as your parents will be when you visit.” There, he’d finally said it, what he’d hinted at, talked around for the last five years. And all the boy did was watch him through those dull cow-eyes. “Every time I call your mother keeps asking about you. And do you know your father has been unwell?”

RK waited for a reaction, some bubble of anger to rise to the surface of that emotionless face, some defensive statement. But Unni just eyed him placidly and murmured noncommittally, his right hand curling about RK’s nameplate.

“Unni, isn’t it time to forgive and forget?”

“Sure, forgive and forget,” Unni said.

“Don’t parrot me boy. *Think*, think through that bullheadedness of yours.” Once, long ago, when Unni had expressed no interest in going for a bachelor’s in commerce, RK had spoken to him in a sharp tone, reminding him of family obligations and the boy had ended up crying. This time he scowled.

“I *am* thinking.” Unni’s tone echoed the other impatient tones RK had heard since his enforced retirement became known. The same barely-there politeness, the bristling impatience of dealing with a washed up man. RK opened his mouth again and Unni seemed to come to a decision. “Don’t interfere. It’s a family matter, between me and *my* family.” The politeness had been extinguished. He stood up and uncurled his hand, the nameplate clattering on the table as he exited.

*Your family? The family I’ve supported materially and emotionally since you were born?*

RK wanted to scream. But he’d learned to think before he spoke, and by the time he gauged how little he had to lose, the boy was gone.

They placed RK in the prospective storage room of the new office. A little table and chair with a computer with no internet connection and the few files he still had to go through. He had always been proud of his assiduousness, but now he wished that he hadn't worked so feverishly these past few weeks. He had three weeks till his departure and the thinness of the files he dealt with meant that he was usually done with his day's work by noon. Then came the awkward, repeated trips to the main office for coffee and stimulation. He'd become an invisible man to his former colleagues; those he passed would give him embarrassed smiles and hurry back to their tables.

The first couple of days, RK had felt a burning sense of shame when he hung around the coffee room, because his wretchedness was nakedly obvious to all in the room. By the second week, he'd started spending more time on the phone calling his family; afternoons in Jeddah coincided with early night times in Texas and the boys were usually home when he called. The eldest boy, Sanjay, rarely spoke long and his curtness reminded RK disquietingly of Unni, at least at first. But the boy at least asked about everyone's health, and dutifully called Appu when RK asked him to. Sidhant's conversation was aggressively cheerful, filled with office anecdotes that made RK laugh and wax nostalgic.

"Don't worry, Dad," Sidhant said when RK confessed his unhappiness. "It's only a few more days. Then you'll be home."

And even more useless, RK thought. He'd first expected that his presence would at least serve Revathi and Sanjana, but lately when he talked with them he'd realized that they'd achieved some sort of balance. Each had built a world in which the other was primary. Appu, despite his sickness, still went out each day to oversee the work on their land, the rubber and the

rice. RK would end up living in a city where he had no family except his wife and daughter, settled in front of the TV, a useless old man.

Sidhant, as if sensing his thoughts, said, “You should think of what you want to do once you get home.”

“Rest,” RK said. “I’ve worked hard all my life and now I’ll rest.” Even as he spoke he knew he was mouthing Collier’s words rather than speaking his own mind. Perhaps if he could make himself believe it, he would be happier.

Mushtaq came by later that afternoon, dragging along a fresh-faced boy just out of his teens. “My cousin,” Mushtaq explained. “He’s starting as a secretary in the new office. I wanted him to meet the man who gave me my break.”

Mushtaq had already helped launch the careers of two of his large family. The boy had a good heart. RK shook hands with the shy young man, mouthed platitudes about hard work and Mushtaq stayed behind after the boy left.

“The work hasn’t really started yet, RK sir. I hope we’ll get a leader like you at the helm when things get hectic.”

RK wondered whether Mushtaq had heard of the opening Collier had.

Mushtaq smiled at him. “The real reason I came is to say I’m getting married. This one, the cousin, he was the last.”

RK had talked to Mushtaq about this long ago, their experiences in self-sacrifice for the sake of the family.

“*Mabrook*, congrats,” RK said. “You made it much faster than me. Tell me about the lucky girl.”

RK had a good afternoon.

Around four-thirty, just as he was planning to leave for home, Collier called.

“RK, you got a pick for me?”

Since his conversation with Mushtaq, RK had been thinking about nothing else. How both Mushtaq and Unni worked so hard. How Mushtaq cared for his family, while Unni did not. How Mushtaq respected RK, while Unni did not. And how Unni was family, which Mushtaq was not. “Yes, I want to talk to you about it.”

“Lunch, tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” RK said and hung up.

In the elevator on his way down, with half the office crowded around them, Unni stood next to RK. Neither spoke.

RK called Appu that night. His sister-in-law answered as always.

“Another week and we’ll be able to see you.”

“Another week,” RK agreed. He’d spent the time since his return boxing up old papers, the school- and artwork of his young children. *I want them to have their memories*, Revathi had said.

“Did you—did you get the photos?” his sister-in-law spoke.

Sad, RK thought. Soon he’d be able to visit the home he grew up in, the one Unni grew up in, but his own children would never be able to see their childhood home in Jeddah, except in photographs. “No, not yet,” RK said. “I’ll get them, I promise.”

Appu didn’t ask about Unni. He spoke about their land holdings instead. “When you’re back, we should consider selling some. Getting too old to take care of it all.”

“You can sell if you feel the need.”

“It’s your land,” Appu said. “Your money.”

Appu’s words stung, the memory of Unni’s “mine and yours” still fresh in RK’s mind.

“What’s mine is yours, always has been.”

RK heard Appu’s sigh. Appu said, “I just don’t want what happened between me and Unni, to happen with your children.”

“I’m meeting my boss tomorrow to help him select a replacement for me. Unni’s name is in the frame.” RK didn’t know why he said this. Despite what he’d told Collier he hadn’t decided yet.

RK expected Appu to react with disinterest, but Appu’s voice perked up. “He is smart, isn’t he? Not as good-hearted as his uncle, but still, it’ll be a great opportunity for him.” Appu talked as if Unni’s getting the job were a given. RK thought of admitting to Appu how powerless he was, thus washing his hands off the responsibility, but home was the last place he still had respect and he couldn’t give it away .

“I tried talking to him the other day, about the differences. He insulted me.” RK didn’t mean for his voice to come out so peevish.

Appu didn’t get angry for RK’s sake, though he cursed his son. “Sonovabitch lets the woman control him. One day he’ll outgrow it and come to us for forgiveness. Let us hope it isn’t too late.”

After the call, RK spent some time fantasizing about forcing the reconciliation between Unni and Appu. Twice he picked up the phone to call Unni, to let him know the power RK had over him, once again. But he’d never been ruthless and the slightly vengeful fantasies he had constructed in his head were alien to him, as was the struggle in choosing between the two.

RK considered himself an ethical man and his occasional nepotism didn't strike him as hypocritical; his most important function in life, other than staying honest, was to help family out. If Unni had been kinder to him, more receptive to his words, the choice wouldn't have existed. But—

The phone rang. It was Sidhant, calling on his lunch break.

“Dad, I was looking at my bank account. The interest rate sucks, but maybe if I bought land back home, you could manage it for me. It'd be more profitable.” It was a transparent attempt to help keep RK occupied and he felt a swell in affection for the boy.

“We'll worry about that once I get home,” he said. “I'm trying to help Collier choose a new Chief Accounts officer for his division. Mushtaq or Unni.” The boys had known Mushtaq; whenever RK hired a new Indian boy, he had made sure to bring the boy to his house a few times and feed him, until he got settled.

“Mushtaq,” Sidhant said promptly. “Unni ettan's an ass.”

“He's family,” RK said.

“He doesn't act like it. You don't owe him anything.”

And there was the problem. He *didn't* owe Unni anything. If he gave the job to his nephew, he knew that, for once, he would feel guilty for the nepotism. And if he gave the job to Mushtaq, Unni might think RK was punishing him and withdraw even further from his family.

“I've decided,” RK lied. “Talk about something else.”

Sidhant asked about the minutiae of packing, and finally hung up.

RK turned on the TV to the B.B.C. and flopped down on a couch. Bombings in Israel: camera focused on wailing families clutching at each other, on the shrieks of ambulances. News from Iraq: horrible.

Compared to this his problems seemed so little, so mundane. When he looked at the problem without worrying about the petty consequences, there was only one decision to be made. But the *petty* consequences affected those he loved.

He turned off the TV and lay back against the sofa.

Collier brought up the issue after they'd ordered. They'd driven to a seafood restaurant that Collier was fond of, owned by an Indian family whose only child had been classmates with Sidhant. The boy was working when they arrived, and he'd seen them immediately to Collier's favorite table and taken down their order himself.

"I will miss this VIP treatment when you're gone." Collier said.

"You'll have to bring someone else along." RK could see through the glass windows to the foamy Red Sea.

"Maybe the new Chief of Accounts." Collier smiled wryly.

RK watched Sidhant's friend, who'd hurried over to the entrance to greet another patron. Revathi knew Nikhil better, from all the sleepovers that she'd policed in their house. "I'm not sure Mushtaq is very fond of seafood."

Collier hid the stunned look quickly. "Good choice, good choice."

"Thank you," RK said, before he could lose his composure. Collier raised an eyebrow. "Giving me a say."

"You were their boss, you know them. And if you chose Mushtaq over your own nephew, I'm sure he's special."

RK's reply was cut off by the waiter, Nikhil again. As Nikhil set the food on the table, he chattered about the dishes. "And uncle," he said, when he'd finished. "You should bring Revathi aunty sometime."

"I like that," Collier said when Nikhil stepped away. "The way these kids just turn everyone into relatives now."

Maybe sometimes you feel kinship with those not your own, RK thought. "Do me a favor, Collier."

"Anything," Collier said.

"Keep this quiet for a day. Let me break the news to Unni."

Collier shrugged. "All right." He slurped a little of his soup. "But let me know if you change your mind."

At the end of the day, RK offered Unni a ride home. The boy looked startled but accepted.

RK waited until he'd pulled out of the parking lot before speaking. "Mushtaq is getting my job." His eyes were fixed on the rush-hour traffic, but he registered Unni's sharp exhalation. "Do you want to know why?" He turned to his nephew. The boy looked out his window.

RK turned back to the road. They drove in silence until they reached Unni's apartment block. RK pulled to a stop, but Unni made no move to get out.

"You only did it because you didn't like what I had to say." Unni laughed bitterly. "I'm glad. I'm glad because now I don't owe you anything."



“I leave a week from today. Your mother has been asking for photographs of you and your child.” Unni fumbled for the lock and pushed the car door open. “You’ve earned the curse of your elders, child. Don’t bring that down upon the girl.”

Unni said nothing as he leapt out and stalked off to his building.

RK watched Unni disappear. He would go upstairs, sulking, to Smitha’s comforting arms. RK thought about just driving off. He didn’t need to deal with these petty children, or the problems that would arise once his family heard.

But he thought about Unni in his office the other day, and his caustic remarks in the car. Whatever else, the boy had been honest. RK owed him a little honesty in return. The same caustic, hurtful honesty. He turned off the ignition, unclasped his safety belt, and stepped outside. Perhaps the boy wouldn’t open the door, RK thought as he locked the car.

It was the girl’s hesitant voice that said “hello?” when he buzzed the intercom.

“Smitha, open the door. It’s your uncle,” he said.

For a second nothing happened, then the door clicked open. RK stepped into the building.