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BETWEEN THE SKY AND EARTH

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BETWEEN THE SKY AND EARTH

Swetha Amit

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For Amit and Samara

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Abstract

Between The Sky And Earth is a collection of short stories that takes place in India, and in America, capturing the lives of Indian immigrants, and a cat, from different walks of life, some made up of students who came to pursue the American dream. The time span ranges between the early to late 2000s, capturing some significant events like farmer suicide and undocumented immigrants. These stories explore grief, trauma, identity, displacement, and relationships, focusing primarily on the consequences of losing loved ones, and unexpected mishaps that lead to a life and death situation. A couple of the stories grapple with the idea of establishing an identity through a profession or battling societal prejudices regarding gender and sexuality. The setting ranges from rural landscapes in India, a literary awards night, the desert, underwater, and to the Bay Area. The protagonists' lives intersect in the most unexpected manner—they believe that their lives still have a purpose despite facing tragic moments.

Preface

The story cycle, otherwise known as the story sequence, is an exciting concept where the stories are all linked via a narrative thread, but the stories can stand alone. These stories have an arc from the beginning, middle, and end. The narrative threads tend to create a different reading experience for the reader. The story cycle embraces the idea of showcasing one character at different stages in their life. This technique is used in works like *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout and *Night of the Living Rez* by Morgan Talty. Another facet of the story cycle is to showcase how several characters' lives are intertwined most unexpectedly. Some characters tend to appear in other stories subtly without distracting the plot of the original story. This technique can be found in *The Dew Breaker* by Edwidge Danticat, a collection of short stories linked by the appearance of one character; *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan; and *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell.

When you write a collection of short stories about characters belonging to different age groups and continents, it is challenging yet interesting to see how human lives intersect differently. The idea was initially conceptualized in the Story Cycle seminar by K.M Soehnlein in the Fall of 2020. The concept seemed fascinating, primarily because it is believed that novels and short stories are divergent by nature. The fact that there is a blurred line between books and short stories, termed as a novel in stories or composite novel, came across as a refreshing change. Fiction is a world that provides the freedom to transcend boundaries, make imaginations soar, and mold characters in various ways. The stories could be linked via common and universal themes, an object, or a character appearing in each story. It is believed that our lives on earth are interconnected in ways that may cease to surprise us. The basic formula to devise the story cycle is to stay with the same

character at different stages in his/her life. Or to find ways all the characters can be linked without being overly contrived.

Writing these stories has helped me find ways to connect the characters' lives. Though it was initially challenging, it became interesting when each story began to develop. The experience felt like solving a jigsaw puzzle, at times resulting in writer's block and the dilemma of whether this experiment would be successful. At first, I decided that it would be an object in the form of a self-help book that would appear in the characters' lives in different stories. This idea was inspired by David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, where a single object appeared in the six stories. However, in my case, the narrative thread seemed contrived and not seamlessly natural. I then decided that a couple of characters appearing in a few other stories would lead to a more seamless narration and a natural thread. The conscious attempt to make these characters unaware of how they intersect in one another's lives was one way of making it look realistic.

I solidified this choice when I wrote the first draft of the stories. In my first draft, I realized a couple of stories did not contain depth, and the protagonists' trajectories did not transform. The plot appeared too simple, and the stakes were too low. In my second draft, I wrote three new stories, and found it easier to find a link to these stories without making them look forced. The themes of the story were clear from the beginning. They revolved around grief, trauma, identity, and belonging. The timeless and universal themes made it easier to make one character appear in another story without making it seem too confusing for the reader. At the same time, the stories provide a stand-alone experience for the reader. Since the themes were universal in nature, the setting of the stories varied in terms of geographical locations, from villages in India to deserts in

Africa, the underwater world, and the Bay Area. The characters involved were both humans and pet animals. Diversity is a part of the world, and this collection would not be complete if I didn't cover various settings, age groups, and genders.

While the story cycle is the central premise of this collection, a writer must choose how to tell each story to make the experience unique for the reader. I chose to use different points of view, forms, and structure once I got an in-depth understanding of my characters and the plot of the stories. When you write a story about a particular character, the writer's instinct must decide the best way to tell a story. Once the writer decides a particular point of view, they must be convinced of why they chose to tell the story in that manner. For *The Desert Fox* and *Lost In The Silent World*, I decided to use omniscient voice to tell the traumatic experiences of the characters, to make it seem as though nature is the narrator. These characters are in a space where they are unable to distinguish between reality and illusion, I did not find it convincing to use first person, or close third, hence I made a choice to use omniscient narration. In *The Dark Cloud, Neither Here Nor There*, I used close third to maintain a slight distance from the characters, as these characters are caught in a grave spectrum, almost between life and death. I did not find the usage of first person convincing in these stories, because I wanted to find a balance between describing the character's feelings and the setting of the drought, village, and the Bay area. In *Stars Shine Down*, I used close third to maintain a balance between the protagonist and describe the setting of the literary awards night. In *Chopping The Vegetables*, I have used second-person narrative to display the distance between the character with themselves, having to deal with the traumatic experience of losing a loved one. Here the protagonist is a girl in her twenties who wants to talk about the death of her mother yet cannot come to terms with her absence completely. She is in denial in some sense and wants to believe

that this experience has happened to someone else. The usage of different points of view exhibits how different people deal with traumatic experiences in different ways. In *Confessions Of A Serial Eater*, *On The Run*, *On The Prowl*, and *Dear Ma* I have used first person to delve into the characters' interiority, giving the readers an understanding of what it's like to live in their minds and bodies while undergoing devastating experiences.

The different points of view lend to the structure and form of the stories. Some stories pursue a novel method of telling the story and play an integral role in the plot and the character's trajectory. In *Confessions Of A Serial Eater*, which is about a woman battling her body image issues, the protagonist cannot share her thoughts with anyone else, including her close confidants or family members. In this case, I devised the form of a journal entry, where the character can share her thoughts unabashedly, giving readers a sense of what it is like to be inside her mind and empathize with the character. In *On The Run*, the protagonist is a gay runner told in the first person. I have used a different structure to capture his stream of consciousness while he is running a half marathon. At every mile, right from the start to the finish line, readers can access the depth of his thoughts which trace back to his childhood, grappling with his identity, sexuality, and parental pressure. These are thoughts that the protagonist is unable to share with the outside world. During the run, the mind tends to travel back in time, which is typical of any runner. This protagonist is no different; at every mile, readers experience the intensity of a run and his thoughts that get deeper with every mile until the finish line. In *Dear Ma*, the character writes letters to his dead mother. Using the first person is essential while using the epistolary form, be it journal entries or letters. In this story, the protagonist experiences feelings of remorse and guilt and cannot share his thoughts with anyone else. These letters are an outlet for his repressed emotions and an apology note to his

mother, who has passed away. Readers get the experience of having stumbled upon a stack of letters, and they get access to the interiority of the protagonist's thoughts about his childhood as he witnessed horrors, was subjected to predatory actions, and kindness.

Using different methods to tell these stories makes it a fun and engaging experience for the reader. It compels them to empathize with the protagonists' journeys, feelings, actions, and thoughts. It also makes the readers share the protagonists' experiences and gives them the feeling of seamlessly finding the narrative thread and solving a jigsaw puzzle. Readers are compelled to debate and discuss using a particular form to tell a story. Reading *Between The Sky And Earth* will make their experience enriching and illuminating.

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The Dark Cloud

Not a speck of cloud. No sign of rain. Second year in a row. Kishan looked up at the blazing sky in despair. It appeared like a perfect canvas of blue. Yet the farmer was in no mood to appreciate the beauty of nature. Not when it was the monsoon season, and the rains were playing hooky. Another year of drought, no crops, and a loan burden of one lakh and seventy thousand rupees. Taken from the money lenders. What could he tell them this time? Goosebumps pricked his saggy skin. There was nothing to do but stare at the sky with a faint hope that the mass sheet of blue would miraculously turn into puffs of grey accompanied by a rumbling sound of thunder. Kishan did that, and a small prayer escaped his lips - *om gan ganpathaye namaha*.

While Kishan continued to pray, gaze at the sky, and tend to his cattle, the ground beneath him was beginning to show signs of cracks. He missed seeing the green fields he had been accustomed to since childhood. How he'd run through the carpet of green, bask in the joy of seeing his father's face beam with happiness. He was heartbroken to see the field now look parched and lifeless. He could almost hear the brown patch of land plead to the skies for a spell of rain. He looked at his cattle and noticed how their rib cages became more prominent daily. Kishan lost all hope about the arrival of the rain. Usually, they were punctual, and the *Shravan* month was already here. Perhaps the rain Gods were angry. Nature's wrath was affecting him and his friends.

He wondered what his plight would have been if he migrated to the city like his friends. Would he enjoy working as a factory laborer? Toiling in someone else's land? And there was his wife, Gita, pestering him to move, stating she could work as a maid. Would she enjoy scrubbing floors in someone else's home? While he missed his friends, he realized he would miss waking up in the morning to the rooster crowing, tending to his cattle, looking at the skies, and watching his

crops flourish, along with his eight-year-old son Bhuvan. He could feel a surge of energy rush through his vein just thinking about his land.

How could he even entertain the thought of leaving it behind? It was utter blasphemy. His eyes filled with tears just at the mere thought. His land was his identity, soul, and connection to his ancestors. And that promise he made to *babuji*? He had to convince Gita too. He couldn't blame her for grumbling about the scarcity of resources, food, and Bhuvan's future. Sometimes he felt useless for not being able to provide for his family adequately. And on the other hand, he wondered if his friends were happy in the city. And then he thought about his other friends who left behind wailing infants and widows beating their chests loudly. What a sad plight. For a moment, Kishan had a fleeting thought. He wondered for the umpteenth time if the afterlife was the only place where he could find solace. And then smacked himself for giving rise to another set of blasphemous thoughts. He was always advised to bide by tough times. Hadn't his father told him that several times? Even until his last breath.

"*Beta*, promise me whatever you do, never sell this land," his father said.

"I won't, *babuji*," Kishan clutched his father's hand. He watched his father take hoarse breaths, and his weak body after an attack of the flu, and the numerous attempted failed remedies.

"This land," his father coughed. "This land is more than just mud and dirt. It's an inherent part of you. Part of your ancestors."

He coughed more while Kishan tenderly stroked his father's chest, and tears poured down his face.

"Don't cry. You will face turbulent times, but it's not the end."

"*Babuji*...I won't."

His father coughed incessantly and then stopped. Kishan watched his father's eyes close, and his body turn still.

Kishan whispered, "I promise *Babuji*, I'll never sell the land."

Beads of perspiration began to form on his forehead and trickled down his neck. How could he repay the loan of one lakh and seventy thousand rupees? He wiped it with the cloth that he had tied around his head. A rumbling sound occurred. The farmer patted his stomach and sighed. All he had eaten since morning was a little piece of *roti* and a small cup of milk. He noticed how the sacks used to store *Atta*, onions, and potatoes in his house gradually shrank. Creases of wrinkles formed on his forehead as he frowned. He felt his hollow, emaciated, and gaunt cheekbones with his fingers. He noticed his reflection in the well behind his hut that morning. His black hair had now turned into a patch of white, making him appear forty years old, although he was a decade younger.

What was going to happen to his family? How will they get their food? And what about his cattle? Shadows began to form around him. Kishan looked up to see the sun making its way to the other side. Soon it would disappear behind those mountains, leaving a streak of pink shade. Birds would be flying back to their nests. It was time to retreat to his home, where Gita, and Bhuvan would be waiting for him. He began to group his cattle together. The two sturdy oxen with their long thick horns looked intimidating. They could scare the evil spirits away. Only he knew how gentle they were underneath their tough exterior. He patted their backs just like he did with Bhuvan. His two cows and calves were left to wander and graze whatever remained on the land. Kishan looked up at the sky one last time and uttered that prayer. Surely God would listen to his pleas and shower them with rain?

He trudged barefoot, and his white *dhoti* was wrapped around him like a curtain. His right hand was clasped around a stick used to drive away anyone or anything that troubled his cattle. So far, there wasn't any reason for him to lift his stick except for a few stray dogs. They would occasionally come, bare their teeth, snarl, and growl. A gentle raise of his stick made them scurry away like frightened rabbits. He soon reached his humble rectangular-shaped home covered with a thatched roof. His glance fell on that big tree whose branches spread out in a manner that felt like an embrace. He believed that the spirits of his ancestors resided there and sought comfort from the fact they guided him during times of turmoil.

Kishan sat under that tree while his cattle roamed around it. He thought about those days when he'd accompany his father to the fields and tend to the cattle. And when he'd feel like a grown-up while accompanying his father to the *Kholapur Mandi*, watch his bargain with the traders for a reasonable price. His father's face would beam with pride as they would bring the largest produce amongst the farmer's lot. The traders wasted no time in showering praises on his father. Sometimes they'd hand him a sweet or two, which he'd munch on the journey back to the village. There were times when he'd seen his father endure trouble, and those traders would come to their aid with some loans. He'd seen his father sign some papers. Luckily, the weather Gods favored his father, who would repay the loan with interest. The same luck favored him, too, except for the past two years. Until that day, the men came to see him, and he watched them eye his land. That unmistakable look of hunger in their eyes was something he hadn't seen before.

"Your land will be your savior," they'd said. At first, Kishan didn't understand. "You can always count on it to fetch a fortune." But why would he want to sell his land? "You never know," they smiled. It was only then he realized the traders, whom he thought were angels, wanted to seize his land at the given opportunity.

The cattle shifted restlessly, and Kishan knew it was time for their routine. He went to the small shed next to the hut, where the cattle rested at night, and began his regular cleaning routine. He talked to them while he gently scrubbed them.

"So, Munna, you really worked hard today. What would I do without you?" The white ox perked its ears and shook its head. Kishan turned to the other brown ox. "Raja, you both are my pillars of strength. I just wish nature wasn't so cruel to us." Just then, a white calf with big brown eyes made a noise. "What is it, Mini?" Kishan asked gently. The calf nuzzled its head against his leg, and he leaned down and stroked her gently. Her mother, Rani, stood there watching him, blinking as she continued chewing. Tani, the other cow, stood in a corner with her calf Mini. Kishan could feel their gaze on him as though they were waiting for reassurance.

"I know these are tough times. This, too, shall pass. My father said that a farmer needs to endure such phases," Kishan said. He finished scrubbing his oxen and poured some water on their backs. The cold water from the almost empty well would ease their tired muscles. How hard they plowed the fields despite not getting enough to eat. The fear of his cattle being reduced to skeletons made his eyelids heavy. He clumsily wiped a tear with the back of his palm. He began conversing with them again. "You must have a good sleep tonight. Let's hope that tomorrow is a better day. Hope is the only thing we can cling to. Sleep tight, my beautiful ones. I'll see you in the morning." He patted each of them before he made his way toward the hut.

He noticed how the pink streak in the sky was gradually converting into ink blue. He could hear the chirrup of the insects. His heart skipped a beat when he noticed a slithering movement near the tree. He breathed a sigh of relief as he realized it was just the garden lizard making its rounds. Then he saw a silhouette at the entrance of his hut. He could identify the familiar veiled head on a wiry body, hair tied into a bun. Gita fanned herself with the *pallu* of her sari. Her

breathing was rapid, and her eyes were red. He noticed the weight she had lost, the haggard look on her face that otherwise used to possess to certain glow. Her *mangalsutra*-a gold chain with black beads hung around her neck while she twisted it around her fingers. He observed the streaks of grey in her hair. He felt sorry thinking about her plight and wished their troubles would end.

"About time," Gita slammed the plate of *rotis* on the floor.

"It was a long and hot day," Kishan wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Hard day for the cattle as well."

"The men were here," Gita toyed with her green sari.

"Let's eat first," Kishan sat down wearily.

He rested his back against the wall that separated the front and back of their hut. Beside him were a few sacks, vessels, and pans. He noticed a tiny spark from the small stove of dried cow dung. One *roti* was almost getting burnt, and he signaled to Gita, who hurriedly smacked the *roti* from the stove. He was puzzled at her disposition, as she was usually attentive about her cooking. He noticed her glancing at the picture of Ganesha and then at the back of the hut where three sleeping mats were placed. He saw her rummaging through their clothes that were loosely piled up in a heap in one corner. Gita muttered something about not finding a cloth and went to their backyard, which extended into the forest area. He was worried about Gita going outside when it was dark. He heaved a sigh of relief when she entered the hut again with a piece of cloth. The *roti* was half burnt, and Kishan chewed slowly, just like how the cows masticated their food.

"They are coming back tomorrow," Gita said.

Kishan felt like someone had planted a massive stone in his chest. What will the men say? What will they do to him? His breathing became rapid, and he almost choked.

"Can I have some water?" Kishan sighed. Gita poured water into a glass from a clay pot and slammed it on the floor. Kishan gulped it down.

"I know some good buyers for the land," Gita stressed.

"The mud in the fields felt like ash today."

"That's how our life is now."

"Not again, Gita. Where is Bhuvan?"

"Asleep. Do you know how scared he was after seeing those men"?

"The rains will come. It's just a matter of time."

"Our livelihood will not depend on the city's rains."

"Will you be happy working as a maid, Gita?"

"Housekeeper. Are you happy being at the mercy of those brutal moneylenders? Don't you care about Bhuvan's education? Don't you care about me?"

"I do care about both of you. We will be happy...."

"Over your dead body Kishan?"

"You don't mean that."

"I don't mean.... I don't want you to....," Gita mumbled and bit her lip.

She clutched her *mangalsutra*. Kishan watched her press the sacred symbol of their marriage against her forehead, close her eyes, and chant a small prayer. For fear of losing such a valuable ornament, Kishan knew that Gita never took off the chain, even during her bath. He felt guilty thinking about his promise to her parents, who had been reputed schoolteachers in the village. Illness consumed them both, and he promised no inconvenience would befall Gita on their deathbed. He heard an owl hoot and a dog barking loudly at a distance. He noticed a lizard found its way into the hut, and watched it climb up the wall, stick out a tongue, and trap a fly.

"The village is turning into a ghost town," Gita whispered.

"Maybe we might see those clouds tomorrow. Dark grey clouds. Just like old times."

"Why aren't you listening to me? We have no time. Would you rather part with the land respectfully or have it snatched from you, Kishan? The cattle must be sold too," Gita threw her hands up in exasperation.

Kishan felt a sharp pain as though someone had stabbed him with a sword and ripped his heart into pieces. He placed his right hand over his chest.

"Have you forgotten how they have been giving us their share of milk every morning?"

"This is no time for emotions or sentiments."

"Will you please, please, please understand my feelings, Gita?"

"And watch those men butcher you?"

"It's just a matter of time."

"We don't have time." Gita pranced up and down the hut. "A lot of people are fine and have moved on. Look at my sister and *Jijaji*. They are happy now."

"You don't understand my sentiments, do you, Gita?"

Gita began to scrub the plates furiously.

"Quiet. You'll wake up, Bhuvan," Kishan tried to pacify her. His face turned red, and his muscles tensed. His hands shook, and he clenched his fists. "Please understand, we will be like slaves in the city, Gita."

Gita stopped scrubbing the plates and looked at him.

"It's better than being at the mercy of those brutal money lenders."

Kishan did not say anything but looked at the shrinking sacks of *Atta* and potatoes. For a long time, silence lingered between him and Gita. He sullenly gazed outside the hut at the tree. He

had half a mind to sit under the tree and mull over his heated conversation with Gita. The thought of a predator roaming in the village restrained him from venturing outside. In just a few hours, the sky would change colors. How he hoped he'd see those grey clouds again. Gita stood up and went to the back of the hut where Bhuvan slept peacefully. She picked up their belongings and began to pack them into bundles and bags.

"What are you doing, Gita?"

Gita looked outside. "Getting ready to leave. The men will be here."

"Is this what you really want?"

"You should have seen their faces today."

Outside, the rooster crowed. The darkness paved the way for the illuminating golden rays of the sun. Bhuvan stirred in his sleep.

"But will we really be happy there, Gita?"

"Nothing wrong with the city. Things will be fine."

Kishan didn't say anything. His gaze fell upon Gita's *mangalsutra*, and a sudden thought occurred.

"What if you pledge that chain, and then maybe I can repurchase it once ...?"

Gita's face clouded in anger as she realized Kishan's scathing suggestion. She threw the bundle of clothes on the floor.

"If you don't want to, you don't have to. Please forgive me, Gita. I am unable to make sense of anything." Kishan picked up the bundle and placed it in her hands.

Bhuvan rubbed his eyes sleepily. Kishan beckoned him.

"Come here, *beta*. How are you feeling today?"

"Better *Babuji*."

"The cattle missed you yesterday. Even I did..."

Kishan's voice trailed at the sight of Gita's pale face. Her voice shook as she pointed at a cloud of dust at a distance. With every ticking minute, the dark cloud was moving closer. Gita closed her eyes and uttered a prayer. *Om gan ganpathaye namhaha Om gan ganpathaye namaha om gan ganpathaye namaha*. She fanned herself vigorously. Bhuvan looked confused while Kishan wiped his forehead with the back of his palm. Together they watched the sturdy, tall and muscular figures with faces sporting long thick mustaches and bushy eyebrows. Wearing pants with cotton shirts, they strutted with an air of confidence. One man in a black shirt was smoking a gold flake king cigarette. Kishan's heart fluttered like a thousand moths flapping their wings, and his legs felt like some force beneath the ground held them together. His breathing became hoarse, like his father on his deathbed. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if he was about to die.

"Ah, there you are, Kishan. It's about time," the man in the black shirt said.

A cloud of smoke blew into Kishan's face. He coughed and began to perspire. He clutched his son and whispered.

"Just take out the cattle and tend to them. "

"*Babuji*..."

"Please, *beta*. Do as I say."

Bhuvan nodded and went outside.

"Kishan," the man with the black shirt held a sheaf of papers. "You took a loan two years ago. You were supposed to repay them in installments. Pay up with interest, else...." The other two men surrounded Kishan. Gita watched with terror in her eyes when Kishan prostrated himself at the man's feet.

"*Saab*, please understand. No rains for two years."

One of the men pulled Kishan up with his hand and held him by the neck.

"You are left with no choice but to sign these papers."

"No, *Saab*, no. Please. Please try to understand. This land is my life. My promise to *babuji*."

Tears flowed down Kishan's gaunt face. He made no attempt to wipe them.

"I will sell myself but not my land. Don't be heartless, *Saab*. Have mercy on our plight. We don't have a morsel to eat. I have a son. My cattle are getting weaker and dying."

The man in the black shirt dropped his cigarette on the floor. He crushed it with his foot. Smoke still emanated from it. He lit up another one with his lighter.

"Do you want to die as well?"

"I would rather end my life than give up the land." Kishan wept until his eyes turned red.

If he cried anymore, it would be blood tears trickling down his cheeks. He began to cough even more as the man blew little clouds of smoke onto his face. He watched Gita clutch her *mangalsutra* while the man in the black shirt tried to get Kishan's fingerprint on the papers. He saw Gita cover her face, rush inside, and come back with some water. Another man in the white shirt was now reasoning with him.

"Look, Kishan, you are in serious debt. Selling your land will save you all this trouble. We have no choice but to force you to sign these papers."

Kishan leaned against the wall. One of the men lunged forward, but the man in the white shirt stopped him.

"We were on good terms with your father and grandfather. Don't force us to do something we'll regret later, " said the man in the white shirt.

The images of Rani, Tani, Mani, and Mini flashed across his mind. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Gita handed him some water which he gulped weakly. Outside, the sun had reached its highest position above the horizon. Kishan could see Bhuvan tending to the cattle waiting for their owner. The ears of the oxen drooped, and cows stood lazily under that tree with the calves snuggling up to them.

Kishan's voice sounded strange as he feebly said, "Take my cattle."

He could see Gita staring at him in disbelief. The men looked at one another for a long time. Finally, the man in the black shirt spoke.

"Call your son, and let's see how much your cattle will fetch you."

Kishan stumbled outside and called out to Bhuvan, who immediately nudged the cattle. Kishan watched those men scrutinize his four-legged family and discuss in hushed tones with one another.

"The cattle will fetch you a good price, and you will only be able to clear half your debts. What about the rest?"

"*Saab*, if the rains come...."

"No, Kishan, we cannot give you any more time. Two years was the agreement."

One of the men took Kishan's hand forcibly and held it tight.

"*Babuji...*" Bhuvan cried.

One of the men shoved Kishan. He fell to the ground and hit his chin against a stone. Blood oozed out, and he cupped his hand on his chin. He saw Gita gasp in horror, and she rushed towards him, tearing a piece from her sari. Kishan's eyes fell on Gita's *mangalsutra* while experiencing the heady rush of pain, blood, and tears. His head swelled as he watched the beaded chain dance in front of him. He felt like it was almost begging him to get rid of it. Was it speaking to him, saying his problems would be solved? All sorts of voices plunged into his head. Maybe he should offer it

to those greedy men. Images of his dying father, land with green fertile crops, and cattle danced in front of him. Logic eluded him. All he could think about was his land, cattle, and ancestors. He could buy Gita another chain, couldn't he? It's not as though his marriage would be any less sacred without the *mangalsutra*. He could explain this to Gita. Before he could change his mind, he uttered loudly.

"*Saab*, I will give you her *mangalsutra*. Pure gold. Will fetch you a fortune," Kishan cried.

He saw Gita's face and hands freeze. A piece of her green sari was around Kishan's chin. She let go and the drops of blood trickled onto the floor. The patch of brown was stained with dark red spots. The men stared at Kishan in surprise.

"Are you really sure about that, Kishan?" the man in the white shirt spoke up.

"Please don't take my land, *Saab*."

"But Kishan..."

"This is all I have," Kishan folded his hands.

The men once again spoke in hushed tones.

"Even then, Kishan, it all adds up to only one lakh rupees. What about the rest of the remaining seventy thousand rupees? We have no choice but to take part of your land." The man in the white shirt took Kishan's thumbprint on the papers. Kishan muttered an apology to his ancestors, stating he had no choice, and promised to buy back that piece of land.

Kishan looked at Gita, who stared at him in aghast. Wordlessly, she handed over her *mangalsutra*. Her eyelids grew moist with unshed tears, accompanied by an angry expression. There was a strange blaze in her eyes Kishan had never seen before. "Sorry, Gita," he muttered. "I'll make it up to you. Please don't hold this against me. Give me another chance to make amends." She just stared at him wordlessly. The men took the *mangalsutra* and dragged the cattle, which

resisted and moaned. Kishan patted his four-legged family for the last time, tears trickling down his face. They looked at them with confusion in their eyes.

"Sorry, my beautiful ones," was all he could say. "Forgive me."

The image of the men and the cattle became tiny as they moved farther away from the hut. The cloud of dust dissipated gradually. Gita dragged Bhuvan inside the hut while Kishan sat under that tree and wept. He lost track of the sun shifting to the other side with every passing second. He failed to notice the sky had turned pink or the birds were flying back to their nests. He didn't see how the sky turned ink blue later or hear the insect's chirrup. The cattle were conspicuous by their absence. Gita and Bhuvan had retired to bed when he walked back to the hut. He reached his arm to shake Gita awake.

"Gita, I'm...."

"There is nothing left to say, Kishan."

"Gita, our marriage will always be sacred with or without the chain."

"*Mangalsutra*, Kishan."

"Gita, please understand that I'll buy you a better chain once things improve."

"It might be a chain for you, but to me, it's something you'll never understand."

"But Gita...."

"I don't want to hear another word."

What could he say or do? Kishan retreated to the empty cattle shed and stared at it for a while before he broke down. Replaying the events of that day in his head, tears flowed down his face. He lay on the haystack, ruminating about his cleaning routine with the cattle. He hoped that he could somehow convince Gita. It would take days, months even. But he hoped she'd get to see his point of view someday. He would shower her with extra love and even cook meals if required.

His eyelids began to feel heavy, and before he realized it, he drifted off to sleep. Dreams about Gita's angst face, the men's angry faces, and Bhuvan's quizzical one haunted him. A part of him felt relieved of no longer having the burden of that loan. Yet another part of him ached at the thought of Gita's wrath on selling the *mangalsutra*. Kishan shivered, and his teeth began to chatter. He tossed and turned. He began to hear different sounds in his sleep. The cattle mooing, Bhuvan crying, and then the rooster crowing. Suddenly he woke up with a jolt. He was surprised to see it was unusually dark inside the cattle shed. How long had it been? Was it still night? He quickly got up to rush to the hut. Gita and Bhuvan would wonder about his whereabouts.

When he stepped outside, he blinked in surprise. It was morning. The blue canvas was replaced with shades of grey. He stared open mouthed as water dripped from his thatched roof. The rains kissed the parched ground. His heart did a little leap of joy, and his prayers were answered. He looked up, folded his hands, and muttered a prayer of thanks. He could harvest his crops on the remaining land he had left. Next year, they will be in a better situation. He rushed inside the hut. When he went to the back side, he noticed the two sleeping mats were missing. Only his pile of clothes remained. The empty hut struck him like a bolt. He collapsed on the floor with both his hands on his head. Even before he could get a chance to make amends, she'd left him. He knew Gita would be furious but never thought she'd leave him. What use was life without them? Where would he go searching for them?

He looked at the dark clouds continuing to gather outside. The rains lashed down furiously. Lightning struck and was followed by a rumbling sound of thunder. While the storm raged outside, another storm was brewing inside Kishan's head. He had lost his cattle and now his family. If only he could get an opportunity to get Gita and Bhuvan back. The rains were here; he could cultivate

crops like his father and make money. He could even buy his cattle back, but not his family. He felt an aching feeling in his heart, his head spun, and he fell to the ground. He looked at the tree and could sense the spirits of his ancestors beckoning him.

Chopping The Vegetables

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. You stand there in the kitchen chopping the vegetables, listening to the sound of raindrops dripping on the window. The rainy winter of Northern California seems to have instigated your appetite. You peel the carrots, slice them along with the onions, tomatoes, and cucumbers. You take a step back and look at the vibrant display of shades in front of you, wishing you could add some color to your dreary life as the color of the plate of vegetables. You feel a tear roll down your cheek. And it's not because of the onions. You wipe it away and glance at your reflection on the glass of the cutlery shelf above you. A pair of brown eyes on a dusky complexion with straight black hair stares back at you. The sky rumbles, and for a flinching second, you think you catch sight of an older version of you. You blink in disbelief. It cannot be! And yet it feels like it's her.

Exactly a year since she went out of your life. Your world had come tumbling down with that phone call. You remember the last words of your mother before she left in her car. *See you soon*, she said, stroking your hair just like she always did. You were hoping to spend that weekend with your parents and talk about your future after graduating from UC Berkeley. You didn't expect to see your mother lying still with her eyes closed at the hospital. That image continues to haunt you even today. Her face strangely looked peaceful. How could she leave you so soon? She had promised to listen to your plans, share your heartbreaks, shop with you for your wedding and change the nappies of your babies. Why mom, why? You feel betrayed and shudder when you think of that voice over the phone that February evening, "Is that Amrita? I am afraid your mother has met with an accident and is in the hospital." It was raining just like it was today. You dropped your phone, screaming for your father. You dialed his number with trembling hands several times

until he picked up with an impatient Hello? You mumbled as tears flowed down your cheeks. At twenty, you sounded just like your eight-year-old self who was afraid of the dark. Vulnerable, petrified, and helpless.

You decided to take a break for a year. All you do is brood and visit the kitchen multiple times. A place that keeps you connected to your mother. You cling on to her memories of your moments with her here. It's the only way you keep her alive. That scene at the hospital flashes in front of you. "It's too late," the doctor had said. "Severe head injuries and little chance of survival." Her car had collided with another on the highway. The front glass was smashed, and the steering wheel was dripping with blood and droplets of rain. You prayed to God, hoping for a miracle. What wouldn't you have done to see your mother open her eyes and smile at you as she always did? You saw nurses and doctors working on her, trying their best to save her. Those crooked lines eventually turned into one straight line accompanied by the beeping sound of the monitor. You open your mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. Your father's hand on your shoulder fails to reassure you. He is clearly upset but strangely calm, knowing he had to be that anchor to help you combat this storm that had wrecked your sanity.

You recollect a strain in their relationship before your mother's death. You could notice, being the sensitive person you are, even if you were away from them. But they dismissed it whenever you broached the topic. "Busy with new contacts and deals," your father, who worked at a venture firm, said. Your mother's voice sounded tight and guarded. "Just a lot of reading and new releases," she shrugged. A reviewer for a literary journal, she was constantly surrounded by books. Their nonchalant behavior nagged you to a point, compelling you to visit that weekend, citing the excuse of wanting to discuss your future academic plans. Your mother appeared to be flustered and in a hurry that afternoon. The door slammed after her, and the sound echoed in the

hall. The aroma of cinnamon, cloves, and spices wafted in the air. You walked towards the kitchen and saw that she had cooked vegetable *biryani*-your favorite dish. Next to it was a bowl of *raita*.

You remembered those times when you and your mother would cook these dishes. It was a regular ritual every Sunday. As a little girl, you'd enjoy watching her smoothly pierce through the carrots and onions. The sound of the knife on the cutting board reverberated throughout the room. Chop chop chop, they'd go, sounding like musical notes to your ears, accompanied by a soft humming sound from her lips. Her eyes shone with pride, seeing the deluge of colors, shapes, and sizes as she cut them into small pieces. Sometimes you'd see water in her eyes. You'd ask why she was crying. "It's from the onions," she'd laugh through her tears. Then there were times she'd carve faces out of the left-over vegetables and arrange them neatly on a plate.

"Mom, why do you do that?" you'd ask.

"Just for fun. I always indulge in creativity outside my writing. To make mundane things look interesting."

"How?"

"In whatever ways, you can."

You would watch her sprinkle the colorful little pieces into a bowl of curd that she had whipped with a spatula to make it smooth. She would then garnish it with coriander leaves. When you were twelve, you learned this art. You felt all grown up to be holding that knife. Over time you mastered this craft and spent several joyous times with your mother. Your father would jokingly remark about not wanting to interrupt the women bonding. "My two lovely and talented ladies, you could give Julia Child competition," he'd say fondly. There were times they'd drive from their home in the suburbs to the city. You would all gape at the view of Land's End, stroll around Golden Gate Park, and picnic at Shakespeare Garden. Together you'd discuss *Romeo and*

Juliet, Hamlet, and Othello while munching on sandwiches and cookies. Those good old days and moments that felt like a different era were still close to your heart. You even remember those torrid arguments and tantrums with your mother. Over messy rooms, your bizarre piercings, tattoos, your choice of clothes, your mother's spacing out resulting in her lack of attention towards you sometimes, her critique on your writing, expecting high standards from a schoolgirl. There were times when you felt she didn't understand you. Like when you dated that boy she didn't like from your class. Not your kind, she'd said. You called her a snob. Later she'd apologize and exude the warmth of a mama bear, embracing you in her arms.

Your father tried his best to be supportive and patient. Even those nights when you'd wake up screaming. Even when you refused to go back to school. Even when you weren't interested in talking to your friends. Even when all you wanted to do was stay in the kitchen the entire day, chopping vegetables. "Post-traumatic stress disorder," the doctor had said. "It's tough. Give her time and always be there for her." You feel grateful for your father's support. Even though you knew he was hurting inside. Once, you even saw him crying silently. When you tried to comfort him, he said it was due to the onions he'd tried chopping earlier. You felt like a part of your body had been chopped off. You look at her photograph numerous times. Sometimes you almost feel like you see her standing in that kitchen, her slender build silhouetted against that marble slab, chopping the vegetables, and talking in her soft voice. One thought constantly troubles you. Where was your mother going on that Friday afternoon in the rain? Why was she in such a hurry that she couldn't stop and chat with you?

Just then, you hear the door open and shut. Your father is home. You hear his footsteps coming towards the kitchen.

"Smells good. Just like how Mamta used to make it," he remarks. You smile weakly and accompany him to the living room. His newly acquired beard makes him look older than his age. You spot the spurts of grey and the tired look in his eyes. Even though he hasn't been working as hard as he used to.

"Were mom and you happy?" you blurt out.

Your father looks up and thinks for a while.

"Mamta and I shared a wonderful relationship," his eyes had a faraway look. "There are times when certain things happen. It makes you wonder if you were at fault. I often think I was spending too much time at work. Did you... did you ever feel neglected by me at any point, Amrita?"

You look at the door wordlessly, recollecting your mother's last words at that same place. Her black dress, silver earrings, lip gloss, and pulled-back hair looked different. Quite a contrast from her usual flowery, bright-colored dresses and equally bright shades of lipstick. Your thoughts are interrupted by your father's voice.

"Tell me, Amrita."

You shake your head. He smiles with relief, but a look of concern immediately flashes on his face.

"Amrita, I am worried about you. I mean...," he pauses and gently pats your shoulder. "I was twelve when my mother passed away. It's hard..." he pauses and wipes a tear. "My extended family offered their support but...."

You knew what he was about to say. Your maternal aunt invited you over to Dallas, where she lived with her husband and two sons, for a change of scene. You declined. You weren't up to meeting anyone. Not your paternal uncle who lived a few miles away with his family. Not your

maternal grandparents in India. You didn't want sympathy. You couldn't bear the thought of looking at their eyes oozing with false concern accompanied by sighs. You look at your father and nod.

It was sometime during the Labor Day weekend when you started detecting some sort of tension. You were visiting home and excitedly making plans for Christmas and Thanksgiving. The lukewarm response by your parents left you baffled. Christmas vacation turned out to be a quiet affair. You all drove up to Mendocino, where your mother would spend afternoons scouting the bookstores for new releases. There were times she'd get phone calls in the middle of dinner. Your father bit his lip, and your mother looked around apologetically. "Sorry. Just an emergency at work," she says. "The phone calls came around the same time, and she'd go outside to attend them. Why couldn't she talk in front of us, you'd think. You remember that one instance at the bookstore where you and your mother spotted the bookstore cat named after a famous classic. Your mother excitedly clicked a selfie of you both with the cat. It purred, and she stroked it. "Maybe we should get a cat someday," she said. Being an animal lover, you instantly agreed, while your father wasn't too ecstatic about the idea of a pet in the house.

You checked your phone to see if you had that photo. It was probably on your mother's phone. For the first time after her death, you wonder about her belongings. What happened to her wallet and phone after her accident? You almost ask your father, but you stop. What holds you back? You aren't sure. You want to try and look for it first. It's dinner time. Your father eats the *Biryani* and *raita*. "Nice," he says. That Julia Child remark accompanied by that wide grin is missing. You remember the initial few months after your mother's death.

Despite the house swarming with relatives, it felt empty. Your eyes were as red as the tomatoes, and it felt as though you had been cutting a thousand onions. You refrained from any

social contact, and your teachers were understanding. When you visited her study and stood by the door, the smell of books wafted into your nostrils. Her desk was as tidy as ever. You imagined her sitting in that chair, her face buried into the pages of a book or typing away on her laptop. All those images would make you burst into tears and run down the stairs to the living room. One day, you decided to carry on making *Biryani* and *Raita*. Your mother would have wanted this. There were times you'd make it on other days besides Sunday. You hadn't eaten properly for weeks except for an occasional nibble. Your father's pasta seemed to taste like rubber. Somehow the rice and its yogurt accompaniment managed to elicit your long-lost appetite. They were the only remnants of your mother's recipe. Not that she didn't make other varieties. But the *Biryani* and *raita* held a special place. It was probably because it was your first introduction to the culinary world.

Your father clears the table and loads the dishwasher. He retires to the den to do some work before bedtime. All he does is immerse himself in work. You go upstairs to your mother's study and turn on the light. The laptop is on her desk, and her books are arranged neatly on a shelf next to it. You see a book next to the computer. You pick it up curiously and read the title. *Ctrl alt del* by Aditi Chaubey. What a unique title, you think. You find it strange as your mother wasn't too much into self-help books. You study the synopsis and profile of the author on the back cover of the book. She worked at an IT firm in Mumbai, where she lived with her husband. Majored in computers. Hmm. Why did the name sound familiar? Did your mother mention anything? You wrack your brain while the clock on the desk ticked seconds. As you browse her desk, you come across a list of Indian authors. Now you remember! Your mother once mentioned how there seemed to be a surge of Indian contemporary authors across genres. She said *Ctrl alt del* was unlike the other self-help books. You flip through the pages and read the lines she has underlined. *If I didn't try to start afresh, I'd have dissolved in my own pool of sorrow. I would have been embroiled*

in the quicksand that I could never get out of. Was it easy? No. Every step felt as though I was carrying a massive rock on my shoulders. What did that mean? Why did your mother underline these sentences? Was there a hidden meaning?

Suddenly you see a face at the window. Beautiful green eyes, whiskers, and golden-brown fur. The ginger cat's eyes scan the room before it rests on you. You stare at it in awe, wondering where it came from. Was it a stray? Was it somebody's lost cat? Was it a sign from the universe to adopt a pet, like your mother always wanted? For a moment, you wonder if it's your mother in a different form, and then shake your head. You open the window to stroke the cat, but it runs away. You blink and mull about it for a minute before you begin to look at your mother's belongings.

The room was devoid of any dirt, thanks to the cleaners who came in every fortnight to deep clean your three-bedroom two-level house tucked away in a quiet neighborhood in Silicon Valley. Downstairs is the large living room with French windows and a spacious open kitchen that overlooked the backyard where your mother had a small garden. Along with her death, the plants lost their luster. You moved here at the age of seven after living in a cramped apartment in the city for three years. After your father got a job with a venture firm, you all decided to move to the suburbs, where life was more peaceful.

You open your mother's drawer and find her car keys and a mobile phone inside. You gingerly touch the car keys wishing they had been misplaced on that fateful day. If only you could turn the clock back. If only you had stopped your mother from driving in that rain. But your mother weathered various such storms, including driving on the highway with the rains lashing furiously on her windshield. "It's so mystical," she'd say, and her eyes would shine like gems. You take her phone and try switching it on. Of course, the battery was drained. You immediately put it on the

charger, watching the battery's red bar gradually convert to green, just like the traffic lights. Did someone jump the signal, you wonder? The driver in the other car was injured, but he had survived. Life is not fair, you think. Why couldn't he die instead? The other driver, a middle-aged man, had exceeded the speed limit as he was in a hurry to get to a meeting. He was fined, and he apologized profusely after being discharged from the hospital. No amount of apology or money would bring back your mother. Your mother's car still stood in the garage, looking as new as ever after the repairs covered by the insurance. If only humans could be repaired as quickly.

Fat blobs of salty puddles form on the keyboard. Your eyes are blurred as you switch on your mother's phone. You see some unread texts and WhatsApp messages dated a year ago. Some forwards and personal messages. You go through her photos and check for that picture you were looking for. It's there. You, your mother, and the adorable black and white furry cat. Her smile is as radiant as ever as it always is whenever she is surrounded by books. You send that message to your phone, hoping to print it and frame it. Just then, you spot a few other photographs. You feel lousy prying, but curiosity gets the better of you. These were photos of her office get-together. How different your mother looked!

More poised and sober. And then you see something that creates a nauseous feeling in your stomach, just like how you feel every time during the car ride up the hills. You see this bespectacled man with mousy brown hair dressed in a suit with an arm around your mother. It's a group photo and looks like a harmless, friendly gesture. But deep down, you feel something. You aren't sure what. Was it the way your mother was smiling? She has had men acquaintances before, but this man piqued your curiosity. You scroll down and see more photos of him, some of him and your mother at another get-together where she is wearing a navy-blue dress. Sophisticated and stylish. It almost feels like she's someone else. Your mother wouldn't change for anyone else. A person

who talked about embracing creativity never bent their rules for anyone. So why now? You check her messages. *Sorry, mom*, you mumble. You cannot help it. Guilt pricks you like a hundred pins one corner of the head. Curiosity nags you on the other side. Your head feels like a zone of tug of war.

You suddenly sit down feeling weak. The exchange of messages sounded like more than just a friendly exchange. You look at the name. John! Who was he? Was he the same man in those photos? You check her emails. This time you don't feel sorry. John Silver. You see a flurry of emails from this name. They appeared work-related, but a couple of times ended up with 'see you tonight.' Did her mother meet this man after work? Was it the office get-together he was talking about? How did it all start? Was she overthinking? But those text messages. Nobody sent their colleague sweetheart or missing you my love messages. You scroll down again to see the dates of those messages. Your heart stops a beat. They were sent during your family's Christmas vacation at Mendocino. The last exchange was on the day of the accident.

"This cannot go on, John, " your mother had written. There was a phone call dated on the same day. Did your mother go to end things with John? Did your father know about this? Was John married? Did he also have a family? Were your parents unhappy? Did he get to know? Why didn't they tell her? Questions swarmed in your head like a hurricane. You wanted all this to be just a bad dream. You shake your head and stare listlessly at the pile of books. Nothing makes sense to you. How you wish your answers were in those books. You clutch the phone. You type John Silver on Google. Images of the man in the photo showed up on the pages. It was the same one, you thought. He was the Editor in Chief of this literary magazine, divorced with two kids in his ex-wife's custody. You shut the laptop and the light. You quietly go to your room.

You look outside the window, and the inky black sky stares at you. The droplets of rain on the trees make a rhythmic sound. You look at the image of your phone. Why mom? Your eyes are blurred with those salty tears as you taste them now. The barrage of waterworks wouldn't stop. There is no one you can call. No one you can trust. You feel like someone has stabbed you with a knife. Your head hits the pillow, and you drift away to sleep. Nightmares of your mother's laughing face, John's smiling one, and your father's sad one haunt you. You wake up to the sound of rain, and nature seems to be crying with you. You glance at the clock. It's nine in the morning. Your father pops his head and looks concerned.

"Not feeling well, Amrita?" he asks.

You shake your head. "I am fine," you reply.

"Come down for breakfast then," he says.

The only sound is the clink of spoons against the bowl of porridge. You look at your father and feel sorry for him. And then a sudden thought crosses your mind. It seemed bizarre. But your head isn't in the right place. Did your father also like someone else in his workplace? You put your hands on your head. He looks up and frowns. "Are you really, ok?" he asks. You nod. He looks unconvinced. He receives a phone call and excuses himself out of the room.

You lose your appetite, and your legs drag you to the study. You look at the photos and the emails with a heavy heart. You replay your father's response in your head, "There are times when certain things happen. It makes you wonder if you were at fault." Did your father blame himself for your mother's affair? Did he find out and chose not to confront her? Was it possible that John was in love with your mother and not the other way around? But what about your mother's sober appearances? The mother you knew would never try and change herself for anyone. Did you ever know her at all, you ask yourself? Were those moments with her an illusion? Find creativity in the

mundane things, her voice echoes in your head. Had her marriage become so ordinary? You were so absorbed in your thoughts that you didn't hear your father calling for you. Nor do you hear those footsteps coming up the stairs. You are suddenly taken aback to see your father standing behind you. He stares at you and at the phone in your hand. Both your eyes meet. They elicit a certain sadness and unspoken words that bring out the ugly truth.

"Did you know?" you ask, trembling.

He just stares.

"Did you know?" your voice shatters the frames on the walls.

"Amrita..."

"How could you not tell me?"

You feel betrayed. Who wouldn't?

Your screams are louder than the ones when you saw your mother breathe her last. Your dad tries to explain. His long hours of work. Your mother feeling neglected, her tantrums, their endless arguments, her withdrawal, his discovery of the affair, a showdown, sessions with the therapist, her guilt, and the conscious decision of not letting you know lest it disrupt your mind. You aren't convinced and cannot bear to stay a minute longer in that house. House. That's right. You can no longer call it home. You feel a certain numbness. You can't find a rational explanation. You feel sorry and angry at your father at the same time. How could they not tell you? You are enraged, hurt, disappointed.

You rush to the kitchen, grab that knife, start chopping the carrots, tomatoes, and onions vigorously. Chop chop-chop. The noise drowns your father's pleas and attempts to explain. Chop chop-chop. You feel a strange sensation of slicing the oranges, cutting the carrots. You don't stop. Water trickles from your red eyes. You are blinded and unable to see anything. But you keep

chopping and don't stop. Not even when you accidentally cut your finger and see the splats of red on the cutting board. You chop till a gentle hand steers you away, washes your finger, and bandages it.

A year later, you chop the vegetables in your own kitchen at an apartment by the waterfront. Chop chop-chop. You look at the array of colorful cut pieces. You dump the chopped vegetable pieces in the bowl of curd. You carve eyes and a nose on three carrot sticks and place them around the bowl of frothy white liquid. You inhale the aroma of spices from the *Biryani*. You arrange some garnished almonds and walnuts in the shape of a heart on top of the rice. Then you look at your reflection in the glass cabinet. You see a face with hair dyed red and eyes wearing grey contacts. Almost a stranger. The phone rings. The word dad flashes on your screen. Chop chop-chop. The sound of the kitchen knife merges with the calls. At one point, you close your eyes and converge with the sound, tapping your foot. *Try to make mundane things look interesting.*

The phone continues to ring.

Stars Shine Down

When Aditi walked up the steps to the hall, the gentle breeze from the Arabian sea tousled her perfectly groomed hair. She instantly put her hand on it and hurriedly smoothed it. She looked around nervously, wondering if anyone had seen her in her clumsy avatar. She was relieved to visit to see the camera crew focused on another celebrity author. The woman flashed a radiant smile, posed, and retreated into the hall, a departing figure in a golden color saree with glittering diamonds on her ears. Aditi recognized her as the same woman who had snubbed her at a recent literary event. She blinked at the sudden display of grandeur, ran her fingers down her plain white dress, and her lips quivered. The incessant honking of the cars behind startled Aditi. Typical of the Mumbai city traffic, she thought. Eventually, her mind was fixated on one person she knew as the literary mafia queen and longed to be in her good books. Dolly Capadia had been the epitome of Aditi's obsession for a while.

Will she be the recipient of the debut author in the nonfiction category? Will society accept her as a serious writer? Most importantly, will Dolly Capadia finally acknowledge her as a part of the literary community? Will she eventually eliminate her image of being this girl from a small town? Will she achieve her dream of being a full-time author? Taking out her mobile from her black handbag, she quickly dialed her husband.

"Ajay, where are you?"

"Stuck in traffic. Will be there in twenty minutes. All, ok?"

"Umm yeah.... just..."

"Relax. I can see the award in your hands already."

"Thanks, Ajay," Aditi took a deep breath.

Aditi glanced at the watch and surveyed the room. She felt invisible among the crowd of journalists, editors, publishers, and authors dressed in their splendor. She enviously glanced at the women flaunting their designer gowns and sarees and gazed in awe at the men suited up in formal shirts, black trousers, and blazers. Some of the older men wore *kurtas* and pants. Their tone, diction, and eloquence reflected their illustrious backgrounds, where their parents were either writers or journalists. Almost all of them were alumna of Ivy League schools. Aditi chewed on her fingernails, cringing at her pink nail polish taste. She coughed and instantly reached out to the waiter carrying a tray of water in paper cups. As she clutched her cup of water, she observed how the authors' hands that usually weaved stories took glasses of carefully blended cocktails. Like their books, they had an interesting blend of drama, thrill, and emotion. And what a plethora of colors. She immediately felt uncouth. The women wore a mix of red, pink, and yellow sarees and evening gowns. Their lips oozed with equally bright shades that could be spotted from a mile. The black eyeliner and kohl made their eyes look a lot bigger. Some of the ladies had enormous earrings dangling from their ears, reminding her of a hoopla ring.

Aditi noticed how their laughter tittered across the rectangular-shaped hall. Like bells chiming. Unlike the loud guffaws, she and her family displayed in response to a joke. The conversations seemed to range from heated discussions about books to opinionated judgment on the works of their co-authors. Would she ever be able to hold her own, converse with these elite folks? Would they even listen to her? Probably not. She'd probably sound like a goat bleating amidst a pride of lions. Aditi's eyes were fixated on a woman whose chin-length hair with blond highlights gave her a unique appearance. She immediately knew Dolly Capadia. How her face exuded a certain haughtiness. Typical of those who were influential in the community. Aditi felt plain; seeing Dolly's bright red chiffon saree with heavy chunks of jewelry and her big round *bindi*

on her forehead made her stand out from the rest of the crowd. That tennis ball-like red dot on her broad forehead was her trademark. She heard a lot about Dolly Capadia being a renowned columnist, critic, and author whose books revolved around characters belonging to the elite social circles of Mumbai. Her favorable reviews in a leading newspaper helped some titles find their place on the bestseller's lists. Her negative reviews would instigate some authors to go into hiding until they found the courage to pick up their pens again and get those creative juices flowing. It was no wonder both budding and renowned authors yearned to be in her good books. Aditi was eager to join the bandwagon.

She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, placed on one side of the wall. She ran her fingers through the thick black hair that fell down her shoulders. A dash of mascara highlighted her dark brown eyes, lips smeared with just a gloss, and her face had minimal makeup. Tiny pearl earrings complemented the white knee-length dress she had just purchased from the mall. Thirty-two-year-old Aditi felt plain in front of the exotic display of colors. She watched the way Dolly tossed her head and run her fingers smoothly down her hair. Aditi admired how Dolly looked so poised, and elegant while Aditi would look like a schoolgirl trying to adjust her pigtails. She watched Dolly pronounce certain words so eloquently. Her diction was smooth and refined unlike Aditi who realized her accent would give her small town upbringing away. Just then, that woman author she'd seen at the beginning went past her. Aditi tried to smile and say hello. Without a smile, the woman scanned her head to toe, rolled her eyes, and walked towards Dolly.

A few months ago, at a literary fest, Aditi approached this woman and meekly introduced herself as a debut author and a fan. It only elicited a tight-lipped smile and the woman author's eyes averted towards someone else. It left Aditi with a broken self-confidence. Perhaps, this is typical of how famous and successful people behave, Ajay reiterated. Aditi accused him of not

empathizing with her and brooded. After a while, she felt terrible, especially since Ajay had supported her big decision. They were seated on their balcony.

"Ajay, I've been thinking..." she began.

"About what?" Ajay poured a glass of whiskey. "It's time to celebrate the success of *Ctrl alt del.*"

"I've decided to quit."

Ajay peered at her closely. "Quit what?"

"I am done with the IT world."

"You can't be serious." Ajay's glass almost slipped out of his hands.

"I can't take it anymore," she almost whispered.

"Do you want a glass of whiskey or wine?"

"Please understand. I want to just write."

"This whiskey is good. Try some."

"Writing this book gave me this sense of fulfillment I don't find in my job anymore."

Ajay poured a glass of whiskey. "Ice?" he asked?

Aaditi shook her head. "I was thinking of writing a novel. I have some ideas.

"The lights look beautiful today." Ajay gestured towards Marine drive.

"I don't have to burn the midnight oil. I'll have more time with you, and...." her voice trailed. She remembered those times when Ajay would hit the bar with his friends, respecting her time and space to write. How she feared Ajay would find someone else. Now she cringed in shame just thinking whether he'd be unfaithful to her. How could she ever doubt him? He was more than supportive. Why! It was ultimately through his network, she'd met a well-known publisher, and

eventually signed a contract with him. Her book miraculously found its way to the best seller list and reviews on amazon, thanks to the word-of-mouth reviews by Ajay's network.

"Is this what you really want, Aditi?" Ajay finally turned to look at her.

Aditi took a sip of the whiskey and stared at the lights.

"I think it's for the best. These headaches and long hours are taking a toll. Besides all that politics...."

"Are you sure?"

"If you aren't happy, then maybe...."

"Will you be happy?" stressed Ajay

"I almost dozed off at that meeting today."

"What about your readers?"

"What about them?"

"If they know you quit."

"Didn't so many bankers quit and become full-time writers?" Aditi pointed out.

"It's a big risk."

"Are you not happy, Ajay?"

"Will you be fine?"

"We will be happy," she placed her palm over his.

"But what about our plans for the house...."Ajay asked.

Silence ensued between them.

"We'll deal with it later," Aditi said.

Soft music streamed out of the speakers, jolting Aditi to the present. It was a song she recognized that was written by a renowned poet who was incidentally the chief guest for tonight's

awards function. She watched the lights in the hall twinkle like the stars in the night sky. Waiters carried trays with glasses of water, delicious *paneer*, and chicken *tikkas* served with green coriander *chutney*. Despite some obnoxious behavior meted out by the elite folks, the smiles continued to remain pasted on their faces. Aditi grabbed a piece of *paneer* from the waiter's tray and gobbled it. The spices made her choke and cough, compelling her to signal to the waiter carrying water. She felt better after the cold water trickled down her throat.

In one corner of the hall was a bar counter where columnists and journalists had gathered. The flowing wine and beer elevated their decibels, and their voices reached Aditi. She managed to get a few glimpses of their conversation.

"Sad what happened to Kabir Nair. I really miss his exhibitions."

A moment of silence lingered over the group. Solemn expressions, quieter tones. Aditi gasped as she realized they were talking about her favorite artist. She moved closer to the group, trying to gather more information. She read some disturbing news about him and wondered what really happened.

"He was in an awful state after his wife and daughter's death. Wouldn't talk to anyone. And then he just disappeared."

"Yeah.... did you see his latest painting before his mysterious disappearance?"

"The one about the underwater world?"

"Apparently, it was the last trace of his presence on that island. Wonder what made him go there."

"Was it a murder?"

"No one really knows."

Aditi watched Dolly walk up to that group with a glass of wine.

"So, what's the latest buzz now?" she flashed her smile.

One of the men coughed. Aditi recognized him as one of the best-selling authors and nominees for the fiction category.

"About Kabir. You know how...."

Dolly's smile was replaced by a frown.

"Always a strange one, he was. Sad. Anyways, when is the chief guest arriving?"

Aditi gasped at the dismissal of the famous painter whom she admired. How many times she'd visited his art exhibitions? A chill ran down her spine, thinking about how such a renowned artist was made to feel invisible. She turned and crashed into a waiter, and the *chutney* trickled on her dress. She immediately bent down to pick up the fallen *paneer* pieces.

"I... I... am so sorry. I didn't see you....," she stammered.

"No problem, ma'am. I'll take care of it," reassured the equally embarrassed waiter.

He handed her some tissues. Aditi grabbed them gratefully and rushed to the restroom, feeling a few eyes bore into her. What must they think? Her face turned red with embarrassment.

Thankfully the washroom was empty. She splashed water and tried to wipe the green *chutney* from her dress. Using the tissues, she managed to scrub them clean. A faint green patch remained. She splashed her face with cold water and patted it dry. After adding a touch of mascara and concealer she had carried in her purse, she appeared presentable. Just then, her phone buzzed with a message from Ajay stating he was still held up in traffic and would be there soon. Aditi took a deep breath and watched two women enter the washroom. They began brushing their hair and talking about a couple having undergone a miscarriage and taken an exotic vacation to Egypt. Some bankers and a teacher. Aditi shook her head and wondered what was happening to the world. She quietly walked out of the room.

More people had arrived, and the hall was getting crowded. Aditi spotted Dolly standing alone at the bar. The earlier group was now scattered across the room, conversing with different people. She cleared her throat and walked toward Dolly. She replayed the scene multiple times in her head. How she'd approach her, try and sound poised, praise her work, and manage to make an excellent first impression on Dolly. With her heart beating fast, her stomach feeling like a thousand moths flapping their wings, she approached Dolly and folded her hands.

"*Namaste*, mam."

Dolly looked at her up and down, startled and half amused.

"*Namaste*." She delicately held a piece of *paneer tikka* with a small fork.

"Ma'am, I am...."

"These *tikkas* are amazing. Can you please get me some more?"

"Yes, sure, ma'am. Of course."

Aditi ran to the waiter, grabbed a plate of *tikkas*, and rushed towards Dolly.

"Thanks. I see you've forgotten the *chutney*, but never mind," Dolly's eyes fell on the green patch on Aditi's dress. She placed the plate on a table at the bar and ordered a glass of wine.

"Ma'am, I'm a fan of your book..."

"Ahh.... which one did you read?"

"*Starry Nights*."

Dolly stifled a yawn with her well-manicured hand with red nail polish. Just then, the bartender handed her a glass.

"Oh. Right," she waved her hand. Taking a sip of her wine, she allowed the taste to linger in her mouth before she spoke again.

"So, I'm having a party next month, and I was wondering if your team would cater."

Aditi looked flummoxed.

"Ma'am... I..."

"Right, you need the exact dates. Let me check...." Dolly fiddled with her phone. How long have you been working with them?" she nodded to the catering team.

"Actually, ma'am, I'm an author."

The loud chatter around them continued. Someone laughed loudly, and Dolly turned to look at the group of journalists. She stared at Aditi and raised her eyebrows.

"Oh. I thought you were... never mind," she waves her hand dismissively.

"Westlink publishers, mam."

"Oh, right. It's that IT book, isn't it? Nina sent it to me, and it's still tucked away in my desk somewhere."

"Yes, it's actually about my journey in the...," Aditi began excitedly.

Dolly tucked her hair behind her ear and looked around the room. Relief washed over her face when she saw the editor of a leading newspaper waving at her.

"Well, you must excuse me. Enjoy your good time while it lasts. I'll see you next year if you are still around. Good luck."

Dolly departed, a retreating figure in a dazzling red sari with huge earrings, her Luis Vuitton bag in tow. Aditi noticed something drop from her handbag. She saw it was a parker pen and eagerly ran after Dolly, who was conversing with a group of journalists. Aditi swallowed nervously before approaching Dolly.

"Ma'am, you dropped your pen," Aditi mumbled.

The group stared at her for a moment. Aditi heard a chuckle.

"You mean pen," Dolly said.

"Yes, pan, uh pen, you dropped your pen," Aditi stuttered.

"Well, thanks," said Dolly.

Aditi heard a giggle and glanced at the group. She stood rooted to the spot, and her eyes felt heavy with the unshed tears. Stars danced in front of her, and the figures around her appeared hazy. It almost seemed like another lifetime.

In the place of a grown-up woman stood a gawky teenager in high school wearing a green and white uniform and an awkward smile. She was standing in front of her class with a poetry book. New to both the school and the coastal city in South India, Aditi was trying to find her feet. Her banker father's job brought them to this city, which was different from Bhopal, where she had spent her childhood. She had grown up speaking Hindi while English was just a foreign language. Struggling with the diction and pronunciations, she was eager to be well versed in English, just like her classmates were. From affluent backgrounds, their stylish accents accentuated the words that flowed like poetry. How she wished she could speak like that one day. During a poetry reading session, Aditi heard a snort of laughter emanating from one of the popular boys. The beautiful lines from *Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening* by Robert Frost ended up in a series of stutters, stammers, and mispronunciations. Oh dear, she thought. This wasn't how it was intended to be. She had spent hours rehearsing the lines. Her hands shook as she heard a giggle or two from the class. She glanced at the teacher, hoping she would reprimand the class, just like her mother did when any of her students misbehaved. Instead, the bespectacled English teacher with the big *bindi* and hair tied in a bun had a blank expression on her face. After Aditi finished, she politely thanked her. The bell rang for recess. When the teacher walked out, the rest of the students crowded around Aditi, imitating her diction and pronunciation. They burst into laughter and ran out of the

classroom. The benches of the class appeared blurry. She wiped the tears with her hands and found her way to her seat. Suddenly she felt a surge of rage.

Aditi now wiped her tears clumsily with the back of her palm. Blotches of black mascara were smeared on her hand. Just then chief guest walked in. The crowd quieted, and the music continued to play softly. They flocked to the renowned poet and spoke in excited hushed tones. Even the group of journalists surrounding Dolly had sobered down. Putting on their best behavior, they walked toward the guest to pay to convey their regards. Most of them had interviewed him in the past and were hoping that he'd remember them. The sixty-year-old chief guest greeted everyone politely and obliged some autographs and photographs. It was soon time for the awards ceremony to begin. The crowd made their way into the dome-shaped auditorium. The hall was quiet except for a few people lingering near the bar and waiters moving around with half-empty trays.

"Where are you?" Aditi sighed relief to see Ajay's name flashing on her mobile.

"Near the bar," replied Ajay.

Aditi turned to see her thirty-five-year-old husband dressed smartly in a formal shirt, trousers, and a tie.

"Hey," he smiled when he saw her. "Looks like your dress enjoyed the *paneer tikkas* and *chutney* as well," he grinned.

"Not funny, Ajay."

"Hey," he peered closely. "You appear out of sorts. Everything ok?"

Aditi shook her head.

"Disastrous evening. Long story. Will tell you later. It's time for the ceremony. Let's go in now."

Aditi and Ajay walked inside the dome-shaped auditorium. Aditi was almost blinded by the stage that glittered with lights, and a banner saying 'literary awards' was pasted on the wall in different colors. She observed authors, nominees, and journalists occupying the dark brown cushioned chairs in the front row. While Ajay found a seat in the back row designated for families and friends. He squeezed her hand and wished her luck. Aditi walked down the steps towards the seats in front. Most of the people were chatting with one another. Dolly was right in the front row. Finding two empty seats in the aisle corner in the fifth row, Aditi sat down. Having no one to chat with, she began to fiddle with her phone, checking for updates on social media.

"Hi there, is this seat taken?"

Aditi looked up to see a bespectacled man with streaks of silvery grey in his hair. It complemented his grey *kurta* and pants. His oval face was covered in a beard.

Aditi drew a sharp breath. It couldn't be. Was it really him? Shiv Jadhav? The man who had written several nonfiction books on winning and power. Aditi gazed at him and shook her head wordlessly.

"Thanks," he sat down next to her. "By the way, I am Shiv."

He held out his hand, and Aditi shook it in a trance.

"*Aapko kyon nahin jaanta hai* sir. I... I am Aditi."

"Author of *Ctrl alt del*? Congratulations on the nomination."

Aditi's hands shook. She toyed with her hair and twisted it around her finger. She noticed Shiv looking at her in a confused manner.

"You ARE the author of *Ctrl alt del*, right? Aditi Chaubey?"

"Huh..y...yes, of course. Thank you," she stammered. Her face flushed, and her palms felt sweaty.

She took a deep breath and spoke in a calmer tone.

"Sorry. I was just surprised that you recognized me."

Shiv furrowed his eyebrows. "Why is that?"

Just then, the emcee came on stage. Aditi admired his grey and black formal attire, which complimented his no-nonsense demeanor. He came straight to the point, starting with a welcome address, acknowledging the chief guest, the sponsors, and the big names behind the show. The emcee then announced the first round of nominations in the children's books category. The screen onstage flashed, showcasing the resplendent book covers and the authors' names.

Shiv turned to Aditi. "So why were you surprised?"

"Huh?" Aditi was startled. "Oh, that. Well..."

What if he thought she was being oversensitive or immature?

"Actually," she began hesitatingly. "Not many people from the community recognize or acknowledge me."

A knowing look appeared on Shiv's face.

Meanwhile, the emcee announced the winner on stage, and a tall woman walked up to receive the award. The crowd erupted with another round of applause.

"Nothing has changed in the last seventeen years," Shiv shook his head sadly.

Aditi looked at him curiously.

"It was like this then also," he said with a faraway look.

"I... I don't understand."

"You see that lady there?" he asked, gesturing towards Dolly.

Aditi nodded.

"When I wrote my first book in 2000, I was told that a certain Dolly Capadia would help my book get the deserved recognition. At that time, I was new to Mumbai and had secured a job in an ad agency.

Aditi listened intently.

"My publisher approached Dolly for a review. But she refused."

"But why?"

"It's complicated, Aditi. People aren't what they appear to be."

"I don't understand, sir."

"Dolly and I come from Bhopal. In fact, we grew up in the same neighborhood. Her mother ran away with a rich man, leaving Dolly and her sister alone with her father."

"Sir, even I'm from Bhopal."

Shiv politely nodded and continued.

"Something snapped inside Dolly. She studied hard, majored in English, and heard how she had received a scholarship to the city's most prestigious college. She met her husband there, who is from an illustrious family.

"They own *Bharat Times*," Aditi chimed in.

"That's right. There was no looking back for Dolly ever since. Besides, she looked through me at every event."

"She didn't recognize you?"

Shiv sighed.

"You'll soon learn the ways of this literary world. Anyways it doesn't matter. I wasn't impressed with her as her books and columns lacked depth. Fortunately, other publications carried

positive reviews about my book. It was even nominated for an award but didn't win. I went on to write more books about leadership, strategy, positive thinking, and winning."

"Ajay, my husband keeps raving about your books."

With his right hand placed over his heart, Shiv bowed humbly and said, "Thanks."

He continued talking.

"I received a lot of support from my professional network, which helped boost sales. Till now, Dolly has not reviewed a single book of mine, nor does she even acknowledge me."

"But her father and sister?"

"She disowned them, citing how her family died in the gas tragedy to her in-laws. Anyways, her husband isn't your regular guy. So, his parents were ready to accept any girl who'd willingly settle down with him."

"I don't understand, sir."

"Last I heard, he was seen with his pants down with that journo over there," Shiv pointed to a handsome man in the navy-blue coat."

Aditi's eyes widened, and she fiddled with her phone buttons.

"Dolly got what she wanted. Power, wealth, and fame. It's a marriage of convenience for both."

Aditi swallowed, trying to process what she'd just heard. She almost felt sorry for Dolly. And then she suddenly realized. She shifted in her seat and tapped on the armrest.

"So, sir, that's why...."

A faint smile appeared on Shiv's face for the first time that evening.

"She knows you are from Bhopal. Don't underestimate her for her dismissive nature. Knowing her, she would have researched about you."

The emcee's voice continued to echo in the background, followed by appreciative applause from the audience. He announced the nominations for popular choice awards in the nonfiction category. "And this year, we have a debutant author," his voice rang loud and clear. It was a surreal feeling to see her name flash on the screen along with the white cover of her book. Her head spun, and her hands shook on hearing her name mentioned in front of the literary world.

"And I call upon Dolly Capadia to come up on stage, announce the winner and give away the award," said the emcee.

Strutting like a peacock, she walked up to the stage and opened the yellow envelope. A blanket of silence had cascaded the auditorium as the crowd waited with bated breath. Her expression exuded disbelief, and her eyebrows almost touched her forehead. She blinked a couple of times before she read out in her silvery voice that sounded like chimes blowing in the wind. "And the winner for the popular choice in the nonfiction category is Aditi Chaubey!!"

Aditi got up and sat down again. She clutched the sides of her seat. The stage lights appeared like a blur. She then stood up, and walked to the stage, feeling all the eyes on her. Did they think she was worthy of the award? Or did they expect some other reputed author to win it? With every step, shivers ran down her spine. Was this really happening? Was she really the winner? She watched Dolly's blank expression on her face. She handed over the award with a tight-lipped smile and muttered congratulations. The crowd clapped. Aditi glanced at her trophy. It was carved in the shape of a stack of books in golden and brown color. Her name was written in tiny black letters. Suddenly the award felt heavy in Aditi's hands as she stood there waiting to give her acceptance speech upon the emcee's request. She searched for Ajay's face in the crowd and noticed a hand waving from the back row. She smiled and cleared her throat.

"Thank you. This is a surprise. *Kahan se shuru karoon?* I want to thank my husband, Ajay, friends, and colleagues for supporting me during this journey. I think my publisher, Westlink, for giving me this fantastic opportunity. "

Aditi paused, feeling breathless; her stomach churned into knots. She closed her eyes and continued.

"It's not an easy route. There were severe obstacles I had to endure right from childhood until now. Despite not getting reviews from top journalists, I am happy that my book still made it to the bestseller list. "

Behind her, Dolly coughed. A titter went across the room.

"God is kind. I hope to write more books and win more awards. Thank you, everyone."

When Aditi returned to her seat, Shiv congratulated her warmly.

"This is a good break for you. Trust me, you'll go places. Don't let small thorns hamper your belief," he said.

The crowd began to disperse after announcing the final award winner and the emcee's vote of thanks. Shiv shook hands with Aditi.

"I must go. It was nice meeting you. All the best, Aditi."

"Thank you, sir."

She watched Shiv disappear into the crowd. As she returned to the hall, she noticed many people from the community pleasantly looking at her. They mumbled congratulations as she walked past them. Wasn't this what she wanted earlier? To be acknowledged by the community. And yet Aditi felt a strange twinge of unhappiness. It felt like a thousand needles were pricking her from the inside when she noticed Dolly hugging the winner of the children's books category.

She felt bile rising in her throat, accompanied by dizziness. Then she remembered Shiv's words and shook her head.

"Congratulations," Ajay excitedly embraced her. "This calls for a celebratory dinner."

"Let's go home," said Aditi.

Ajay looked at her closely.

"Ok... Sure," he decided not to contest and give her some space.

After Aditi posed for photographs with her award, they walked toward the parking lot. The trees swayed gently, and the breeze tousled Aditi's hair. This time, her hand didn't reach out to straighten it. Cars still zoomed on the roads as they drove silently to their sea-facing apartment, which wasn't too far from the hall. Aditi rested her head against the seat and closed her eyes. In a flash, the incidents from her classroom and at the evening awards function played in her mind.

"I met Shiv Jadhav," she said, breaking the silence.

"Wow. Really? How was he in person?"

"Very nice."

Aditi narrated the entire conversation, and Ajay listened closely. They soon reached their apartment, changed into their night clothes, and sat on their balcony. They watched the beam from the moon reflect on the black mass of waves. Along the shore, the illuminating dazzle of the row of man-made lights added to nature's charm.

"What a complex world it is," remarked Ajay. "I'm glad you had that conversation with Shiv."

Aditi glanced at the trophy carefully placed on the shelf in her hall. She took her phone and posted a picture on her social media platforms.

"Funny how I was reminded of that incident in school today. The past has a way of catching up with you."

"Let's go out tomorrow and celebrate," Ajay said. "You have wanted to go to that beach café for a while. For some time now. Let's take a nice stroll by the beach tomorrow morning and catch some brunch and beer. We can leave the keys with the security guard so that Gita can let herself in. What say?"

Aditi nodded.

The night sky dissipated to make way for the break of dawn. The rising sun cast orange hues across the sky. The newspaper was lying outside the door. Aditi skimmed through it while sipping her coffee. There was an article about the awards night with several quotes from literary critics. She read Dolly's comment about the new debut author. *Has potential and luck, but talent ultimately speaks*. Aditi felt the coffee taste like mud. She took a deep breath and felt tears welling in her eyes. Dolly's comment lingered in her head before she replayed Shiv's conversation. The words *people aren't what they appear to be. You will learn the ways of the literary world* swarmed inside her head like a hurricane. Shiv was trying to warn her about the insecurities of celebrities. In that case, should she really give Dolly so much importance and idolize her? Why did she want Dolly's approval so much? Her book won an award and rave reviews. Shiv also reiterated the same. Aditi took another sip of her coffee. Who was Dolly Capadia anyway? Beneath that grandeur and splendor was a lonely and insecure woman. Aditi smiled and tore that newspaper page. She crumbled it and tossed it in the trash can. Aditi took a deep breath and let the coffee taste linger in her mouth. It suddenly had a sweet taste to it. She smiled and turned to the next page of the newspaper.

Confessions Of A Serial Eater

Day 1

12:25 pm- Was at the doctor's stepping on that weighing scale. It shows 30 pounds overweight. Not sure I liked the doctor's disdainful expression. Asks me to lose weight. He talks about vegetables, high fiber, protein, and no carbs or sugar. That's it, no arguments. He sounded more like an attorney than a doctor to me. My heart beat faster than usual. Heck, did he just say the word diet? As in no more carbs and sugar? My life is over.

1:00 pm- My stomach growled. Saliva dripped along my mouth, just thinking of creamy white pasta served at that joint near my workplace at Menlo Park. I felt a tingling sensation thinking of that tiramisu melting in my mouth. The satiated feeling, the sugar rush it would give me. Oh, nothing like a good remedy for those blues I felt after that doctor's visit. That feel of the cream, the pleasure of sweetness around the sides before it traveled down my throat. With every spoon, I'd feel more folds on my core. More jiggles on my thighs. Yet that doesn't stop me.

3:00 pm- My bladder felt like it was about to burst. Here I was standing in front of the restaurant, waiting to show customers to their table, and later watch them gorge on lasagnas, and apple pies. I was trying to paste a smile on my face and kept shuffling my feet. Goodness, I hope I don't have an accident here. I couldn't excuse myself from the customer talking to me. I had to show him to

his table. A thorough gentleman- the kind who makes those working in restaurants feel like humans. I wish I could talk to him longer. But I had to pee.

3:30 pm- I relieved myself. My head throbbed like someone was playing drums in there. Heavy eyelids stifled a couple of yawns. I got myself a cup of espresso. My tongue almost burned with the first sip. I felt wide awake, wondering how that girl who walked in had the perfect hourglass physique, accompanied by a guy I assumed was her boyfriend. The kind who always doted on her, complimented her, fed her ego, and maybe someday even married her.

4:00 pm- Feeling the familiar stab of pain in my heart every time I see those perfect sculpted arms, legs, tiny waist, and stomach. How can anyone look so perfect? And every time, it's torture to feel my stomach churn into chunks of flab. Feeling the pinch of every extra ounce of the bulge that is obvious in my black and white outfit as the receptionist in this fancy restaurant. I tried to tuck my stomach inside when I spotted that sculpted woman's eyes scanning my body and resting on my stomach. My head spun when I saw her eyebrows arch and her nose crinkle. I get that a lot, especially at malls by women with hourglass figures. What's with them? It seems to be a crime to be plus size, okay, maybe large.

5:00 pm- I felt a nausea sensation, and I comfort myself with a cup of chocolate mousse I grab from the kitchen counter. My palms felt sweaty, and my long black hair was disheveled. I quickly glanced at the mirror. Double chin, droopy eyelids, saggy chins. Waiting for my shift to get over.

6:00 pm- In walks my colleague. Looking trim in her uniform. Here I am, trying to stand tall and look slender while battling the shame of my love handles. Why couldn't I have a decent love life instead? The last guy I went on a date with seemed to gape at the amount of cream in my cold coffee, asking me politely if I needed so much sugar. I never heard from him again. Is there someone who loves food the way I do, or have they all joined the fitness bandwagon?

7:00 pm- Amanda is out of town, so I have the entire apartment to myself. I curled up on my sofa in my one-bedroom apartment with a bowl of instant noodles-the kind I'd have back home in India. My refuge food-whenver I hid behind the veil of embarrassment on seeing my two perfect sisters. Gosh, everyone seems so perfect except me. I scrolled through the channels and movies and decided to watch *The Devil wears Prada*. I feel for Anne Hathway every moment. Wait! Did they just call her overweight in the film?

7:30 pm- I stand in front of the mirror, looking at myself closely. Folds and curves are more apparent. Wide hips, sagging boobs that require a sports bra, thighs that wobble like jelly. I squeeze my arm and feel the blob of flesh between my fingers. The image of the shapely arm of that woman pops into my head. My heart feels like it's stabbed with a knife. I run my hands on my thigh and visualize how they'd look without that extra flab. Maybe I should try liposuction. I should do something!!

8:00 pm- I gobble the bowl of noodles and a bar of chocolate. My tongue runs over my lips, licking the remnants of these sugary brown bits, and savoring the sugar rush. Feels like a heady mix of a cocktail. Wonder if kissing a guy would feel this way? Heck, and I've never been kissed at 27?

8:30 pm- I lay on my bed and brood about my absent love life, my voluptuous physique, wishing I could shed the extra flab like how a snake sheds its skin. I wanted to do something but what? Does that doctor's voice still bother me?

Day 2

7:30 am- I woke up with gnawing aches in my stomach. It feels like someone has placed a stone in my sleep. It's my period, and there is a bright red pimple on my nose. I get a call from my sister, urging me to go on a blind date with a guy she knows through her husband's network. Someone called Akash Verma who has been in the Bay Area for years. She gives me his contact.

8:30 am- I still feel bloated and groggy. I take Tylenol, fix coffee, and check Akash's Facebook profile. What the...whoa! His profile picture shows him bare-chested and running. Sculpted to perfection. That nauseous feeling again. Why would you want to meet someone like me? Works in a tech company. Hmm, typical of a Bay Area resident. My chest is pounding, and my stomach does a flip-flop. Heck, it's just my period cramp. I decide to take a nap before my shift.

10:00 am- Feel less bloated and groggy. Slip my uniform over my bulges. That fat red pimple still sitting on my nose. I apply some concealer. Makes me look less like Rudolph the reindeer. I stop at Starbucks for coffee. Too lazy to fix one myself. Place my usual order. The usual Indian chap with that toothy grin calls my name. The one that told me my name reminded him of a 90s

Bollywood blockbuster. Why did my parents name me Simran? Ughhh. Well, at least he doesn't comment on my extra amount of whipped cream or extra cheese in my sandwich.

12:45 pm- My shift again. Standing there, feeling like a whale as I watch these sculpted bodies swim around me. How come that woman has such a tiny waist even after that scoop of vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce? How? That churning sensation that wants to make me throw up. I take a bite of chocolate I carry from home. Doesn't help. Maybe I should drown myself in that creamy world of lasagna. Ahh, the thought of slicing through those layers of cheese and tomatoes. I was melting in my mouth, oozing that orgasm I probably wouldn't get from sex. But hey, who knows? I've not even been kissed.

1:30 pm- More couples, more gooey eyes, makes me feel like I sat on a basket of broken eggs. I run to the bathroom, change my pad, and stare at the mirror. My stomach feels like it's ready to burst any moment. Afterward, I gorge on a plate of lasagna.

3:00 pm- I am seating people at their tables. As I walk, my thighs rub against one another. The abrasive feeling of skin rubbing against another feels like I might bleed there as well. My calves ache from all that walking. Or probably because of cramps. They feel tight, as though someone has tied them with a rope. There is a stab of pain in my stomach again. Time for some coffee. The mere aroma wafts into my nostrils, waking me up from my drowsiness. I feel customers' eyes on me. Particularly one lady with perfectly manicured nails looking at my oversized boobs. They certainly feel heavier than usual, like I am carrying gallons of water.

4:00 pm- I hear this nagging voice inside my head. I want to ignore it, but it persists. That little imp wants me to consider losing weight. Says it's for my own good. It will probably make me feel better. But what about food? Change your diet. It sounds like that doctor. But isn't he right? Maybe I'll feel good about myself?

7:00 pm- I am home, plonked on the couch. A message from my sister to see if I've reached out to Akash Verma. Why doesn't he reach out, I ask, rolling my eyes. And I get a response about not hesitating to make the first move. I feel queasy thinking about the lack of response in case I did. I feel even more queasy when I think about his sculpted abs. I comfort myself with a vague thought about his pictures being photoshopped. Nothing is certain until I see him in person. I bite into the bar of chocolate and drift away into a deep sleep. I have dreams of being trapped in a cottage made of lasagna with chocolate toppings and coffee oozing out of the taps.

Day 3

7:30 am- I have strange cravings today. Goosebumps prickle my arms, and I am shivering. Maybe because it's colder than usual. And it's only the beginning of fall. I grab a slice of bread, apply butter, and sprinkle sugar on top. My tongue feels like it's landed in heaven made of sugar. Feels like biting into several donuts at the same time.

9:00 am- I press the buttons on my phone several times. I type, delete, and type again. My fingers shake a little and hover around the keys before they press the send button. My heart is pounding so loudly that I am sure the neighbors can hear it.

11:00 am- My phone beeps. It's a text from Akash. My hands tremble as I scan to read the message. My lips quiver and my legs wobble. My stomach aches a little and does a flip flop. He is asking to meet tomorrow. My head spins. I don't have time, and how? I need a cappuccino now. Phew.

3:00 pm- We decide on a coffee place close to my workplace. My hands are still shaky. I dropped a pen twice and ended up spilling coffee over my uniform. Thank goodness the manager was on leave today. The woman who has just come in gives me a strange look. She almost asks if I'm okay but seems to decide against it when I show her to her table. She is generously endowed, much to my relief. Her yellow dress accentuates her curves and her love handles. I almost do a little jig of joy.

6:00 pm- I visit the mall to get a new dress for tomorrow's meeting with Akash. I see a patisserie place with chocolate cakes and macaroons. They are almost sprouting hands, inviting me to come towards them. I spot a clothes store and decide to get myself a dress first. I pick one in black color, that is smart and casual at the same time. It falls within my budget. The woman at the store recommends a plus size. My stomach folds into those knots again. I feel a heavy lump in my throat. I try hard to pull it over my body. And it fits. I give her a smirk while she stares at me open-mouthed. I eat one of those chocolate cakes to celebrate my little victory. My heart feels warm as the dark brown cream swishes down my throat. The sweet taste lingers in my mouth.

8:00 pm- I try on the dress once again to ensure I still fit into it. I stare at the mirror. The medium sleeves hide the bulk on my arms. My heavy boobs are concealed under those buttons. The knee-length dress covers the flab on my jelly-like thighs. I don't look so bad. A change from my trousers

and loose shirts I usually wear. I hold my hair up and decide to let it down. The blotchy pimple has almost gone. My jaws suddenly tense, and beads of sweat form on my forehead. Suddenly, I feel like I've swallowed a lump of coal. Heck, it's only a guy. I do my laundry and clean the coffee stains from my uniform.

9:00 pm- I toss and turn, feeling the skin jiggle all over. I gradually drift to sleep, dreaming of black dresses, chocolate cakes, and a shirtless Akash running towards me.

Day 4

8:00 am- I feel well rested. My eyes don't look puffy. No bad hair day. No face bloating. Good. I binge on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Yes, I'm weird. I later grab coffee at Starbucks. That Indian bloke smiles at me. I nod. He is cute, except I don't like being referred to as Bollywood damsels. The coffee tastes a little more bitter today. Hmm. Maybe it was an overdose of sugar earlier.

Noon- Sweaty palms, flushed face, butterflies in my stomach. Maybe a hundred moths. My breathing is rapid. I stutter and stammer. My manager gives me a weird look and asks if I'm fine. I nod and stare at her perfectly groomed dark curls, red lipstick, and the royal blue dress that fits her well. She almost looked like a mannequin. How can anyone lose weight when surrounded by food all the time?

1:00 pm- I find solace in pasta. This time it's in tomato sauce, lots of cheese, olives, and bell pepper. Hmm. Delicious. A few hours away before I meet the guy with a chiseled torso. My calves feel tight, and I almost trip and fall. Clumsy me. I hope I can get my act together before the coffee meet.

4:00 pm- Chaos at work. A customer yells about the food. My heart pounds loudly. I go over to smooth things. My manager comes, offers a discount, and yells at the cook. My ears feel like they have been inside a rock concert. I grab some coffee. Phew, thank God it's Friday.

6:00 pm- Akash looks exactly how he does in his profile picture. My stomach sinks into that bottomless pit. The cuts on his arms, those washboard abs. Does he sleep on the treadmill? He smiles-a polite smile, not too friendly, just courteous-like the one you give a stranger on the street. Okay, so he doesn't know me-not yet anyway.

6:30 pm- He is appalled by the whipped cream on my coffee. Makes a casual remark about too many calories. I choke. Déjà vu. He has a slight accent. We talk about the weather and his workouts, making me want to faint. I began to perspire just hearing about that. Apparently, he likes to run and is training for the San Francisco half marathon next year. We talk about books, and he loves poetry and occasionally has a cheat meal of pasta before a big run. Ahh! So, he likes pasta too. I feel a tingling sensation on my back. He asks me about my hobbies. I talk about journaling, writing, movies, and food while he sips his green tea. Asks if I do any form of workout. I shake my Head, and he looks appalled. Says I need to, and he immediately flushes. My hands start shaking. He profusely apologizes, saying he didn't mean it the wrong way. Just good for mental

health. I'm not sure I believe him. We exchange goodbyes, and he politely says nice to meet you. He doesn't suggest meeting again or keeping in touch.

8:30 pm - I am sprawled on my couch with a box of tissues. I watch *The Devil Wears Prada* again. I am munching on chocolate cookies. Even the sugar tastes bitter amidst the salty tears. I don't feel high. I hold my thigh with both hands and stare at the blob of flab. I begin to hate myself. Fresh tears roll down. My breathing becomes heavy, my eyes burn, and my nose feels stuffy. I need to do something but what? Give up eating like Emily in the movie?

9:00 pm- I am standing in front of the mirror, brushing my teeth. The arms wiggle as I move them. I am fed up with eyes scrutinizing my extra bulges. It feels like a crime to be overweight. I am sick of being single and feeling jealous of all those couples. Something ought to be done. But what? Running? No. Walking? Hmm, not a bad option. So many trails and parks nearby, people walking their dogs, and I have time before my shift. So not a bad choice.

Day 5

7:30 am- I am sipping coffee. My eyes still feel heavy after all that crying. My sister texts and asks if I met Akash. I ignore her calls. I know he isn't going to get in touch. The jam sandwich tastes like mud. A few hours left before my shift. Maybe I should just get out and go for a walk. Get some fresh air.

10:00 am- I am sweaty, my legs feel sore, my face is flushed, and I feel this strange energy inside me, in a good way. At first, I felt conscious of my legs jiggling as a woman in a sports bra and shorts runs past me. Then I felt relieved seeing another heavy-busted woman with a broad waistline taking her dog for a walk. We exchange smiles. Wish I had visited this place earlier. Reminds me of the garden *Dadaji* and I used to visit. Brings back fond memories. Lots of people out there. Not all thin, necessarily. Yet they seem happy. Ended up walking three miles. Not bad for a start.

1:00 pm- Its crowded. Long queues. I'm overwhelmed dealing with cranky folks and impatient families. Why couldn't they just make a reservation? In between, I manage to check Akash's Facebook profile. His Instagram is private, and I'm too hesitant to send him a follow request. One of my coworkers accidentally drops a milkshake on a customer. The sound reverberates in my ears. Feels like exploding fireworks. Phew. Where is my bar of chocolate? I don't seem to find it.

4:00 pm- I finally get my cappuccino. Working late today. Feeling stressed. Like a ball of weight has been placed on my Head. Quads and feet are sore.

9:00 pm- Amanda texts to say she's coming back tomorrow evening. Thank God. It was getting to be lonely. My stomach growls: I gorge on the noodles, watch television, and hit the bed, dreaming of swimming in a pool of lasagna.

Day 6

9 am- Legs still sore, headache gone. I sip coffee and take a bite of the jam sandwich. I go outside to the same place. Smile at people. Keep walking along the trail and took some pictures on my

phone. Why didn't I ever think of doing this before? Maybe I should thank Akash. 3.1 miles. My head doesn't feel that muddled. I am famished, though. Could use that Starbucks coffee along with a muffin.

11:00 am- Ran into Akash unexpectedly in the coffee shop. He was with another guy. A colleague probably. Gave the nod and a tight smile. Said hello when I walked past him, but nothing more. I look out for that Indian bloke who works here. He isn't to be seen today. I order my coffee and the cream feels so bitter. I put it on a plate along with my new muffin. The more I look at Akash, the more I feel like a whale. Panting and puffing, I quickly head back home.

3:00 pm- Watched television to enjoy my day off at work. More coffee. Some cookies. Read a book I recently purchased from Kepler's. *Overstory* by Richard Powers. Longlisted for the Booker prize this year. Took a nap.

8:00 pm- Amanda is finally back from her trip. She remarks on me looking better. Told her about my walks. Just two days and already a difference? Later, I look into the mirror. The same wiggly arms and thighs. Stomach still protruding. Love handles intact. But something is different. My face? I peer closely. Not so blotchy. Not so much of a double chin. Strange. Maybe I should continue these walks and see what happens. When I hit the bed, I dream of parks, trails, long walks, mugs of coffee, and chocolate cakes with sprouting arms.

Between The Sky And Earth

How could he forget that fateful day? Sarla's incessant coughing. Her hand on her chest. Those splats of blood. That gasping. That gesture of calling out to him. That last breath escaping from her mouth. Those tender brown eyes closing. Never to open again. How he cradled her in his arms. Wept until he depleted every drop of water from his body. Her face peaceful at least. Devoid of all that pain and suffering she had endured in the last few months.

He begged her to move to the city. Better treatments, better facilities, he'd said. She hadn't listened. The obstinate and stubborn person she was. Her reservations about the city. Corrupt and polluted, she'd remark. There was nothing the crisp mountain air couldn't cure. And the money? She refused to become a burden on her only son and his family consisting of a wife and three daughters. He remembered how Ravi pleaded. But Sarla refused. Her move would only disrupt the lives of her granddaughters and daughter in law. And hospitals scared her. Ever since she'd heard about her friend's son losing his life after a surgeon had operated on the wrong side during an appendix operation. If he could remember, he and Sarla had led healthy lives. Except for that occasional cough or cold. There was nothing that couldn't be set right with Sarla's magic potion. *Tulsi* leaves grown in their garden. She'd mix them with hot water. A formula that never failed either of them until those last few months.

How he moped for days his home in the village. His beard fell down his chin. His unkempt hair turned into a mass of white. His cheeks sunk inside. How could Sarla leave him so soon? Only sixty. At least another few years to live. Outside his humble home, everything remained the same. The lush green valley nestled between the Western Ghats, the caves, temples, the tiny houses amidst the gigantic slopes. Just two hours from the city. During the rainy season, the water would

cascade down the rocks. He reminisced about their simple life. The morning prayers, offering flowers to the idols of several deities, the aroma of her cooking, the breakfast of *Poha*, *batata wada* and *lasoon chutney*, teaching kids at the English medium school, watering the plants in the evening, discussing his day with Sarla, dinner, and a peaceful sleep. Weekends they'd tend to their garden. All that seemed like a distant dream now.

There were times he sensed Sarla in his home. The sudden noise after a spoon fell from the shelf. Or a glass rolling on the floor. The creaking sound of the window. He'd sit up and stare into the darkness. There were times he'd see a slinking shadow shaped in the form of a woman. Was it his imagination? Was it real? He couldn't tell. These days he was oscillating between reality and delusion. He quit his job. The leaves in his garden drooped. The flowers withered. The garden resembled a graveyard. He considered taking up Ravi's offer to move to the city. What would he do there? How would he adapt? And then it all happened on a sudden. Ravi's visit. His firm voice. Packing his belongings. Like an infant, he was led by his son to the car. He watched his home become a dissipated slab of stone as Ravi drove him to the city.

Next to Ravi's spacious apartment in the Southern part of the city was a garden. Twelve acres of land. When Ravi mentioned about this garden next to his apartment, I dismissed it initially. Surely there cannot be a better garden than the one Sarla and I tended to? Curiosity got the better of me. Tucked in a posh locality in the southern tip of the city, this twelve-acre green paradise was a world. Despite being located opposite a bus depot, the sound of nature was enough to drown the noisy decibels of the running bus and the incessant honking by the drivers. I was pleasantly surprised. Whenever I felt claustrophobic in the apartment, I'd retreat to this nature's abode. The humming sound of the cuckoos and sparrows would greet me. The cool sea breeze ruffled the large leaves of the coconut trees and the blossoming flowers. I was a stranger to this city but not to the

call of the earth. This solitude was a welcome change from the banter that took place in Ravi's apartment. Morning walks became a regular routine where I'd pluck hibiscus flowers for my *puja*. There were times I'd feel out of place even though Ravi and Seema were kind to me. Nothing could match up to Sarla's curiosity and her laughter. Even after a year, I still felt her presence. I visualized her face in the stillness of the night and woke up to sweaty palms.

I saw the usual crowd in the garden. It was the same scene as every other day. Yet something felt different. Somewhere in this familiarity, there were moments that brought pain and remorse. I observed quietly as I always did.

There were people of all ages with different faces, bodies, and hearts. I saw Gopu-that energetic watchman who'd stroke his moustache every time he'd greet me. I'd give him a cursory nod while Simran would smile at him. However today, he couldn't greet me. I watched that group of youngsters diligently working out under Rama-their athletic looking instructor. Just watching their drills would make me go out of breath. Then there were those folks who would jog around the garden with headphones, lost in the world of music. Some chose to walk briskly in pairs or alone. Others meditated in one corner where the waves kissed the shores. The crows cawed. The squirrels ran up the trees chasing one another. The cats walked in a majestic manner, unfazed by the presence of those couple of dogs-Moti and Sweetie. I remember how Simran was initially petrified and later grew fond of them. I looked at the hills which appeared like a green carpet of waves. I admired the flowers in full bloom, smiling at the sun's first rays. Especially the hibiscus flowers which Simran, and I would pluck every day for my daily prayers. I saw those group of old people gathered in a circle and laughing out loud. The air reverberated with their guffawing. Sharmaji-their leader had asked me join in several times in the past, since the first day I had set

foot in this garden. His bright eyes and warm welcoming face were enough to lure anyone. Not me. My reluctance and reticence bothered them. They'd often wave at me with a hope that someday I too would become a part of their group. Sadly, I could never join them now. Maybe joining them would have done me good. The truth was that a part of me could not get myself to laugh. Not the way they did. Though Simran gave me a reason to smile in the last two years, I still thought of my dead wife. The pain ripped me apart as I relived the memories of those good old days with my beloved Sarla, our quiet life in the countryside and my incomplete life with Simran in Ravi's apartment.

The first time Simran came into my room, she was in tears.

"Why do they act so mean to me *Dadaji*?"

"What happened *beta*?"

"Radhika and Pooja never let me play with them or their friends."

"What do they play?"

"I don't really know."

The two sisters, I had noticed, were always huddled together whispering and giggling. I'd seen Simran look at them, eager to be included. She might as well have been a fly on the wall. Not that those girls made any effort to converse with me beyond the customary greetings. I remember that first week at the dinner table. Radhika and Pooja were seated to my right. I tried engaging them in a conversation.

"So how was school today?"

"Good," replied Pooja twisting her fingers around her hair. Her gaze was on the television which was streaming the evening news.

"You are in seventh grade, right?"

"Uh huh."

"Pooja please respond to your grandfather properly," Seema gave her an exasperated look.

I turned to Radhika.

"So how are your studies coming along? Next year you will be facing the boards."

"Yeah. Coming along fine," she stirred her bowl of lentils with a spoon.

"What are your plans?"

She merely shrugged. Ravi glared at her. I looked at Simran who was immersed in a book.

"Simran, no reading while eating," said Seema.

The sisters smirked.

"Now there was no need for you both to mock her, " reprimanded Ravi.

Nothing they said brought any change in the behavior of the older sisters. I retreated to my room which was a study prior to my moving in. Perhaps my sudden presence annoyed the girls, though Ravi and Seema were kind, giving me space to adjust to the loss and change. I survived on my memories with Sarla until Simran came into my room today. I often wondered what compelled her to come to me. I looked her closely. She seemed different from Radhika and Pooja. And I didn't necessarily mean her appearance. Sharper and smarter-there was an aura of curiosity that reflected in her brown eyes, reminding me a lot of Sarla.

"The other day Radhika told me I was boring. That I always spent my time reading."

"What kind of books do you like to read?"

"Comics, fables, classics."

"Ah! Have you read the story of the Hart and the Hunter?"

"Yes."

"What did you learn from that story?"

Simran thought for a moment.

"Hmm...that we should learn to accept ourselves?"

"Correct. Our weaknesses can also be our strengths. What we hate about ourselves can also turn out to be our advantage."

"So, you mean my reading can be my strength?"

"Reading is never a weakness."

"Then why do they call me boring?"

"You are not boring. You are just different. "

"Nobody likes me."

"Why do you say that?"

"The other children in the building do not want to play the games I like to play."

"What do they want to play?"

"They always want to play catch and run."

"And you don't like to run?"

"I can't run fast, and the other kids make fun of me."

The pain in her voice pierced my heart. How I wish I could make her realize her potential. That one day she'd grow wings and soar high. That at ten she was far more mature for her age.

Simran's unexpected entry into my room that day instilled a new sense of purpose. A purpose that I thought had disappeared after Sarla's demise. I asked her if she'd like to join me on my morning walks. She nodded in excitement and said she'd come once her summer vacations began. And she did. Her eyes widened on seeing the sights around her.

"I came here once with *Papa*. He promised to bring me again, but he has been so busy."

I watched her tug the aerial tap roots of the banyan tree that dropped from the trunks. She shouted in glee at the cuckoo's call. Her hands stretched to catch the elusive butterflies. They flitted past her as glorious hues of color dancing in front of her. She squealed looking at the mangoes dangling from the trees. The sight of the flaming red trumpet petals of the hibiscus flowers brought a smile to her face. She touched the petals gingerly and asked several questions as she watched me pluck the flowers.

"Why do you pluck these flowers *Dadaji*?"

"To offer it to God."

"Which God?"

"Ganesha."

"Oooh he is my favorite God. I love his elephant ears. It's so cute."

"These are Ganesh's favorite flowers. They are offered for overall prosperity and to destroy enemies."

"Destroy enemies?"

"Yes."

"If I offer him a flower, will he destroy my enemies?"

I raised my eyebrows.

"Who are your enemies?"

"Radhika, Pooja and all those kids in my building."

Clearly, there was hurt, anger and anguish haunting her little mind.

"They are not your enemies, *beta*. They are your sisters. And the kids also don't hate you."

"No. They are all mean to me."

I took a deep breath. "They are well...as I said earlier just different from you."

"Is it because I am not thin like them?"

"Not at all. What gave you that idea?"

"Why do people keep calling me chubby cheeks?"

"That's just out of affection."

"Then why do they say, I don't look like my sisters?"

"Who said that?"

"The other day when Maya *maasi* came home, she...."

I made a mental note to talk to Ravi and Seema sometime. Make them realize how Simran really feels and not dent her confidence.

Ever since that conversation about Ganesha in the garden, Simran began to actively participate in the morning *puja*. While her older sisters slept till noon. She'd listen while I chanted *Shlokas* and offered flowers to Ganesh and the other Gods. Simran would place a flower near Ganesha and prostrate in front of him.

"Why is Ganesha's tusk broken?"

I marveled at her observation.

"There are several explanations to this. I'll tell you one. Ganesha was transcribing the *Mahabharata* as Sage Vyasa was narrating the verses without stopping. In his hurry of writing, his feather pen broke. So, he broke his tusk and used it as a pen so that he could continue writing without any interruption."

Simran cocked her head to one side.

"Oh. Doesn't Lord Krishna also come in *Mahabharata*?"

"Yes. He does. He plays a very important role."

"I read some comic stories about him and the five brothers."

"Yes, the Pandavas."

"There are also those hundred brothers, right?"

"The Kauravas."

"Did they not like the Pandavas?"

"No."

"Why?"

"It's a long story. If you want the detailed story from the beginning, you should read the actual book."

"The actual book?"

"Yes. *Mahabharata* by C. Rajagopalachari is the English retelling of the epic."

"Can you tell me some parts of the story please?"

"Of course."

Between the first glimpse of the sunrise, the sight of morning dew on the leaves and the sound of birds chirping, I began my storytelling sessions with Simran. There were times when we'd sit on those benches facing the sea. The gurgling sound of water and the gentle breeze was soothing to our ears. There were moments of silence as we'd gaze at the sheet of blue in front of us. Sometimes she'd ask me about Sarla and whether I missed her. I would nod tearfully and change the subject. Once during our walk, two dogs came up to us. Simran shrieked and clutched my hand.

"*Dadaji*, please shoo them away."

They mean no harm; I reassured her and gently patted them. Their eyes exuded warmth and they wagged their tails. In the coming days, they became our companions and Simran grew to like them. She named the white dog Moti as it reminded her of the color of pearl. The other brown

one always licked her hand, and she found the gesture to be very sweet. And she decided to name it Sweety. A few times we'd stumble upon some cats near the hibiscus plants. Simran would stroke them while they'd purr in delight. Sometimes they would stroll on the grass to find another spot where they could catch their forty winks. Once when we were walking towards the garden, a bus turned from the depot and the driver almost lost control. Simran screamed. I pulled her on the pavement just in time while the sound of the screeching breaks echoed in the street. The driver apologized while I glared at him. That incident shook Simran as she clutched my hand, sobbing.

"*Dadaji*. I am scared."

I patted her head.

"Don't worry. Nothing will happen to you as long as I am here."

And just like that the summer rolled by making way for the monsoon season. When Simran went back to school, I continued my morning walks and hibiscus plucking ritual on my own. Simran would join me on weekends. On days of a heavy downpour, I'd sit in my room watching the rains lash the city. The grey skies and stormy clouds moved at a rapid pace. I reminisced those days with Sarla when we'd watch the valley glistening in the icy drops of rain, sipping cups of ginger tea. There were times when I'd go and visit Rajesh who lived around the neighborhood. Yet I couldn't get myself to stay there too long. Simran and the garden lured me back to Ravi's apartment. Simran would complete her homework in my room. Our story telling sessions continued. She was eager to get her hands on the book.

"When can I start reading it?"

"Soon."

"Okay."

Months went by, seasons changed. The garden remained as beautiful as ever. Almost as fresh as a newly wedded bride. There was something different that I'd discover every other day. One thing that never changed was the older sisters' exclusion of Simran. I decided to talk to Ravi and Seema about this. In the meantime, I carefully wrapped the copy of the *Mahabharata* with a pink paper. On the cover of the book was a picture of Krishna counselling Arjuna on a chariot. I couldn't wait to see Simran's brown eyes light up when she opened it tomorrow on her birthday. Inside, my handwritten note read as follows- *Life may pose several struggles. If we continue doing our duty and follow our heart, the efforts will bear fruit. You are destined for bigger things and will reach great heights. Never let others' inability to accept you come in the way of your dreams. Happy birthday dear Simran.*

After placing it on my desk, I decided to talk to Ravi and Seema. Ravi was unexpectedly home for lunch that day while the girls were still at school. That intense discussion induced defensive reactions from both Ravi and Seema who felt I was unnecessarily accusing them. They said Simran was introverted and preferred to dwell in her own world of books and academics. No doubt she was a good student but maybe a little too sensitive? Why couldn't they understand? Simran was far more intelligent and mature for her age. All she wanted was acceptance and inclusion. Was it her fault she was different from the rest? One day she'll make you proud, I told them. The tension in the air was palpable. Seema pursed her lips and Ravi frowned. Maybe I had overstepped my boundaries. Disturbed and sad, I decided to go out for a walk in the garden. My head hurt as several thoughts floated around. Absorbed I was with that heated discussion, I failed to see the bus make that blind turn. And suddenly everything went dark.

I found myself in the garden. The hibiscus flowers dangled from the branches waiting to be plucked. "Come to us," they seemed to say. I couldn't touch them. What was happening? I saw

the sun's rays penetrate through the trees and reflect on the petals. They had this strange glow that I'd never seen before. Two women were walking towards my direction, engaged in a deep conversation about food. I recognized them as regulars in the garden. I wave to them. They just look right through me. I saw them shiver and looked around.

"That's funny," said one with the red T shirt.

She rubbed her hands and looked around.

"Is it just me or do you feel the drop in the temperature too?"

"Yeah, it's suddenly turned cold. That's so weird. And there is no breeze. All this while I was sweating," the other lady in the yellow T shirt replied. Her teeth chattered and she held her hands close together. They just walked past me. I felt hurt and puzzled. Then I saw Moti and Sweety heading towards my direction and wagging their tails. They began to bark in an unusually loud manner. A few people turned and stared.

"Moti, Sweety, you guys see me!" I instinctively bent down to stroke them as I usually did before I realized I couldn't. Gazing at them with a mix of melancholy and joy, I talked to them. They could hear me, understand me.

"Wonder what's with those dogs today?" a man remarked to his wife.

"Not sure. Must have spotted a cat or a squirrel."

Moti whimpered and I looked at her helplessly. The realization sank in, and the feeling of denial was giving way to acceptance. I was dead. I was just a lonely ghost haunting the garden, restless about the fact of not being able to give my granddaughter her birthday present or resolve a family conflict.

"Missing Simran? I know that feeling dear. I cannot go to that apartment. Not after that day."

When I visited the apartment, I saw sad, serious, and solemn faces. Tears were flowing down the faces of my entire family. Even Radhika and Pooja were sad. As for Simran, her eyes were swollen, and her cheeks were sunken. My room remained untouched. The sight of my photograph with a garland was the last straw. I couldn't get myself to go there again. And yet I was restless to see if Simran managed to get her hands on the gift. Several times I was tempted to peek into that apartment. But the thought of seeing that photograph unsettled me. I couldn't go away so soon. Just when I had regained a sense of purpose after Sarla had gone. The garden became my refuge just as it was when I was alive. Moti and Sweety continued to yelp and jump. Just then Gopu came to shoo the dogs with a stick. They scuttled away in a hurry.

"No Gopu. Please. They are talking to me."

I was miserable about the fact humans couldn't see me. I couldn't do anything about it. I had to tell myself I was just a ghost, an *aatma*.

Of course, Gopu couldn't hear me. The retreating figures of the dogs became blobs of brown and white. The garden was at its brightest until the dark skies took over. After which it was nothing but a sheet of black with lurking shadows. I heard the owl hooting. Flapping its wings, it swooped down to catch the mice. It turned towards my direction and stared with its big eyes. A menacing glare which I couldn't decipher. Was it disturbed by my presence? Was it frightened? I couldn't tell. The garden lizard scrambled up the branches, looking up and waiting for an insect to be trapped in its elongated sticky tongue. I lingered by the hibiscus plant recollecting Simran's innocuous questions. My dear little bright-eyed Simran! Will she ever come to the garden again? Did she manage to find my gift for her? That conversation with Ravi and Seema played in my head like a broken record. A discussion that was unfinished. If I hadn't stepped out that day, I wouldn't be in this state. If only I had been more patient. Or more alert. How I wish I could get that one

more chance to go back in time. To be able to wish her a Happy birthday. To make Ravi and Seema understand I wasn't trying to blame them.

I wasn't sure how many days and nights elapsed. The regular crowd came, shivering every time they'd pass me, remark about the drop in the temperature, stare at the dogs and walk away muttering about them being a menace. Between the sky and the earth, I felt weird being in this strange space. An unexpected summer rain one night brought a strange sense of an inkling. I spotted Simran and Ravi the next morning. Ravi was carrying a small bag. Must be a Sunday if Ravi wasn't at work. Their downcast eyes and hollow cheeks were a contrast to the bright and cheerful ambience of the garden. Like the hibiscus flower, Simran's happiness was short lived. Even the presence of the dogs couldn't evoke a smile on her face. Ravi's lips moved and the words became clear when they came towards me.

"*Dadaji* was really fond of you, Simran."

"Then why did he go away?"

A tear rolled down Simran's face. Ravi sighed. Moti and Sweety licked Simran's hand, barking frantically, and jerking their heads towards my direction.

No point darlings. She cannot see me. Neither can Ravi. To them I am just ashes merged with the soil on earth.

"I wish I could answer that question. I think...I think perhaps he wanted to be with *Dadi*."

"But...why before my birthday?"

A pained expression crossed Ravi's face. Just then an old lady stopped by them.

"I am sorry about your father. I heard how..."

Ravi nodded and folded his hands.

The lady looked at them with concern and walked away.

"He could have at least said goodbye," sobbed Simran.

I put my hand out wishing I could stroke her head. Forgive me *Beta*.

"Simran, I brought you here because I have something to give you. Something that I found in *Dadaji's* room."

"What is it?"

He wiped her tears and opened his bag.

I gasped.

From his bag, he fished out a gift wrapped in pink paper.

I took a deep breath. At last! Ravi did manage to find it after all.

Simran looked at it for some time.

"What's that?"

"I think it must be *Dadaji's* present for your birthday."

She unwrapped the paper gingerly. Just like the way she stroked the petals of the hibiscus flower. For a minute, she stared at the book. A faint glow of surprise in her eyes.

Read the message inside, I whispered.

She didn't. But just kept gazing at the bright yellow cover. What was she thinking? Was she happy? She must be. After all, she wanted to read the book so badly.

"I wanted to give it to you here. I know how special this place is to you and *Dadaji*," he gestured towards the Hibiscus flowers.

Moti and Sweetie wailed in a way I never heard before. I saw Simran looking towards my direction. The copy of *The Mahabharata* was clasped between her little fingers. She came towards me and plucked a hibiscus flower. Her brown eyes widened for a moment. Could she see me? Could she sense my presence? I looked at her wistfully as the myriad emotions engulfed me like a

whirlwind. She slowly turned and walked away with Ravi. Neither of them glanced behind. I didn't expect them to. Yet a part of me wished they would. What wouldn't I do for just that little chance to say goodbye? To make amends. To especially tell Simran why I'd left abruptly. A gust of wind blew. The trees swayed. The leaves rustled. I suddenly found myself enveloped by some invisible force, feeling the distance between the garden and me grow. I was finally attaining *moksh*. I didn't want to go until I knew Simran had read my message. But I was rising higher and higher until I merged with the clouds. After a while I saw nothing but a tiny speck of dot on the mass of waves. It was once my home.

The Desert Fox

The air smells of smoke and spices. The fire produces a glow of red and orange, and the sudden brightness makes the woman squirm. She draws closer to the man. It's for the first time in months she displays such proximity. The man retraces those incidents that led to this restrained communication between them. The little bump, that fall, bleeding, that rush of blood, her cries, her anguish, the hospital, solemn expressions on the doctor's face. Fifteen weeks. And the end of growing life. They were taunted by images of red clots and infants for nights. The shade of red began to frighten her. She was dressed in a creamy white gown that fateful day. Like the color of chalkstone structures around them, formed due to several sandstorms. But nothing like the storm that wrecked their blissful marital life. Those months of dealing with hysterical rants, tears, bawling, and then a sudden stony silence. A silence that terrified him. A silence that led to her disengagement from reality. That smell of burnt toast, dirty laundry, split coffee on the upholstery, the leaking pipe, unkempt hair, eyes that lost their sheen, long stares out of the window. Months went by. Seasons changed. And yet, in his life, everything had come to a standstill.

The sudden gust of wind ruffles her hair and caresses her cheek. For a moment, he thinks he sees a little sparkle in her eyes, looks hopeful, and then slumps his shoulders. All he sees is just the reflection of the stars in her eyes. Together they watch the gems of the sky, arranged in a pattern, each competing to be the brightest. The moon's reflection falls like a floodlight on them. A pair of invisible arms cradles them into a divine embrace. Beneath the star-studded canvas of black is a sheet of white that stretches across for miles. Chalk-like formations rest on it. Shaped sometimes like a woman's head, a rabbit, a giant bird, or a mushroom. Peculiar yet fascinating. A fleeting sound echoes in the stillness of the white desert. Almost like a whisper. Then there is a

crackling noise of the fire. The man looks up and watches his tourist guide boil eggs, placing the cooked chicken and rice on the yellow mats. He now clears his throat.

"Dinner is ready," he says.

She looks at him. Pale face, tired eyes, and luscious black hair. Small creases form on her broad forehead as she stares at the horizon.

"The fox?" she asks.

Their tour guide's mention about the appearance of the desert fox earlier that day appears to have etched in her mind.

"Consider it your good luck if you see one," he'd said.

"Does it come every night?" the woman asked.

"Can't tell," the guide shrugged.

The man stands up and offers his hand. She takes it, and they walk towards the tour guide. Another gust of wind blows. They watch the reddish-orange ball of fire sway by the force of the air. The elements of nature synchronized in perfect harmony. Like they had once been. It triggered memories of their first date a few years ago.

The restaurant by the sea, the musical notes of the violin wrapped in each other's arms, the rhythmic movement of their feet, and swaying to the music. Their eyes would shine like stars. Their faces would emanate a glow. How the man wishes he could turn back the clock. Maybe they wouldn't have run down those stairs. Perhaps, they wouldn't have been in a rush to watch that latest blockbuster. If only they knew. His eyes feel heavy with the unshed tears. Not a drop of water slid down his cheek since that day. He couldn't. Not when his wife was on the brink of insanity. Nothing would help. Not his parents. Not her parents. Not their friends. Not her colleagues. Calls and emails

went unanswered, doors closed, and her abrupt resignation letter. And just like that, she'd retreated into her shell. A change of scene, their doctor had reiterated. A considerable amount of pleading had finally resulted in a reluctant nod when he mentioned Egypt. He remembered her dream to visit the land of the pharaohs ever since she'd read *The Alchemist*. The silence lingered around them, with occasional bouts of awkward small talk throughout their flight from India, drive to the hotel, and tour around the pyramids.

As mentioned by their guide, the word tomb triggered her bouts of melancholy and a pool of tears. She couldn't bear the sight of those happy families. Even the presence of historical monuments or cruising on the calm blue waters of the Nile couldn't divert her mind. He didn't blame her, yet he wondered if they would ever see daylight again. He recollected that they led content lives with him as an investment banker and his wife educating young minds. Was it Karma compelling nature to play such a cruel trick on them? Even this vacation was taunting his wife. Perhaps they should go back to being holed in that room in their apartment where they'd placed a cradle surrounded with toys. Let his wife dwell in misery that seemed to instill a strange calmness in her. Their tour guide's casual and impromptu suggestion steered them into this surreal space of whiteness called the White desert. Placid and bare. No sign of a tree or a bush. No scent of a flower. They looked around, gasping at the vastness of the space. White, white, and white. Shades of brown here and there. Crescent-like structures. Almost giving them the feeling of landing on the moon. They reached it in time to see the sun sink behind the clouds. Its rays stretched like it was bidding goodbye. Darkness prevailed.

The man and his wife sit. The smell of spices wafts into their nostrils as the guide serves them chicken and rice. The chicken pieces are swimming in a pool of red gravy, smeared with

spices. The man and his wife pause for a second and stare at the red liquid. He looks at her and nods understandingly.

"Is it too hot or spicy?" the guide seems concerned.

They shake their heads. The guide continues to make small talk.

"No children?" he asks in an innocuous manner.

The couple takes a bite of the white rice, and carefully pick the chicken pieces. They push the gravy aside, and cringe in sorrow. Of course, the guide doesn't know about his folly of inadvertently touching a raw nerve.

A chill breeze blows tossing his loosely worn hat a few yards away. He moves to get it. Under the watchful eyes of the stars, the couple's eyes glisten with salty drops of fluid. For a moment, everything appears hazy, almost like a mirage. It is then they hear a light skittering of paws. When they see it at first, they aren't sure if it is just a figment of their imagination. Only the tour guide's remark makes them realize that the blurry shape of the bat-like ears, the long funnel-like fur tail, and the triangular face is as real as it could get. The desert fox has arrived.

The man and his wife can now see its light fawn color fur that seems to have a special glow. As though it is put under the spotlight. It walks in rather shyly, its tail tucked between the legs, and presents itself to the couple. It looks up with its black eyes that are shaped like dates. The dot of black on its nose resembles a blackberry. A contrast to its creamy off-white fur. It looks around, at the fire, the food, and then back at the couple. The cricket chirrup suddenly, and the whistling sound of the wind reverberates through this white arid land. The tour guide places an egg in a jar of water. The fox looks at it curiously and moves closer.

The woman stares at the fox. An inexplicable calmness takes over her face. Is it relief? Joy? Intrigue? The fox shakes its head slightly and takes a step closer. They notice how tiny it is

with that innocent look in its eyes and curious expression on its face. It almost dispels the notion of any cunningness that is usually associated with a fox. And yet it seems to look at the woman closely. For some reason, it does not care much for the man. He steps back and watches them. Perhaps it senses her loss? Is it comforting her? And then it bends down and nibbles the egg. It bites and chews slowly before it swallows it down its throat.

She stretches her arm and strokes its fur. It stops eating. Once again, the fox looks at her. Is it wary? Sensitive to human touch? Fearful? The woman and the fox stared at each other. She instinctively reaches out again. The fur feels soft in her hands. Above them, the stars are twinkling. The moon is as radiant as ever. The ghostly expression on the woman's face is gone. After many months, she seems to have come alive. Her eyes seem to be communicating something to the fox. What is she saying? What is she seeing? The man wonders. A sudden thought strikes him. Is she reminded of Anubis? Does she see this fox as the soul of their lost unborn child?

The tour guide gets up quietly and stands at a distance. The fox finishes eating and curls beside the fire. Then it gets up, scampers for a while, and stops. It turns back and looks at the woman for a long time. And gradually, it becomes a speck of dust. The flames are dying down. The woman's gaze is fixed towards the direction where the fennec fox disappears. The tour guide breaks the spell with his animated small talk. He gathers the vessels and mats and puts them in the vehicle they had traveled.

"You are lucky," he says.

The man looks at him inquiringly.

"Many people have come but go back disappointed. They don't see the fox."

"Oh," that's all the man says.

He takes a deep breath. The woman is still in a trance, and it suddenly turns cold. He wraps a blanket around her and leads her to the tent. Under the star-lit sky, they fall into a deep slumber. They do not notice the tent flapping. They are oblivious to the winds' howl, the sand flying in the air, and the banshee-like wails.

The woman is the first to wake up. She steps outside the tent. The sun peeps out into the horizon. Streaks of yellow and orange illuminate the sky like a golden carpet. The clouds gradually part to present a cascade of blue. The shades of white and brown are more apparent in the daytime. The chalk formations look even more dramatic in the sunlight. She blinks and gapes at the structures around her. There is one shaped like a sphinx that catches her fancy, and she walks towards it. She attempts to brush some dust on the stones and feels a tap on her shoulder.

"There was a little storm last night," the man says.

"A storm?" she whispers

"Yes. That explains the black particles."

"What about the...," she looks around furtively.

"It will survive. That's what the guide said."

"Oh."

"We survived too."

The woman looks at him for a long time. She nods. Everything around them appears calm and serene. They walk towards the camp, where the guide hands them coffee. They take a sip and see more unique shapes.

"If we leave now, we can reach the city soon," the guide tells them.

He puts away the things in the vehicle. The woman's eyes widen. Her face portrays a tinge of sadness as she quickly looks at the magnificent rock boulders. What is it about this pearl white landscape that fills her with a strange sense of tranquility? Is it her estrangement from people? Reality? Truth? She walks around some more. The man observes her. She appears to be moving away from him. Her silhouette glistens in the sunlight, and she almost seems nonexistent. He quickly walks towards her, takes her hand gently, and places it on his face.

"It's time to go," he says softly.

Reluctantly she trudges behind him. On the sheets of sand, she sees their footprints. They appear like tiny dots in a pattern. Like the ones, she'd seen in the stars. Limitless and infinite. It'll soon be cascaded by another sheet of sand. The guide starts the vehicle, and it roars. Clouds of white sand fill the air. The woman turns and cranes her neck. Eventually, the desert reduces to a white dot.

"The fox?" she asks.

"It'll come," says the man.

The woman places her head on the man's shoulder. He wraps his arms around her. Locked in an embrace, they drive far from this white space. They are so lost in each other that they do not see it. A pair of black eyes on a body of fawn color fur peers at their vehicle from a corner and blesses them.

On The Prowl

I was just a tiny kitten when I lost my mother. She went to fetch food like she did every day. My siblings and I would wait in vacant lots or porches of houses. That evening was freezing more than usual. The wind howled, the trees swayed, and it was raining. The entire world was grey and cold. The loud noises from the roads made us crouch in fear. And then there was this screeching sound, followed by another sound of a door opening and slamming. I heard a woman's cry of anguish. I saw her bend down and pick up something. It was my mother's limp body, remnants of meat plastered around her mouth and on the ground. I watched the woman gingerly stroke my mother's golden-brown fur. "Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry," she said. She looked around for a minute before placing my mother in the big vehicle, like the others that whizzed past on the roads making loud noises. I chased that woman until the vehicle became a speck of dust. My mother! Our anchor! What would we do without you?

My siblings and I wailed for days. Tired, helpless, and hungry. We huddled together, derived comfort within our golden-brown fur, and watched the rains lash furiously on the roads. Sometimes the warm cloth on the porch floor became our refuge against the cold winds. The roof above the porch sheltered us from the fat droplets of rain. One fine day, those two girls in the house saw us. They ran to fetch the adults, who looked at us with pity, fed us some meat, and took us to a home with other cats and dogs for company. I wonder if they, too, lost their mothers. They hardly talked and kept to themselves. This place was relatively smaller than the house we lived in. My siblings and I were separated and put in tiny little spaces with a grill, like the house's windows on that porch we lived. Every other day, I'd see human faces looking at us. Sometimes, they'd take

home one of the cats or dogs. My siblings were taken away too, and I never got a chance to say goodbye. I am not sure how many days passed, but I waited, hoping that I'd find someone to love me and give me a home. And then one day, when I opened my eyes, I saw an old, wrinkled face with beautiful blue eyes smile at me. "What a dear little thing," she said gently. Later I learned her name was Liz. I finally found a home.

She lifted me with her tender hands, stroked me, and placed me in her vehicle, the same as the one where my mother was placed. This one was relatively smaller but made the same noise while it moved on the roads. When Liz said, welcome home, I looked up to see a building. It was taller than the house on the porch I lived and had multiple smaller houses. Liz took me up the stairs to her cozy home. The floor was softer than the streets outside. She placed me on a soft cloth, which reminded me of my mother's fur. She patted me tenderly. "You have beautiful green eyes and lovely golden-brown fur. I can't think why but I'd like to name you Ginger." She fed me some delicious titbits on a round object which I learned was the cat's bowl. Sometimes, she'd feed me slimy salmon or a nice juicy chicken. I dozed off to sleep and dreamt about my dead mother's limp body. I'd wake up meowing, and Liz would tuck me back to sleep.

As I grew older, I became more accustomed to the human world and its strangeness. Liz would often watch other people's faces from this colossal thing. I could hear them talking, and their faces would appear close. Sometimes I wondered if they could also see us. Initially, I hid in a corner until Liz laughed and said, "Come out, Ginger, they can't see you." Her face lit up with a certain radiance when she smiled. Sometimes I'd notice a certain sadness in her eyes. Next to the place where Liz slept, there was the face of an old man. It felt like the man was peering in from a window from somewhere. His face was round and wrinkled, and his grey eyes had a pleasant tinge.

He must have been a funny man, one who made Liz laugh. His hair was the color of a tree branch and fell like a mop around his head. I stared at his face. He had a long nose, hollow cheeks, and some hair above his lips too. I kept staring at it until Liz came and took the man's face in her hands.

She had a wistful expression on her face. "That's Joe, Ginger. He was such a wonderful man. He..." her voice trailed, and she stopped talking. I meowed loudly to get her attention and rolled on my back. She tickled my tummy, then fed me some slimy salmon. And then she talked. I looked at her, but her eyes were staring straight ahead. "A year ago, it was our twenty-fifth anniversary. Our neighbors Mamta and her husband Rakesh were supposed to join us, along with their daughter Amrita. Before he wanted to give me his gift, he rushed to the stores to get something. Not sure what. Maybe a wine bottle...after some time, I got a call. They said," she paused to wipe a tear. "He suddenly complained of a chest pain, fainted. Before 911 arrived, he...he stopped breathing. He was just gone."

I swished my tail and perked my ears. I munched on the remnants of salmon and smacked my lips with my tongue. She suddenly lifted me and pulled me close to her chest. I feel uncomfortable when Liz sometimes cuddles me too much. I know she is lonely. I understand the sorrow of losing a close one. I think her salty blobs of tears fall on my fur. Uh-oh! I just cleaned it a few hours ago. "You are all I have, Ginger," she said. What about your children? Don't you have any? I want to ask her. Just as she read my mind, she sighs, "Bob and George are..." on their own. Sporadic calls, work... not sure why they won't talk. I couldn't give Joe what I got him. She got up and came back to show me something round and gleaming. She slipped it on her finger. "It would have been nice to see it on his hand." She stares wistfully at me. I wonder who those neighbors were. Did they live in this building? Did they come and visit?

It felt like Liz read my mind for the second time. "You know what's strange, Ginger? Last year, after a few months, Mamta died too. It was a car accident." All this talk about death was making me uncomfortable. My whiskers twitched, and I found my eyes burning. What is a car anyway? Is it that vehicle that killed my mother? The image of her limp body flashed in front of me. I wailed loudly enough for Liz to panic. "What is it, Ginger?" This time I didn't mind her cuddles and was glad to close my eyes and drift off into a deep sleep.

One such time when Liz was staring at the man's face, I noticed the window open. I slipped outside to explore the world beyond Liz's small home. I had often seen other humans walk by and was curious to know what they were up to. What was it like outside? Sometimes from Liz's home, I'd hear dogs barking and once a cat meowing. Did they also belong to people like Liz? What were they like? It was sunny outside, and I blinked. The sound of footsteps made me retreat behind the bushes and watch quietly. Then I came out and swished my tail. I glided from Patio to Patio inside this apartment complex. Sometimes I pressed my face through the window. I saw all the houses, were like Liz's house. Cozy, compact, with similar-looking objects. Like there is this soft cushiony structure where Liz usually sits and watches people's faces from this colossal thing. The only thing is this cushiony structure is smaller than the one at Liz's place. This piece of cloth was on the floor, which felt like my mother's fur. There is this thing where I see fire whenever Liz pushes and presses something. Then I see something which is vast and makes a lot of noise. Once the noise stops, Liz takes some clothes from it. That noise terrifies me.

The world outside Liz's home was an interesting one. I began my usual rounds whenever I found the window open. I was unsure how many days have passed, but the humans around this apartment recognized me. They stooped down to stroke me. Sometimes I like it, and sometimes I just feel like scratching them on their faces for doing that. I try and be nice though it's hard for me.

Not all humans mean harm. They just get excited about seeing me. They exclaim about my golden-brown fur and green eyes. I don't blame them. I swish my tail and toss my head. In this world of humans, the pitter-patter of footsteps, loud voices, and my meowing stand out in a solitary rhythm. Sometimes I get a response from the neighbor's cats if they aren't napping. But they never talk to me otherwise. At times I hear that tiresome dog growling. Bruno! Ughh! He always bares his teeth whenever he sees me. A clumsy fellow with his tongue hanging out and a perennial scowl on his face. Does he think his teeth are sharper than my claws? Fat chance.

It is almost getting dark, and this was when I could see better. But I must go home. Liz gets anxious every time I stay out late these days. I notice the days are shorter, and it gets darker earlier. The leaves are strewn on the ground. I must find a way to get out of Liz's home and explore the apartment at night. Liz always locks the window, and I shuffle around the house restlessly. Even a piece of that slimy salmon or tidbits cannot keep me confined. Liz looked at me exasperated and asked me what was wrong. I wish to find a way to tell her I sometimes need my space and time alone. What was I supposed to do when she placed this small dark object on her lap and pressed and moved her fingers around it. Whenever she presses her fingers, it makes a sound. Tap, tap...it feels like the sound of human footsteps. And it annoys me. That's why I like the solitude of the nighttime. What does Liz do anyway? I've seen her go out of the house only a few times. The rest of the time, she makes that tap-tap noise with a scowl or looks at the man's face. I curl up on that piece of cloth and sleep, dreaming about the time I'm roaming in the dark world outside.

And one day, to my surprise, I find the window is left open. I was curious to know how Liz missed locking the window. She is almost asleep. I prance around the house as usual before I go to sleep. I suddenly see something at the window. A shadowy figure of sorts. I perk my ears and walk towards it with my tail up. Is it another cat? A cold breeze blows as I let myself out. It's

dark outside, and I see occasional spurts of brightness like the sun's rays. It's like what I've seen in Liz's apartment. Liz presses something on the wall, and these bright lights come on. There is hardly anyone except a lady carrying something in her hands. She is one of those who always love petting me. "Hello, Ginger," she said. "What are you doing out here so late? Liz must be worried."

I see that shadowy figure with light around him next to her. I gape in surprise. That face, I can recognize it anywhere. It's the face of that man Liz keeps staring at. What is he doing here? Can that lady see him? She is just stroking me, telling me to go home soon. Then she turns around and walks towards her house. She doesn't appear to have seen that man. I look at him. The same dark hair on his head and above his lips. That same eyes, hollow cheekbones. Yes, it's him. He stares at me. What's his name now? Yes, that's right, it's Joe.

Does Liz know he is here? Then he moves his lips and utters my name. I gasp. How does he know? Then he just stares into the distance, like Liz does when she talks about him. I can sense the sadness in his eyes. There is something he wants to say. But what? He looks at me and touches me with his fingers tenderly. Just then, Bruno wails. I've never heard him cry like that. And then Joe dissipates into the darkness like fog. Where has he gone? Will he come back? Is he always here at night? I must find out more. Drat, that stupid dog! Why did he have to bark at that point? I curse Bruno before I go back to Liz. She is sound asleep. I look at her face, which is peaceful. Yet I know she is searching for answers. What was it that she said? Joe wanted to give her something. But what? How will I find out? Can I communicate with him?

That night I had dreams. I dream about loud noises, screeching sounds, my mother's limp body, and Joe staring at me. I yowl, and Liz wakes up startled. "Ginger, what is it, dear?" I clutch the cloth with claws, and my tail is upright. "Poor dear, you look petrified. Come, sleep next to

me." For once, I was grateful for Liz showering extra love upon me. I wouldn't have minded if she held me in her arms forever.

Then she begins to sniff. I look at her quizzically. She gives me a strange look, half fearful and half shocked. "That smell on you, it can't be..." she sniffs again. I try to wriggle away from her. I am not sure which is worse, her extra cuddles or inhaling. She reminds me of Bruno, the only difference being Liz doesn't bark or bite. She continues sniffing, and I half expect her to stick her tongue out like that clumsy dog. Stop it, Liz, I want to tell her. I almost want to scratch her, and then I see her eyes.

Filled with tears. "It feels like Joe is here," she whispered. I freeze and stare at her. I want to tell her I met Joe outside in the darkness. He, too, had a melancholic expression on his face. He tried to tell me something. But I couldn't tell her. My attempt to talk would only be a string of meow language, making her panic. Why doesn't Joe meet Liz? Strange are the ways of humans. But are cats different? My mother never came to meet me. Perhaps she is happy in heaven. Liz continues to sniff and finally gives up. "Perhaps it's just my imagination," she says. "Grief has a strange way of making the impossible seem real. Swirls your mind like a tornado." After a long time, we both drift into a deep slumber.

The next day I wandered off alone, wondering if I'd run into Joe again. The sun is sinking behind the clouds. Soon it'll be dark. I see another cat walking around. It's black and white and a female. I wonder who it belongs to. Will Liz get another cat? Sometimes it gets lonely, with Liz lost in her world of Joe or pressing her fingers on that dark object she keeps on her lap. Once I peeped to see what she was doing. I look at a black space with strange squiggles. Sometimes Liz presses another elongated object to her ears and keeps talking. Is she talking to herself? Not that Liz does not care for me. I just need someone who can speak my language, especially after

yesterday's experience of seeing Joe. I try and approach that black and white cat. She just rebuffs me. Quite standoffish, like those cats and dogs in the building I was staying after I lost my mother. I followed her, curious to know who she was. The black and white cat leaps up a wall and disappears into some bushes. I press my claws against the ground and hurl myself in the air until I land deftly on the wall. The black and white cat is nowhere to be seen.

I see this house which is smaller than this building. It's like the house whose porch my family and I lived in. I walk around cautiously, hoping there isn't a dog nearby. My claws are sharper than ever, and I wouldn't want to get into a fight and trouble. I see some windows and peep inside one. I see a girl searching for something, and she appeared distressed. I can tell. What is she searching for? What is going on in her mind? She suddenly turns to look at me. Her eyes exhibit melancholy. She is holding something with the face of a woman. Yes, she has lost someone very dear to her. Maybe her mother? Like me? We stare at one another for a while. She looks at me curiously, probably wondering why this orange cat was staring at her. Then she turns away and looks at that woman's face. I shake my head, wondering if all humans are like Liz, holding someone's face close to them all the time.

I go back to see Liz anxiously peering out from her Patio. An anxious expression is plastered on her face. Her scowl highlighted her wrinkles. "Where have you been, Ginger?" I see her holding something. It was a picture of a grey tabby cat. For a moment, I was overjoyed. Was Liz thinking of getting another cat? "Oh Ginger, the lady upstairs has lost her cat. Poor thing. You haven't seen this fella by chance, have you?" I dropped my tail and looked at her. No, I haven't. I want to tell her. "Oh Ginger, that poor thing must be lost and cold. Ginger, come home sooner, will you? What if you get lost too?" Then she held me close in her arms. I wriggled. Why couldn't

she understand? I'll signal to her when I want a hug. She locked the window, and I couldn't go out to see if I could spot Joe again.

The next day, she tied something around my neck. I look at her imploringly. "Mommy will know where you are and how to find you." Humans and their objects. What's this on my neck now? It looks like something Liz wears around her neck sometimes. I've seen some of the other women wear something similar. Feels tight, as though someone is clutching me with their paws. Gosh, how could they wear such things? I wish I could remove it. Why is Liz worried now?

She places a bowl of tuna in front of me. Hmm... this is delicious. Bless Liz for this treat. I wander off on my own, hoping to see Joe. All I get is some dark grey clouds and gloomy weather.

The next few days, it rained. I snuggled on the soft cloth with Liz and slept the entire day. The cold weather was making me sleepy and hungry. Liz has been more attentive lately. I wonder if she fears losing me, like that lady upstairs. I'll probably wander off far, and someone might take me. "You are getting fatter, Ginger," she rubs my belly. I yawn and go off to sleep. I dream of the shadowy figure of Joe. When I woke up, it stopped raining. I venture out into the Patio. It is wet. I feel a tingling sensation as a drop of water falls on me. I see people carrying something that protects their heads from the rain. And in some houses, these yellow round soft items, with eyes and noses, are drawn on them. They look like human faces and are creepy. I wonder if they can see me. I try and keep my paw on one of them. It topples over. I smirk and meow. Ha! Nothing can beat me. I return to Liz to take another nap. My stomach is growling, and I need food. Then I think about Liz's remark about getting fatter. I sulk and then give in to some chicken pieces.

I notice it getting dark outside. Liz is, as usual, moving and pressing her fingers. Tap, tap, tap. That noise got on my nerves, and I decided to go outside for a stroll. I must knock off that belly, as Liz categorically pointed out. "Come back soon, Ginger," she calls. That object is still

around my neck. What could she be afraid of? It's misty outside, and a cold gust of wind blows. I shiver, and for some reason, a chill runs down my spine. At first, it's blurry, and then the shadowy figure becomes clearer. Joe makes himself visible to me. The hair above his lips quivers as he utters my name. He is wearing a mix of something dark and light, like the color on Liz's floor. He strokes my head and speaks again. His voice sounds like the gentle rustle of leaves. "I see you have been giving Liz some company. Goodfella, you are." I meow in response. He rubs my head, and it feels great. This strange light around him makes me blink the same way when I see the sun.

I want to tell him how Liz misses him and that her sons don't talk to her. She is lonely; she pines for you every day. I wish I could speak the human language, but I can only understand what they say. "Will you do me a favor, fella?" I tilt my head to one side, wondering what it is. "There is something I got for Liz, which I couldn't give to her before my." he pauses. "I don't know if she ever found it, but it's inside the pocket of my white coat in my closet." What is a closet? What is a coat, a pocket? How am I supposed to convey this to Liz? I just swish my tail and blink at him. Just at that moment, Bruno wails. Darn, that awful dog. This time Joe doesn't flinch. He turns to glance at the dog. I'm not sure what he does, but Bruno calms down. Joe turns to me and, as if he had read my mind, sighs, "Yes, how could I expect you to understand what a closet or coat is. But I must make this journey soon. My time is running out. I cannot depart until Liz has received what I wanted to give her. If only I didn't go out to get flowers and wine."

I look at him closely. Is he teary-eyed? He just looks sad. I feel sorry for him. I wonder if my mother ever thought she had to give something to us. She just left us happily. I feel a sense of sudden anger toward my mother after so many years. Did she not care about us? I wonder about my siblings and drift into a trance of my past until Joe nudges me to the present. It's beginning to rain again. The bright sun-like lights shine on the sides. I don't like the feel of water on my fur.

But I cannot leave until I find a way to convey this to Liz. How? Just then, I hear her calling out to me. I see her frantic face standing on the Patio. She is looking at something and then spots me.

"Oh, there you are, standing near the bushes. Thank goodness for the tracker. How wet you are! Come back inside, will you?"

I stand rooted to the spot. I look back at forth between Liz and Joe. Liz walks towards me hurriedly.

"Ginger, what happened? Come inside. I've set some tuna for you to eat."

I still stand there, despite the uncomfortable feeling of water dripping from my whiskers. The rain is getting heavier. I jerk my head towards Joe and raise my paw. "What is it, dear?" Meow is all I could say. "You must be hungry." I shake my head violently. How could she not see him? Of course, he was dead, and I wanted to smack myself. Joe is looking at me, feeling aghast. He shakes his head sorrowfully as Liz lifts me in her arms. Joe and I exchange a look and make intense eye contact. Both of us are feeling helpless.

A flash of light occurs in the sky, followed by a rumbling sound. I blink, and Joe disappears. I suddenly feel heavy and squeamish, as though I have eaten something serious. And what a strange feeling I experience. A load of melancholy inside my cat's body. Liz looks at me in surprise as we get inside the house. She begins to sniff again. "Cannot be. Yet you smell just like him. He always smelt like morning dew. Fresh and invigorating." Liz looks into my eyes intensely. She raises her eyebrows. "Hmm, you look different, Ginger, something in your eyes...you also feel different. Wait, maybe it's the rain. Or maybe the weather is driving me nuts. Let me get you dry." I slip out of her clutches and leave a wet trail behind. I find myself being led into a tiny hollow space in the other room where Liz kept some of her and Joe's clothes. I wasn't sure what was happening, but I

found myself standing on my hind legs and dipping my paws into the pocket of the white coat. Wait! How and when did I learn to recognize these things?

Liz calls out to me. I don't respond. I am busy taking a small box from my pocket. The box that contained Joe's gift to Liz. She comes inside and gasps when she sees me. "Ginger, what? How did you? I don't understand." I don't understand, either. I feel my body is being held captive. I don't feel like myself. Maybe that lightning struck my head and damaged something permanently. I held out the box to her. Liz's eyes widened. "How did you find this? What's going on?" She sits on the floor and places her palm over her forehead. Still, on my hind legs, I do the unthinkable. I stroke her head. Liz gasps in shock. "That smell, I know he is somewhere here. But how? Ginger, tell me how?" I open my mouth, expecting a string of meows to come out. Instead, I speak a language I've never uttered before. The language of humans flows fluently from my mouth. The voice was not my own. And then I feel a sudden rush of energy sapped from my body. Darkness surrounds me.

I open my eyes to see Liz bending over me, tears flowing down her cheeks. She is holding something. Something like what is tied around my neck, but a thinner version with something small shining brightly. "How can I thank you, Ginger? You saw him, didn't you? No wonder I kept smelling him. I thought it was my head playing tricks with me." My head was in a swirl; I didn't understand what had happened. I was glad Liz and Joe got what they wanted.

For days after that, I didn't venture out. The rains continued to lash. I felt sluggish, tired, and hungry all the time. Liz looked happier these days. I still saw her looking at Joe's face sometimes. Sometimes she wore that sad expression whenever she mentioned her sons. I didn't mind her extra cuddles, especially not after those delicious tidbits. She seemed to spend less time

punching her fingers and stroking my head more. One day when it stopped raining, I went outside. It was dark, and I could see the moon shining brightly. It almost felt like a face of a man. Just then, I heard Bruno wail. I quickly disappeared inside, jumped on Liz's lap, and curled myself to sleep. The feeling of her loving fingers was warmer than my mother's golden-brown fur.

Lost In The Silent World

Kabir Nair looks at his therapist with bloodshot eyes. His voice shakes as he narrates those recurring images and dreams about his dead wife and five-year-old daughter.

I see them, he whispers. They speak to me.

What do they say? The therapist opens her notebook.

My daughter was standing at the edge of my bed...and...

The only noise in the room is the clock ticking. The therapist places a glass of water in front of the man. His hand trembles as he takes a sip.

I can't hold it anymore.

Hold what?

The brush. And my daughter. She wants me to do a painting.

There was a time when the brush felt like his third hand. The canvas would fill up with beautiful shapes and patterns. With places that stemmed out of his fertile imagination. Paintings that caught the fancy of an impressive clientele. Awards that were reduced to mere items in the storeroom now. That glory was a thing of the past. Ideas eluded him, and he needed help to mix colors.

What did you say to her?

Nothing. She was gone.

And your wife?

I see her too. The same mass of curls, painted lips, long nose, and kohl-lined eyes. That last conversation. I wish...

Kabir closes his eyes.

What did she say? The therapist leans forward.

She wanted to go to Agatti Island for our tenth anniversary.

He tells the therapist about that strange conversation with his wife just before she and their daughter left for her parents' place.

Why there, of all places? We could go to the Maldives, he'd said.

I've wanted to visit this place for a while. My grandma always told me stories about strange folklore on this island. I'm curious to see it.

It's remote. From Mumbai, we must take a flight to Cochin, Kerala. From Cochin, there are only one or two weekly flights to Agatti.

I want to see it. She was strangely obstinate.

Okay. We'll see.

I saw her.

Who?

My dead grandma. She stroked my head just like I had a fever as a little girl.

Kabir stares at her.

He says no such thing as spirits or ghosts, picking up the remote and flipping channels.

Don't you believe in the concept of the afterlife?

No reason to. Kabir's eyes were on the television.

She'd said you never know when you might... they exist with a glassy look in her eyes.

They argued for a while, and she retreated into her room and slammed the door. Kabir continued watching the game of soccer.

The therapist looks at him closely. She watches the fat blobs of tears roll down his cheek. And then he pours out the memories of that fateful day. Seven months and seven days ago. The evening of his exhibition, the phone call, the news of the accident on the highway, pelting rain, the truck. Rushing to the spot, the dent on the door, the shattered pieces of glass, splats of blood, the still bodies, eyes that would never open again. The police vans, sirens, and the ambulance. What wouldn't he do for just one chance to go back in time and change things? Perhaps he wouldn't have argued with his wife. He should have booked their flights to Agatti and planned the holiday. Apart from that argument, he led a happy life of family dinners, picnics, and memorable moments of his daughter playing with his paints while he worked. Sometimes, he couldn't understand his wife's obsession with supernatural forces, unlike her logical banker's mind.

The therapist takes a deep breath, writes something in her book, and looks at him. Beads of sweat form on her forehead. She opens the window to let fresh air in. The breeze from the ocean drifts into the room. It is an unexpectedly hot day in Kochi.

What if you get a chance?

What do you mean? How? Kabir looks puzzled.

What is it you want to do?

I don't know. Maybe paint, maybe take that trip...

You should.

Paint or the trip?

You decide.

Kabir ruminates.

Could you think it over, and we can talk about it in the next session?

Kabir nods tearfully.

After two weeks, he boards the flight to Agatti from Cochin. Perhaps it is his way of fulfilling his wife's last wish. The cemented road paves the way to sandy beaches within a few yards. Coconut trees lean over the ocean as if ready to embrace the foamy blue sheet below. Local folks seem to live with bare necessities. He looks at the resort. Nothing too fancy. Just enough to suffice: a hot bath, a good night's sleep, and some decent meals. Despite its lack of advancement, the place looks cleaner than most beaches in India. After meeting the owner, he places his belongings, canvas, and paintbrushes in his room. He needed to figure out how long he'd stay. The resort owner didn't ask. Perhaps he didn't get too many tourists on this island. Most of them preferred to stay at Bangaram Island, an hour away by boat. The property there was more upscale, he was told. He lies on his bed and drifts into a deep slumber.

Kabir wakes up to the sound of the waves. Glimpses of the sun's rays penetrate his room. He steps outside to see fishermen getting their boats ready. Tiny hermit crabs move across the wet sand. He sees one of the fisherfolks with a mop of black hair and a mole on his left cheek pick one up and hold it delicately. He catches the fisherman's eye. The latter waves and gives a toothy grin. Kabir merely nods and watches the fisherman steer the boat into the ocean. After freshening up, he walks on the beach aimlessly. He visualizes his daughter getting her feet wet and squealing in delight. He imagines his wife floating on her back on the salty blue mass of water. He wipes a tear, and his eyes fall on the giant wooden board extending into the lagoon. He walks and stands at the edge, absorbing the ocean's exotic mix of green and blue shades. He sees a turtle swimming and periodically comes to the surface to catch its breath. As a little boy, he remembers accompanying his father to the beaches to see turtles lay their eggs on the shore. Then he wanders on the beach far from the resort until the sky turns a dark shade of ink blue. The tide ebbs, and it feels like the waves are swallowing the sun. He sees a black shadow in the twilight. He strains his eyes to get a

proper glimpse. Something moves, and he hears a splash. Then he hears someone calling out to him. He turns to see a figure waving its hands from the sea. As the boat draws closer, he recognizes the face of the fisherman with black hair and a mole.

Look here, Sir. Go back to the resort.

Why? Kabir looks puzzled.

We don't come here.

Kabir looks back and realizes how far he has come.

Here. Hop on my boat. A fishy smell fills the air, and Kabir waves his hand in front of his nose. Reluctantly, he sits on the boat.

In a mix of Malayalam and broken English, the fisherman engages in small talk about Kabir's visit.

You arrive only today?

Yes.

How long are you staying?

Not sure, Kabir shrugs.

Ahh. You should visit Kalpeni. Not very far, Sir.

Okay.

No family? The fisherman's question is innocuous.

Kabir's face reddens, then quickly recovers. He asks the fisherman why no one ventures into this part of the island.

Ah. Long story, Sir.

Tell me.

During that choppy ride, he was told an exotic tale.

Many years ago, the fisherfolk in that part of the island caught something unusual. A big fish with a face like a human. Beautiful color and features. Something that no other island could boast of. At first, they couldn't believe what they saw. They gaped in awe. And then, greed took over them. They chained and placed it in a cage near their huts on the beach. They hoped to lure more tourists, make money, and become rich. Alas. It suffered. Refused food. Separated from its loved ones, it dwelled in grief. It cried for days. Struggled against the chains. One day, they found it still as a sheet. Eyes blank. They buried it. The sea lashed out on the shore. Transcended its limits. Swept the huts and their families. It haunts that part of the island. Even the sea. Men who ventured there were reduced to nothing but dead remains.

Kabir raises his eyebrows and looks at the fisherman.

Really? he asks.

You do not believe me, Sir? You ask anyone.

The ride ends, and they both get off the boat. Kabir ponders over the strange tale. Could it really be true? His wife's last words about her grandmother echo in his ears. He shakes his head. And what was it precisely the fisherfolk caught? he asks.

The fisherman had a distant look.

A big fish. Strange breed, Sir. Maybe a human is cursed as a fish. Perhaps the Sea Goddess herself.

You will come for dinner, Sir? Nice fresh catch.

Later, when Kabir asks the resort's owner about this tale, the latter nods.

We don't really talk about it. Who told you?

Kabir points to the fisherman.

In fact, recently, there have been a couple of deaths. So, you know, that's why...but don't worry, Sir. Just stay close to the resort, and you will be fine.

Kabir twists the ring around his finger. The owner looks at it curiously.

Beautiful color. Like the lagoon.

Kabir nods quietly.

The owner speaks in his brisk, business-like tone. So, have you tried exploring our underwater world?

It was then the man heard about Scuba Diving. The owner offers him a discount.

A different world out there, the owner remarks.

His wife would have loved this, Kabir thinks. He is a decent swimmer. Besides, he has nothing to lose. If you insist, he shrugs. For the next few days, he spends his mornings taking the introduction to scuba diving lessons. It helps him distract his mind. Soon he finds himself in the underwater world with five other men and the newly appointed instructor.

A dark shadow looms above him. For a minute, Kabir freezes. He coughs, removes his regulator from his mouth, and blows bubbles. Just like his diving guide instructed him. He inserts it again. When he looks up, the shadow is gone. Instead, he sees subdued rays of light penetrating through the contours of blue. What a peaceful world, he thinks. The only sound he hears is his own breathing. The coral shimmers. The hair-like tendrils sway in an orchestrated manner. Left to right. Up and down. They look like a bob of curls placed on the head of a giant rock. It reminds him of a doll his daughter always carried with her. One that was squashed to a pulp after the accident. Spurts of red on its hair. He shivers despite wearing a wetsuit. He feels a tap on his shoulder. The man looks at his guide bending his index finger and touching his thumb. He almost opens his mouth to say he is okay. Then he realizes he is underwater. He makes a similar gesture, and the

guide steers him toward the group. Kabir kicks his feet firmly tucked inside a pair of fins and glides effortlessly. The oxygen tank feels like a feather on his back. Contrary to his earlier inhibitions, he feels comfortable underwater. Keeping his body parallel to the ocean bed, he looks at the different shapes of coral- a dwarf tree with bare branches shaped like a human brain and a mushroom. Striking shades of orange, pink, yellow, and blue flash before him. He is instantly reminded of his palette. One that remained untouched after that tragedy.

He is distracted by a sudden movement. A brownish-orange fish swims past him. He tries to recollect the book on underwater species he was reading on the boat. He watches it swish its fin tail in a perfect rhythm. It appears unfazed by his presence. Is it used by humans? He wonders. There is something majestic about it. He looks at its large droopy eyes and detects a tinge of sadness. He almost stretches his arm to touch it but withdraws in time. His guide's strict instructions about not touching marine life reverberate in his ears. He sees his group pointing at a rock. And then he sees a pair of antennae sticking out of the stone. A partially jutted-out body. A mix of yellow and red stripes. It almost looks painted. The spiky lobster retreats into a hole in the rock. Kabir feels an instant empathy toward this creature. Why can't they leave it alone?

Those days he just stared at the blank canvas in front of him. Unkempt hair, overgrown beard, blood-red eyes, dark circles. Terrified by his own reflection. Not at all like a man in his late thirties. Stale food, spoilt milk. And then those constant knocks, doorbells, phone calls, text messages. Why couldn't they leave him alone? Relatives, neighbors, and friends. Words of sympathy, unsolicited advice, his unresponsiveness, the distance, and finally, the withdrawal. Followed by the move from Mumbai to Kochi. Far from those memories, the world of galleries and exhibitions.

He averts his gaze from the lobster. The world around him is a blend of blue and green. A deep shade of blue at some points. Turquoise green in other places. Red snappers and blue-green parrot fish zoom past him. He looks at the family of parrotfish wistfully. His eyes sting for a minute. His mask becomes hazy. It blurs his vision. He gives the bottom seal of the mask a gentle lift with his thumb and index finger. Then he allows a little water in it. He presses the top seal of the mask to his forehead, opens the bottom seal, and blows hard through his nose. The mask is now clear. Suddenly the world around him darkens. He sees that shadow again. Is it a shark? His breathing becomes rapid. The shadow attains shape and color, and he recognizes the webbed feet under that long-streamlined shell. Those flippers. The greenish-brown shade. He heaves a sigh of relief as the turtle swims above him. He glances at the expression on its face. Focused, calm, and placid.

Just then, his guide taps him and points his thumb up. Kabir nods and adds a little air to his buoyancy control device. They ascend to the surface. Step by step. The turquoise-blue world becomes a speck. As he emerges to the surface, waves, and the cacophony of voices on the boat fill his ears. The crew members hold him and pull his fins and his oxygen tank. He climbs the ladder to the deck of the ship. The sun initially hurts his eyes. The weather is pleasant, as expected to be in February. He sees the turtle come up to take a breath of fresh air. Excited chatter fills the air. High-pitched voices, names of fish, descriptions of shapes and colors. The group of five men sounds like children receiving Christmas presents. Dripping wet, his wetsuit to his waist, he sits by the boat's edge and tries to join the conversation. So far, he has avoided questions about his family. Just small talk about ocean life. The chatter continues until the guide calls for a second dive. As he did earlier, he gives the instructions again about sticking together as a group.

In case you drift, DON'T panic. Use this.

He holds a long orange floating device in his hands.

Each of you has an inflatable marker in a pouch attached to your Buoyancy Control Device. Position yourselves vertically underwater. Take out the buoy from your pocket. Hold it in a way that avoids getting entangled with your legs. Pull your octopus full length. He holds out another regulator, yellow in color. Hold the buoy with your right hand and inflate air into it. Before launching the buoy, make sure there are no obstructions above you. One of the crew will always be on the lookout for the marker. They will immediately fetch you using the lifeboat when they see it. Is that clear?

The group nods. One by one, they land in the water with a splash. They let out air from their Buoyancy control devices and descend. Kabir is surrounded by a cascade of blue as the cacophony of the human world dissipates. His breathing takes over, and they land on the ocean bed. It's cold, dark, and deep. There are spots where the sun's rays generously penetrate. The guide ushers them there. He bends his index finger towards his thumb and looks enquiringly at the group. They all repeat the gesture, including the man. At first, it's all blue with bare rocks. And then, Kabir begins to see specks of orange. When he moves closer, he notices they are a shoal of tiny orange fish. Then he sees some more orange fish with shades of red on them. He chokes. His stomach forms knots. It feels like someone has placed a slab of stone in his chest. That orange dress on his daughter's body. Smearred with blood. He is unable to scream. He looks at his group keenly, observing something on the ocean bed. Kabir takes a deep breath and moves towards them. He sees a long stretch of moss green with tiny yellow growth, like thorns. It reminds him of a cucumber. The moss of green moves a little. He sees a yellow dot and peers closely to see a small crab. A baby, in fact. Nestled against the sea cucumber cozily.

And then he sees that dark shadow once again. This time he doesn't flinch. He recognizes the pair of flippers, the greenish-brown shell, and those eyes. The turtle brushes past him. He looks up and finds himself drawn towards it. Kabir kicks his legs. One arm stretched forward. An action like he is calling out to the turtle. Of course, he cannot shout. The guide's onboard instructions slip away from his memory. Like Alice, he is lured into this rabbit hole. The turtle is swimming at a fast pace. Kabir is trying to keep up. He leaves behind the enchanting world of corals. The turtle becomes a speck and disappears. Kabir looks around. Not a trace of light. Not a sign of coral. His breathing quickens. He places his hand over his chest. He opens his mouth. The regulator slips out. He hurriedly inserts it into his mouth and blows bubbles. How far is he? How deep? He looks up. All he sees is a sheet of dark blue. He tries to kick but is unable to move his legs. He feels a strange sensation. Is it cramps? What is happening to him? he wonders frantically. Strange noises occur in his ears like a thousand bees buzzing. Shadows encircle him.

Peculiar figures dance in front of him. Nothing makes sense. His head feels dizzy. He tries to recollect what his guide said. What was it? Holding a stick? He pulls out something from his buoyancy control device. A yellow tube dangles in his hands. And then he sees something huge coming towards him. He squints. He feels a giant tailfin brush his face. The regulator drops. He opens his mouth. His eyes cringe in terror. Does he see eyes, nose, and hair? The figure becomes hazy. Translucent. His eyes snap shut. The world around him turns black. He stops moving.

When he opens his eyes, he finds himself on the floor of the moving boat. His wetsuit is undone, and he is surrounded by anxious faces. He blinks. Coughs. He tries to get up. His head feels heavy. A hand helps him up. It rests him against the side of the boat. The sun is still glaring at him. He frowns. The last thing he remembers is being underwater. And then the blackout.

Are you okay? The guide places his hand on Kabir's forehead.

Kabir nods weakly.

Good thing you used that inflatable marker.

The guide points to the orange buoy beside him.

Kabir stares at it.

How? What? A flurry of questions engulfs his mind.

One of the crew boys immediately spotted it and rushed in that direction.

The guide went on.

He found you unconscious. What happened?

Kabir shakes his head. He doesn't remember using the inflatable marker. If he hadn't, who did?

The boat is nearing the shore. One of the group members hands him a bottle of water. He takes a couple of sips.

We were worried when we didn't find you. I mean, you just disappeared, the member said. The boat stops, and Kabir stands up. He looks at the crystal water of the lagoon. The sight of the little head breathing fresh air makes him stare. He remembers following the turtle, dark blue water, a giant tail fin, and the face. A cool breeze blows. Goosebumps appear on his arms like little sprouts. He wraps a towel around him. The group gathers around him on the shore. Concerned. Curious. Perplexed. Questions. The man tells them about everything he saw.

It must be Narcosis, one of them say.

Kabir looks puzzled.

Read it somewhere. Going too deep underwater can cause this condition. A feeling of being drunk and dizzy. Sometimes it causes hallucinations.

Oh, that's all Kabir could muster. Was it just his imagination? Or was he enthralled by the folklore, and imagined an encounter with the mysterious figure? Did he really use that inflated marker? What was happening?

Later he bumps into the resort owner.

How are you feeling?

Better, Kabir says.

What really happened?

Kabir explains the turtle and the strange face with a giant tailfin. The owner turns pale as he holds Kabir by his shoulders and locks him in an embrace.

Oh my God! You could have died. It saved you! But why?

What if he had died? He ponders later in his room. Perhaps it would have ended his pain and suffering. And then his eyes begin to shut, and he recollects his near-to-death experience. Water, tailfin, and that face. So vivid in his mind now. He doesn't want to forget that face. Was that the sea Goddess? The strange creature? Why did it save him? He reflects on the walk that evening. How the fisherman stopped him. The eerie ambiance. He looks at the photograph on his table. His wife and daughter's faces stare back at him. *Separated from its loved ones*, the fisherman's voice echoes in his ears. Was this a sign? Perhaps his wife was right about those magical and supernatural elements. He gets up and gathers his paintbrushes.

His hands move slowly at first. Rusty and uncertain as he outlines a shape with his brush. He stares at the streaks of bluish green. He feels a sudden tingling sensation, like those times when he painted those award-winning portraits. With every stroke, his hands become steady. He gets a better grip on his brush, and his confidence grows by the minute. At one point, it feels like the

brush has taken control of his hand. He finds himself getting into that rhythm. After that, his hand furiously moves across the canvas, dabbing different shades and colors.

A few hours later, Kabir finds himself staring at the canvas. It's now filled with exotic shapes, sizes, and colors. A mix of blue and green. Corals are shaped in the form of mushrooms and walnuts. Fish. Some big. Some small. Unique shades of pink, purple, orange, and yellow. Colors he'd never mixed before. A turtle. The elongated moss of green. A tiny dot of yellow on it. A small rock. That jutted out head with antennae. Red with yellow stripes. He paints a large tail fin with well-defined scales. A shade of icy blue. Greyish tinge. Then he draws a face. Black eyes, a long nose, and red lips. The mass of black waves crowned on top of the head. Then he signs his name below the painting. He feels a strange mix of gratitude and melancholy. No doubt. He finds his inspiration to paint. Yet, he wants answers.

The next day at dusk, Kabir walks along the shore to that part of the island. The waves touch his feet and retreat. The sky darkens, and he sees the sun sinking behind the restless waves. He finds the water coming towards him with a sense of urgency. He stands there with a searching look in his eyes. What does he expect to see? Suddenly, he finds himself walking toward the foamy ripples of water. He is lured and feels this strange magnetic pull. The waves envelop him, coming up to the waist. He looks at the salty mass of water, hears a splash, and then sees the strange shape. Is it that mysterious Sea Goddess who saved him?? He draws closer, questions swarming in his head, awaiting answers he wasn't sure he'd get. But that doesn't stop him. Kabir continues to move until the water is up to his neck. Images of his wife and daughter play in his head. Those moments of laughter, happiness, and togetherness. He doubted if he could make another painting like he had earlier. This was the final masterpiece. Hopefully, they remember the great Kabir Nair with his

scintillating portrait of the world beneath the waves. He closes his eyes and walks until the waves lock him into an embrace.

A year later, some tourists look at a painting displayed in front of the resort. They marvel at the colors and call it a work of genius. The owner is ecstatic at the sudden increase in the business. One woman from the group approaches him.

How much for that painting? She takes out her wallet.

Not for sale, the owner replies.

Do you know who painted it?

Kabir Nair. He stayed with us for a few days.

The Kabir Nair?? Here? Wow. What happened to him?

Gone, the owner simply said.

Gone where?

No one really knows.

That's strange.

The woman is interrupted by her five-year-old daughter.

Mommy, look, it's a mermaid in the painting. Please, can we buy it?

The owner looks at the ocean. He recollects that day when one of the staff came to him frantically and reported Kabir was missing. They searched far and wide on the island. No trace of him. One day, that fisherman found something strange in his catch. A ring. The owner remembers it from Kabir's left ring finger. He enters the room and finds the painting, with the signature of Kabir Nair. He gapes at it in awe. What a magnificent portrayal of his island. He puts an image of it on the website, the internet, and brochures. He was offered hefty prices for the painting, but he

refused to part with it. He could use this to lure tourists. Also, the owner is afraid that the sea would transcend its limits and wipe out his resort if he parts with the artwork. The woman and the daughter argue about the painting. They plead with him to sell it. Outside, the waves crash on the shore until it drowns the voices of the humans.

Neither Here Nor There

Bhuvan saw him walk in through the door. Big and burly, the man had a certain cockiness about him. Thud, Thud, Thud, his boots plodded on the floor. His brown mustache twitched as he made his way to the counter. With his dark blue uniform covered with badges, he certainly made heads turn. Bhuvan dropped a glass and hastily bent down to pick it up. He clumsily wiped his hand on his green apron. The entry of the cop reminded him of an image that had been etched in his mind since childhood. The same thud noise announced the arrival of those men as big and burly as the cop here. The sight of his frail father crying and falling at the feet of those men still gave him nightmares.

His fingers shook while he poured coffee into a cup. His ears felt like they were on fire. For days, he had dreaded this moment. He stared at the cup of frothy milk until he was nudged by a colleague. He feebly called out the customer's name. A middle-aged man picked up his order, flashed him a smile, and said thanks. Bhuvan was grateful for that little gesture of kindness. He prayed and hoped someone else would attend to the cop. But no! They were busy preparing several orders for the Sunday morning crowd.

He realized it was just another regular day at Beans Coffee for everyone else. People in queues, their cursory glance at the menu, the exchange of pleasantries followed by orders, a pause before they decided on their beverage, the noise of the coffee maker, the clinking sound of the cups and spoons. Names being called out, footsteps of the customers back and forth between the counter and their table, lively chatter accompanied by occasional laughs. Beans Coffee was a world. Bhuvan liked how the crowd was an eclectic blend of different cultures. He noticed some locals, Europeans, Latin Americans, and Asians. Like different flavors of coffee. Occasionally the

smell of freshly baked brownies or muffins emanated a pleasant scent. Some customers smiled, while others were curt. As tough as nails, Bhuvan liked to label them. The hardened expression on the cop's face could make anyone feel they were about to be arrested. Even if they were as innocent as a fly on the wall. And Bhuvan was an undocumented immigrant, after all.

Bhuvan cleared his throat and muttered.

"G...good morning, Sir. What...what will it be for today?"

The cop stared at him.

"One Cappuccino to go, please. Medium."

Bhuvan coughed. "Uh, Certainly, Sir. Anything else?"

"No. That's it."

It seemed to take a longer time for him to make the coffee. He banged into his colleague James twice. "Hey, all ok with you, man?" James smiled good-naturedly.

"Y... yeah...just..."

"Don't blame you. That cop looks like he could kill," chuckled James

Bhuvan smiled weakly. He looked at James's compassionate green eyes. How he wished he could confide in him. But he was scared. What if James told someone, and the word got around? The only people who knew about his situation were Henry-the owner of the coffee joint, and some of his old roommates with whom he was hardly in touch. He hoped and prayed they hadn't told anyone.

Bhuvan absentmindedly handed the order over to the cop in a mug.

"Didn't I say it's a takeaway, young man?"

Bhuvan's eyes widened, and his face turned red.

"Sorry, sir, in a minute."

He came back with a takeaway plastic cup. The cop grabbed the cup and stormed out of the cafe muttering under his breath. Probably cursing what a turnip head that young lad at the coffee place was. Bhuvan wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. A habit he acquired in childhood. He always forgot to reach out for a tissue or a napkin.

"Always carry a handkerchief," Mrs. Costa told him numerous times. And he always failed. Those times almost felt like his past life. So much had changed in the past two and a half years. Before he left India, his plan was well chalked out, and his future was crystal clear. He was eager to fulfill his dream and make his mother proud. Wasn't this why they left the village and why she worked hard night and day at various households? Here he was, serving coffee and constantly living under the veil of terror of being deported to some unknown destination along with a group of strangers.

He couldn't believe Mrs. Costa was no more. When it was time to pay his tuition fee, he found the money hadn't been transferred to the bank. He waited for days until he received that dreaded phone call about her death. Passed away in her sleep, he was told. Over tears, he watched the deadline pass and decided to take a break, hoping he'd miraculously secure funds. But working in a local coffee joint would barely take care of his living arrangements. And even if the university decided to waive one semester's fees, what about the rest? The money stopped coming, and his calls to Mrs. Costa's residence went unanswered. Her lawyers said her will was incomplete and that the childless woman's funds were denoted to an orphanage in Mumbai city. Just like that, his American dream fizzled away like smoke. He made several calls just to hear unanswered rings, which ultimately stopped. After a few days, he received news of his mother's untimely death. Nursing a broken heart, uncertain about continuing his education, and nothing to go back home to,

he almost ended his life. He dreaded hearing his phone ring, which eventually resulted in nightmares. Every call felt like a banshee wailing.

The ringing sound of the door opening compelled him to attend to another customer. He spotted that Indian girl curiously looking at him from the corner of the café. She seemed concerned and then returned to her reading after the cop left. She was a regular here. Probably lived in the neighborhood. Something about her attracted him instantly. She seemed intelligent and witty. He hoped he hadn't scared her by sounding enthusiastic about her name. What had come over him? Perhaps it was homesickness. Simran! Her name reminded him of his favorite film that he once watched with Mrs. Costa. It was a treat after he passed his final year exams with flying colors. He loved how two youngsters fell in love during their vacation in Europe. Just thinking of the movie brought a smile to his face. Clinging to such memories was his only light in this dark tunnel. His thoughts were interrupted when Simran approached the counter.

She flashed a radiant smile. "I'd like a Vanilla Latte, large, please, and a Cinnamon bagel.

Bhuvan almost fainted. He felt a warm fuzzy feeling in his heart, and his face turned red.

"Go or have? I mean..you are going...to go. Yes, to go or have it here?" Bhuvan stammered.

Gosh, what must Simran think of him? Clumsy, goofy, and immature.

"I think I'll have it here."

"Sure, Simran."

She nodded and returned to her seat.

After twenty minutes, her order was ready.

"Vanilla Latte and cinnamon bagel for S...S.Simran," Bhuvan called out. Oh dear, he sounded like Shahrukh Khan now. He wondered if she was a Shahrukh Fan. Most Indian women were, he thought.

Simran came up to the counter again with an amused smile.

"Thank you," she said. "You know you sounded like SRK in Darr."

Bhuvan coughed. She seemed to read his mind, and his heart fluttered like a hundred seagulls flapping their wings.

"Are you a fan of Sharukh?"

"Who isn't?" she smiled. "Though *Harry Met Sejal* was a disappointment. Have you watched it?"

Bhuvan swallowed nervously. He hadn't watched a movie in a while. His precarious position made him scared to venture beyond his workplace and Henry's house. He couldn't show his student id anymore. What if they called the school and verified? He knew he was being paranoid about that. But still, he couldn't risk it. He was petrified of showing his passport, and the person at the counter asked him questions. People in the Bay area asked simple questions, he noticed. They were just being friendly.

"No, haven't had a chance to watch movies," Bhuvan smiled nervously.

"Hard time managing work and school, huh?"

Uh-oh! At 23, did he look like a kid in front of her? She must be in her twenties, too, surely.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well. Let me know if you want to watch a Bollywood movie sometime," she smiled.

Bhuvan fiddled with his shirt button. Did she just ask him out on a date?

"See you around," she returned to her seat.

Bhuvan's heart kept beating furiously, and he felt his body was inside a microwave. He had a tough time attending to customers the rest of the day, waiting for Henry to take him home. Later that night, after he had finished cleaning the café and everyone had left, Bhuvan accompanied

Henry to his cozy home a few blocks away. Henry lived alone as he was divorced. His only estranged grown-up son now lived on the East coast. Bhuvan was grateful for Henry's kindness in accommodating him in the study. Bhuvan lay on his mat, watching the ceiling above. He tossed and turned, unable to sleep, which was the case every night. Bhuvan drank some water which he kept next to his mattress. He replayed the scene with the cop earlier that morning. He almost had a heart attack just watching the figure in that dark blue uniform enter that door. Bhuvan couldn't help thinking about how his pursuit of the American dream became such a nightmare.

When he and his mother left the village in Western part of India, she was determined to break his mold from being just a farmer's son. After scrubbing filthy bathrooms, cooking meals, and enduring the perverted male gazes, she secured funds to send him to a decent school. Only after working with Mrs. Costa she had enough to get him well-educated in an English medium school in the city. Mrs. Costa-a dear old lady who had lost her husband to a terminal illness. It was she who seeded the idea of studying abroad. Said he had the potential to make it big in life after discovering his fascination for computers. And Bhuvan had been dreaming about making it big in life ever since. Till today, he was still determining why Mrs. Costa took a particular interest in him. She adopted him as her son, almost like a Godmother, and decided to fund his fees while studying abroad. He was ecstatic when he received that email about being admitted to San Jose State University. When he decided to embark on his journey, his vision was clear. He'd finish his master's and then apply for a job in the line of computers. Coding was something that fascinated him. He recollected tears of joy falling down his mother's cheeks like the torrential rains in Mumbai. "*Mera Beta vilayat chala gaya,*" she'd told everyone she met. It was a moment of pride to see her son from the village shine in the city and then cross the ocean to the land of opportunities. He had wanted to make her proud and send her money. She could give herself a much-deserved

break from scrubbing floors or cooking meals for several households. Life wasn't easy for a single mother with a son from the village. The city was lurking with predators, worse than those men who troubled his father. Bhuvan often wondered what had happened to him. "He was just an emotional fool and a failure," she'd say, and her eyes blazed with a certain kind of anger that frightened him. He never broached the subject again.

And yet Bhuvan couldn't help thinking he was a failure today. He had lost both his mother and Godmother, and now his student status, unable to complete his education, and now reduced to a mere undocumented immigrant. He had no home to go back to, no home here. What if Henry, too, died? What would happen to him? His mother must be cursing him from heaven. Just then, he heard a sound in the next room. A bookshelf was being opened, and something hard was being placed on the desk. Bhuvan knew Henry sometimes looked at the photo of his son wistfully. He wondered why his son never contacted him. Poor Henry. How lonely he must be feeling. Bhuvan realized everyone was lonely in some sense. He asked about Simran. Did she have a family? Was she lonely too? Perhaps that's why she invited him to a movie.

Student life was good for that one semester. His mentors were kind, helpful, and friendly. He lived in a rented apartment with three other students, twenty minutes away from campus. He was delighted to see Indian grocery stores and restaurants. And a lot of Indians-people who worked in Google or Apple. He hoped to be one of them someday. He was faring well in his classes and learning a lot. He often found himself gaping at the University campus and its facilities. He secured a part-time job at Beans coffee. He had his share of alcohol and parties but was still shy around girls like he always was, even in Mumbai. Besides, he never really came close to liking anyone besides passing crushes that withered away like the petals of a dried rose. That phone call ruined everything. What was he going to do? How was he going to secure funds? He looked up at the

skies in the hope of an answer. All he could see was a mass of black sheets. Fate seemed to have closed doors on him. He let out a cry of anguish, fear, and anger. There was no one to comfort him or wipe his tears. He was alone on this journey.

Based on his roommates' suggestions, he approached the registrar's office. A stern-looking man with thick glasses looked up without a smile. He begged and pleaded with the hope that a miracle in the form of humanity would be showcased. Perhaps they might pity this poor Indian lad who had come here saddled with dreams and aspirations. The expression on that bespectacled man remained as stoic as ever.

"What should I do, Sir? Should I take a break this semester?" cried Bhuvan.

"In that case, you'll lose your F1 status, young man," said the bespectacled man in a grave tone.

"Please help me, Sir. Please. I'll do anything..."

The man sighed and shuffled his papers. He stared at them for a while before he spoke again.

"There is one way out. You can submit a reinstatement application five months after losing your F1 status. It must be compiled with the ISSS office and sent to USCIS. You must explain the reason for the loss of status, and a fee will be charged. The process usually takes between six to twelve months." Bhuvan's head was in a whirl. It was all so complex and uncertain. What if his application gets rejected? And how much was the fee? When he came out, he saw the sun sinking behind the clouds, just like his hopes diminishing behind a dark cloud.

With a heavy heart, he went back to his apartment. The lights were on, and music was playing. His roommates were celebrating the end of the first semester. They had invited a couple of their mentors. They sensed Bhuvan's morose mood when he walked in, wading through the

empty cups, chips packets, and some smeared salsa on the floor. Instantly the music was turned off. Their high spirits caused by beer eventually sobered down when they heard about his plight.

The suggestions poured in. One of his mentors advised that he take up odd jobs.

"Like what?" Bhuvan asked.

"Like ones in a grocery store."

Bhuvan gasped.

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Yeah, well. I know many who do that to earn some extra bucks."

"What if you get caught?"

The mentor shrugged.

"Fate," he said nonchalantly. He thought for a moment.

"You know to code, right?"

Bhuvan nodded.

The mentor drummed his fingers on the chair.

"I have a friend. Works in coding. I was looking for help. Maybe you could hmm...."

The tension in the air was palpable. One of the boys got up and opened the window. The cold air wafted inside as a respite.

"I'll talk to him and see if something can be worked out.

Bhuvan looked hopeful.

"Why can't you just go home?" Another roommate asked.

Bhuvan sighed. "Nothing to go back to."

"I see."

"I suppose I have to make other living arrangements now."

"Hey, don't sweat it. You can continue staying here. Things will get better."

Bhuvan was grateful. But he knew his days in the US would be numbered if he didn't act fast.

The days were getting shorter, and colder. He saw people with jackets, and hoodies. He watched his friends get flu shots. "Hey, did you get one, too?" one of them asked. He learned how people succumbed to the flu during winters. Cough, cold, high chills. With his loss of status, he'd lost out on the university-provided medical insurance. And he couldn't risk going to the medical center. What if someone found out about his situation? It would cause unnecessary confusion. He prayed and hoped that his roommates would not tell anyone. But eventually, everyone would notice. His absence from the classes in the upcoming semester would be conspicuous.

The festive season began to set in. People were making plans for Christmas and New Year. Everywhere he went, he saw beautifully decorated Christmas trees and Santa caricatures. How he wished Santa was honest and could gift him some money. As jubilant the ambiance around him was, he couldn't help feeling morose. Every step he took contained a massive amount of trepidation. He discovered it didn't snow in the Bay Area during winter. It was cold, nevertheless. A roommate loaned him a jacket after seeing him shiver in his plain sweatshirt. Life appeared to be a little kinder to him in the coming days. He got an opportunity to do some coding work, albeit anonymously. A cheque with a meager amount came his way, and he put it away safely. Every dollar was crucial. He had to somehow earn enough in the next few months. He also managed menial jobs at the coffee joint, like cleaning shelves and the bathroom. This wasn't the life he had envisioned. He had no choice and continued slogging.

Bhuvan woke up one morning feeling like someone had placed hot coal in his tonsils overnight. His forehead burnt, and his body ached. He longed for his mother, who would have

served him hot dal khichdi, placed a wet cloth on his forehead, and given him crushed *tulsi* leaves and turmeric in hot water. He had no choice but to miss work and lie in bed the entire day. The second semester had begun. His roommates were gone during the day. The tension mounted in him with every passing day he missed at work. And just like that, two weeks elapsed. Time seemed to fly, but life had come to a standstill for him. He watched the seasons change. The heavy downpours and gray clouds paved the way for clearer skies and warmer weather. He slaved over his chores and spent sleepless nights coding. Before he realized five months had gone by. Another semester had ended. He still needed more resources. And worst of all, he was in no man's land. Stuck in a snare with no way to escape.

Meanwhile, summer was just around the corner. Talks about beaches, kayaking, and Lake Tahoe floated in the air. His roommates were making plans too. They were kind enough to accommodate him. It was just a matter of time before he'd be shown the door. And the time finally arrived. With apologetic expressions accompanied by reluctance, they came up to him.

"Bhuvan, er...you see, it's like this. People are asking questions. I mean, you are not in class and...."

Wordlessly he collected his belongings and walked out the door, muttering a word of thanks. He understood even though his insides ached. He couldn't blame them. They had been more than helpful, and he couldn't get them into trouble. The weather was warm and sunny. Everything looked bright and cheerful. For Bhuvan, it still felt like winter.

What plagued Bhuvan the most was the fear of getting caught. He found a small garage next to the coffee place. That night, when Henry was locking up, he saw Bhuvan walk towards the garage with a suitcase in tow. Henry gently probed him, and amidst tears of anguish, Bhuvan told his woeful tale. Afterward, Henry led him to his study and said he could stay there. Henry left the

room and came back with a plate of food. "Eat," he had said gingerly. Bhuvan looked up in disbelief. For a long time, Henry watched him as he ate the rice and beans. "Don't worry about anything. You can continue working in my coffee shop," said Henry.

Bhuvan looked outside. It was dark. Life had a strange way of landing you in places and situations which initially seemed like a dream come true. He felt like a fly trapped in a spider's web, and his sanity began deteriorating. For a few days, he could not get up and get a hold of himself. He looked at his unshaven face, red eyes, and black circles. Henry gave him a few days to recover. Bhuvan would toss and turn in his sleep. Nightmares about his mother calling him a failure haunted him, his father's face stared at him from the sky, and images of the cattle and fields swirled in his head.

Just then, he heard a sound in the next room. A bookshelf was being opened, and something hard was being placed on the desk. Bhuvan knew Henry sometimes looked at the photo of his son. A son who rarely called or visited him. There were mornings when Bhuvan would be privy to red eyes, which Henry would try and conceal with a smile. "Just couldn't get enough sleep last night," he'd say. Bhuvan would nod. But secretly, he knew those puffy eyes were a result of silent tears that flowed in the stillness of those long dark winter nights. It was strange how both battled pain under the same roof that they couldn't easily share with the world. Bhuvan often wondered if he'd ever be able to repay Henry for his kindness. The nightmarish ordeal continued to haunt him. He recollected those instances that had rendered him helpless in this strange foreign land.

Bhuvan eventually went back to Beans Coffee and worked total hours. Nobody questioned Henry or Bhuvan about this. If they did, Bhuvan would say he was taking a break from a semester which was common to avoid burnout and fatigue. One night Henry confided in Bhuvan. "It's been lonely since the divorce," he said. "John shows no signs of coming back." Bhuvan wondered what

would happen if Henry's son landed up unexpectedly. He once asked Henry. His faraway look said it all. There were more chances of Bhuvan getting back his status than John coming back home. His day began and ended at the coffee shop. Winter seemed like a short time this year. He had earned enough to buy himself a jacket from a sale.

Months rolled by. Henry was impressed with his coding abilities. "You are a talented young man," he said wistfully. "I wish there was some way I could help you get justice for your talent and potential." Henry was doing more than enough, though Bhuvan. Over time he had become like a father to him. There were days he almost forgot about his status. He'd begin to convince himself that Beans Coffee was his destiny. A few weeks ago, he'd heard some disturbing news about the Mexican family down the road.

That sweet old couple. He would run into them often in the mornings when they were out on their walks. They had invited him once for dinner on the weekend and served his fish tacos. They asked about his family.

"Mother died recently. Father...", Bhuvan hesitated.

They didn't ask him anything further. But the lady's kind gesture of offering more food and the man's gentle squeeze of his hand provided all the comfort he had. He had gone to their house a couple of more times. They had told him about how their son had died in an accident. Bhuvan empathized with them and traced back to his thoughts about loneliness.

For the first time, Bhuvan saw fear in Henry's eyes. Henry reported how the couple had been busted out of their house and taken in a van. The news streamed about people-families, men, women, and children who were herded like cattle under the most pitiable conditions. They were taken to some distant location. This was the plight of people who crossed the border or did not

have proper documents. Henry did not let Bhuvan out of the house for a few days until he felt it was safe.

He knew life wasn't easy for an Indian immigrant, especially with all those complicated immigration procedures and visa statuses. And yet millions still flocked to this country with the hope of making it big. Bhuvan was inspired by the stories of Indian immigrants who had carved a name for themselves in the US. He, too, aspired to work for one of the big Tech Giants, partly because he was eager to come to the Bay area. He had read that the biggies of Apple and Facebook would be found hanging around in the local coffee shops. Henry told him how Tim Cook would sometimes visit Beans coffee. Unlike India, where all the Chairman and CEOs would settle for nothing less than the ambiance of a five-star hotel.

One day Henry took him for a drive. Just for a change of scene. They drove to California's central valley, past the farms and fields. Bhuvan was instantly reminded of his days in the village. Henry was explaining the drought situation. He hoped it would rain or be challenging for the farmers and the people. Bhuvan couldn't help thinking the problem here was like India. The grass seemed greener on the other side. The only thing it wasn't. Barren lands here too.

Henry cleared his throat.

"Umm, Bhuvan? There is something I'd like to discuss with you."

Bhuvan froze. "Y... yes, sir?"

"You are too talented to just be mixing coffees and sweeping floors. You should be...well..." he paused.

Was he going to ask Bhuvan to go? But where would he go? What would he do?

"I have an attorney friend. Perhaps..."

"I don't want to go to prison."

Henry looked up in shock and surprise.

"Why no. Oh, Bhuvan, I didn't mean... You are like a son to me. I meant. There may be a chance to get your status back. See if the Immigrations Attorney will take up..."

"Attorney?"

Henry looked at Bhuvan's fearful face.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"But. The fees and what if?"

"I know. Think it over calmly.

Henry pulled the car to the side and handed Bhuvan a card. Bhuvan read the name written on it. Katherine Waters. His head was in a whirl. The paper he held in his hand was probably his ticket to living the American dream. What if she fights his case? What if he regains his status and can live respectably? He could do multiple jobs, or that coding job, save funds and finish his degree. He was orphaned and did not have any relatives. Wasn't this country kind to orphans and the needy? There was a chance the attorney would lose the case. But he saw hope. Henry was a divine intervention in his life, just like Mrs. Costa had been. His life was filled with strangers treating him like family. For a moment, he was filled with a sudden streak of rage. Would he have faced all this had his mother not left the village? He might have been a farmer's son, taking care of the land. Life may have been simpler. He looked at the card. There was a number and email address below the title. Bhuvan toyed with it for a while before slipping it into his pocket. "Thank you, sir," he told Henry. They drove back home in silence, the pastures of land arched on either side.

The next day, Bhuvan punched the numbers and hung up before the call went through. A couple of times, the phone slipped from his hands. He took a deep breath and looked at the phone

for a long time. He punched the numbers again. This time he allowed the call to go through. He listened to a long ring before a voice answered at the other end.

On the Run

Start line

It is Sunday early morning in San Francisco. On the Embarcadero, I am treated to a glorious view of the Bay Bridge. There are thousands of folks gathered here. The sea of faces swarms in colorful tees, running shorts, and shoes. I admire their sculpted arms, athletic legs, and focused expressions, ready to clock their PRs. I notice some others standing in groups, laughing, and joking as though they are here on a picnic, not to run a half marathon. One of the men catches my eye and smiles at me. For a moment, my heart beats fast. Heck. I haven't even begun running. His chiseled torso is fitted into a blue T-shirt that reads "San Francisco Marathon."

I notice his brown hair, bushy eyebrows, and black eyes. I wonder what running my fingers through his hair would be like. I cringe in shame thinking about Robbie-my partner for the past two years, who was sound asleep in bed and would meet me at the finish line after a couple of hours. Sometimes I wonder whether our relationship had become stale, or if we were drifting apart. Ever since I took up running, I feel a distance. Robbie seems to be travelling more often, the conversations are short lived, more like a Q and A, as compared to the lengthy deep all-night conversations we used to have.

I try to distract myself and avert my gaze to the orange sky that spreads like a painting. The sun is up already. Perfect summer weather. No sign of the usual fog the city is accustomed to. The announcement about getting into corrals booms in my ears. I observe runners holding placards that read pace per mile. The pacers, I thought, and adjusted my bib with my name and number. My orange T-shirt seemed to blend with the morning sky. I place the water bottle on the ground and adjust my shoelace for the next time. That's the compulsive Virgo in me. I find a small space

between the crowds, to stretch and do my warmups. My muscles ease, and relax and I do some high knees, and side toe touches. I take a deep breath which helps me unclog my mind. I feel light, as though I can fly. I felt like this during the pride month celebrations in June. My body felt much more at ease, as though I was floating through space. It felt like I had been released from a prison of pretenses where I was forced to be someone, I wasn't with my family back in India.

According to them, I am this perfect eligible bachelor whom women are ready to run after. Here I am, running away from the pressures of a conservative Indian household that wants me to tie the knot. The crowd moves in waves while I watch the waves of the Pacific hitting the shore in ripples. I blend with the nine-minute-per-mile pacer. I notice the faster runners take off as soon as the announcer finishes the countdown. They must have been impalas or cheetahs in their previous births. I catch sight of the seagulls flying over the ocean. Flap flap flap. What a lovely feeling to hover above the pristine blue ocean. A part of me wishes, my feet would grow wings, and I'd end up flying instead of running. Gravity has a strange way of showing who you are. Sigh.

Mile 1

At the countdown, I swing my arms and legs, raring to go. At first, my arms and legs brush against other runners. I feel I am pushed along with the herd. For a minute, blending with the crowd and being one amongst them feels nice, not an outlier. No looks of scrutiny, no judgmental eyes about wearing a specific color. After a few yards, the crowd scatters, and each runner branches out independently. I cross the timing mat, from where my official run time will be recorded. I run fast in my zest. My lungs begin to feel heavy, and I slow down. I take a deep breath and look at other runners whizzing past me. My stomach feels as though someone has punched me. I stop in

my tracks, feeling I wasn't ready to race. "To the side," shouted one of the runners impatiently. I cringe in embarrassment.

It was a sports day in school. I was in sixth grade and participating in the 400 m running event. I trained hard under my father. All those drills, and speed work, to ensure I'll bag a medal. For some reason, when the race began, I lost my hold and rhythm. The other boys whizzed past me. I stood there rooted to the spot, watching them fly across the muddy tracks. When I heard someone shout my name from the bystanders, it was only my feet that took off. By then, it was too late. Even though I pushed hard and was almost out of breath, I missed the podium by a whisker. I placed fourth.

"Did you look at that boy, who placed first? Just look at his physique. Traces of muscle already."

"But Baba...I tried my best..."

"I spoke to his dad. You know what he eats?"

"I don't know why I lost"

"He has lots of eggs, and chicken."

"I'm sorry, I'll do better," tears rolled down my face.

"Tomorrow, I'm getting you some weights. I will tie the weights around your ankles, and you'll run."

One day of running with weights, I was in tears, and vomited all over the place.

"You need to get tougher, not cry like a girl. Tears will get you nowhere."

Just then, a volunteer patted me on my back, "You got this one," he said. I took a sip of water, muttered thanks, and focused on finding my rhythm. It wasn't about the PR. It was just for enjoyment and an outlet to release the mind filled with random thoughts of guilt and shame. I aim

to find my rhythm, just like those training runs at Stanford Dish. Strong and steady. I ran along Embarcadero, with the beautiful sight of the ocean. I ran on the pavement to avoid coming in the way of more runners in case I had that attack of nervous bouts. Bystanders on the sidelines held placards and shouted our names on our bibs. "Go, Akash," shouted a guy. I flashed a smile at the stranger, and a warm feeling engulfed my body. I reach the first-mile mark and pause to take a breath

Mile 2

I continue to hear city folks who are cheering us on. "Come on, Akash," I hear someone say. I look at the woman standing on the sides and calling out to every runner passing by. She clearly has sharp eyes to read the names from the bibs written in bold black letters along with our numbers. I smile back at her, but her attention is on another participant. This race feels like a strange paradox.

On the one hand, people make you feel special. The next minute you are a stranger. I continue running. Suddenly, I feel lonely amidst this crowd. I pause for a moment on the pavement, plug my headphones, and play music. "Candle in the Wind" streams out of the headphones. Soothing, melodious, and just the right notes to ease my nerves. I keep running along Fisherman's Wharf until I reach Mile 2 at Fort Mason. It's the first aid station. I stop and take a sip of Gatorade. I look up to see the sun glaring at me now. I pour some water on my head. "It's a nice day, isn't it?" one volunteer remarks cheerfully. I looked at her in disbelief, wondering if we were on the same planet. And then I remember how the city folk embraced the heat. They consider it a pleasant change from the cold and the winds. A few runners stop to take sips of water. Like me, they, too, are carrying a bottle. I smile lightly. I am not as much of an outlier as I thought I was.

I was twelve, I was ridiculed for picking out a pink shirt while Diwali shopping with my family and relatives. I watched my cousin brother pick blues and greys.

"Can you show me that pink shirt," I asked the shopkeeper.

"Such a girly color," mocked one of my cousins.

"Don't you guys' smear pink during *Holi*?"

"Only on *holi*, pinky, not like you wearing it year-round," my cousin laughed.

The elders tried to intervene.

"Come on Akash, don't you like any other color?"

"What's wrong with pink?"

They shook their heads and relented. Over time I had grown accustomed to names like pinky and pink panther.

I spot some people with masks on their faces. Maybe they were mascots of the race. They wave, cheer, and high-five all the runners. I wonder if they are happy or sad inside? I wonder if they, too, feel some internal pain like the pain I feel on my quads when I run on an incline on Fort Mason, which makes me stop and catch my breath. I marvel at the other runners who can run up slopes. Fast, sturdy, and strong. How many years must they have trained? I wonder. "Come on, you can do it," I hear another runner egging me on. I feel motivated and try to at least jog lightly. I survive this one to reach mile 3 on Marina.

Mile 3

I continue my strides and enjoy the bay views to my right. I have a hard time looking straight and almost bump into another runner. The guy in a red sleeveless tee looks back, and I

apologetically hold up my hand. He stares with his deep blue eyes that remind me of the ocean. He gives a cursory nod and continues running. I can't tear my eyes away from his broad shoulders, muscular arms, and sturdy legs covered with beads of perspiration! I suddenly want to reach out and touch those arms and then feel ashamed. What would Robbie think? Will he be as angry as I was when he told me about his fling with that bartender when he was in New York? Will he throw plates or drink that entire bottle of wine, swear, until the wee hours of the morning? Two years. Was he getting fatigued from this relationship? Am I fatigued, or is it just my quest to avenge Robbie for what he did for me? Even after he begged and pleaded with me, stating it was a mistake. It was Robbie who convinced me to come out. What's the big deal? He asked? This isn't India. I want to tell him section 377 has been decriminalized. But I know he is right about India not accepting queer folks with open arms. I told him about my parents' shocked reactions if I told them the truth. As they term it, the number of prayers, sending me to exorcists, or keeping those ridiculous rituals that supposedly would cure me out of my 'condition.'

A gentle breeze blows on my face. I look at the waves crashing on the rocks. The foamy white curls hit the shore. I feel grateful for this gesture of nature. I feel like I've been embraced. I do not feel judged or ridiculed. I do not feel answerable to its flurry of questions. Like why I am not getting married. Why wasn't I interested in looking at prospective women? Don't I find any woman attractive? Its draining on me to answer such questions. More tiring than running this race.

Mile 4

I find myself on Mason Street. I see the race photographers focusing their cameras on the runners. One of them clicks as I run past him. I give him a thumbs-up. I continue running until a wave of fatigue washes over me. I stop by the side, catch my breath, and watch other runners run

past me. I can see some walking and pouring water on their heads. I notice a couple running together. The woman is panting, and the guy is coaxing her to not give up.

Sometimes I wonder what it would feel like to give up on my family. Will I feel more at ease and relaxed? Should I constantly be embroiled in a web of shame and guilt? The constant pressure of making me meet prospective girls in the Bay Area. My WhatsApp messages are filled with photographs of women daily. It was getting too much. I am still standing there, staring into space, while the world around me rushes. Someone taps me on the shoulder and asks if I'm ok. I nod. I continue running, wanting to feel those endorphins embracing me. My quads ache, and my feet feel a little sore. It's only the 4th mile. I must keep going.

Mile 5

The blue cascade is preceded by a carpet of green. Crissy Field! It almost feels like nature is giving me a green carpet welcome. The sight of the Golden Gate bridge catches my eye. Now it isn't the first time I have seen the bridge. But today, for some reason, it looks more spectacular than ever. It looks tall and sturdy. Why isn't this a part of the seven wonders of the world? I see runners stop and take selfies. Smiles and poses, ignoring the official race photographers. How much technology has evolved over the years? If only mindsets became better with time. I then stare at the ducks huddled together on the field. They seem to have a community. And then I see another duck pecking on the grass by itself.

After school, my friends and I gathered in the park, in the neighborhood. They were discussing their crushes and debating whether to ask them out or not. Heated debates about their skin, hair, eyes, boobs. I found solace in my sandwich while my eyes are on that one guy two years my senior, dribbling a football. My pals talked about this new girl in school as the next hot thing.

Isn't she sexy? One boy asked me. I shrugged and forcibly nodded. Just a few years ago, the singer Elton John came out. But still, things in India were regressive. After a point, I faked a crush on a girl, went on a fake date with her, and broke up, stating a lack of compatibility. It all began with that one lie.

Mile 6

The heat is unrelenting. I see this big hill around the turning below the Golden gate bridge. I see people wearing sunglasses and wish I had brought mine. I pour some water on my head and spot people holding placards. "Run for beer." They smile and give me a thumb up sign. "Doing good. You got this one."

The first beer I had was at a party during my undergraduate graduation. One of the mentors' parents was out, and he had thrown a dance party with flowing wine, and beer, loud music. It was the first time I locked eyes with a guy. Later, we slipped outside to the garden, made out under the stars, and re-entered the party in high spirits. Later, he broke my heart by marrying a woman and moving to Australia. I never heard from him, except for an email apologizing, saying he was pressured to settle down with a woman because of family pressure. Confessed he was bisexual. My wounded heart sought solace in beers. I feel bad about allowing myself to be led into this web of deceit, to have exposed my vulnerability, and for daring to come out with my sexuality. What if someone had spotted us? Being their only son, this stigma would have instigated my parents to the gates of hell by tying a noose around their necks and their still bodies hanging from the fans on the ceiling. No amount of convincing would work.

Mile 7

My heart is beating faster. The hills on Lincoln Blvd. are getting steeper. I am going up and up, like Jack climbing the beanstalk. Even the seasoned pros were walking through this one. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and paused midway, observing the stampede climbing up this notoriously steep hill. I wanted some respite. I feel excruciating pain in my quads. I gulp water from my bottle. Ah! The feel of cool liquid trickling down my throat is soothing. I finally reached the top and, admired the view.

My dad and I were visiting a hill station on a summer vacation. I was going for a walk with him. He had a man-to-man talk with me about how men should be a certain way.

"You know, when I was in the army, we would run carrying sacks, up the hills like this."

"Run?" I squeaked.

"Yes son, run. And we would run very fast." He looked at me closely.

"Chin up, pump your hands up and down, and walk up. Correct your posture. Don't slouch."

I huffed and puffed. My breathing was hoarse. As a retired Colonel, dad's strength and fitness were tough to match up to. I wonder why I never took after him, neither did I show any inclination to join the army. I was interested in becoming a musician, much to the chagrin of my parents.

"It's just an adolescent fantasy. Besides, music will not pay your bills."

They were relieved when I decided to work in the tech field. Computers and the internet boomed big time in India during the late 90s. Besides, I harbored the American dream and felt it was my only escape from this oppressively conservative society. Here I was in the Bay Area. Earned a master's from UC Berkeley, working in one of the tech giants, and being able to embrace

my sexuality and my identity. There was no shame in sharing a bed with a man, waking up naked next to him, and no one questioning you. I stop running, as my head feels dizzy with all those thoughts swarming like a hurricane. Heck! No wonder my body does not slouch anymore, and my posture is right. If only my father could see me today. I want to tell him, that there is a part of the world where pink shirts are worn by men, they sport long hair, wear earrings, tattoos, and date other men. Being queer is considered normal.

Mile 8

My T-shirt is drenched in perspiration. I feel as though I've stood in the shower. Seeing the city from such a height makes me feel elevated. Not just in a literal sense. I feel like Jonathan Livingston Seagull, having risen higher from his flock. Even the mighty ocean looks minuscule. The houses and tall buildings feel like doll houses. I see the plethora of runners in front of me. This is an ocean by itself. A world of its own. I wish I could be embroiled in this world forever. Just another ordinary soul blending with the crowd. Suddenly my throat feels parched. I look at my bottle, which is half empty. My lungs feel like they are on fire. The sight of the water station makes me smile. I see volunteers holding boxes of Gu gels of different flavors. I pick up a strawberry banana flavor and pop it into my mouth. The fruity flavor induces a sudden spike in my energy levels. I look at my watch for the first time since I began the run. 8 miles in 80 minutes. The road paves the way into a trail. I see people slowing down. I see some runners clicking selfies against the backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge. I feel the slippery gravel beneath my feet. I see some 26.2-mile runners on the bridge and wonder what it'd feel like to run on it. The thud thud sound of vehicles moving quickly reverberates in the air. I watch some of the runners appear to be in their own zone. Unfazed and focused.

Probably visualizing nothing but the finish line in their heads. Running on a trail feels exhausting. I stop and turn on my speakers. Just then the trail paves way to the pavement. "Here I am...on the road again" by Metallica streams from the headphones. If the uphill was tough, running downhill was no easy feat. I feel myself falling as I run along the slope spiraling downwards. It gives me the feeling of gliding like a bird. Like I'd seen eagles do. I am surrounded by trees and trails. Deep green and brown shades engulf me. I feel a sudden rush of euphoria. Is this what is the runner's high?

The first time I experienced this euphoric feeling was at another party. Along with drinks, a group of guys had weed. I felt a sense of relaxation for the first time in my life. I smoked it more often to avoid the jitters and guilt of masturbating under my sheets while looking at magazines with hot-looking men. It was a wonder my parents never found those magazines, deeply embedded amidst the clothes in my closet.

Mile 9

At mile 9, there is a steady climb again. This race is a real test of endurance and limits. How far was I willing to push myself? I feel pain everywhere. My head throbs with thoughts churning like ocean currents. My arms ache with all that swinging motion. My glutes, quads, and calves are burning. I'm sure if they could speak, they'd be cursing me by now. I find myself in the Richmond district, on the way to Golden Gate Park.

This pain is nothing compared to having heard that conversation between my mother and the neighbor over tea. I overheard them talking about some guy in hushed tones over the neighborhood.

"You know Mrs. Malhotra's son? *Bada Ajeeb* hai."

"Why?"

"He is not interested in getting married. And when they asked him, he told them something.

Bahut tamasha Hua I'll tell you. Modernity has ruined everything."

"*Lekin*, what happened?"

"I believe he likes men."

My mother gasped.

The maliciousness of the middle-class Delhi women stifled me.

Mile 10

By reaching mile 10, I am ready to give up. I see people cheering. I see several placards. There is one that catches my eye-If you cannot run with your legs, run with your heart. Hmm, interesting. I place my hand on my heart. "Are you alright?" I see an Indian girl dressed in tracks and a T-shirt. Her round face and eyes remind me of Simran. Is it really her? I squint as the sun's rays fall on my eyes. It blinds me, and I wish I had carried my sunglasses for the hundredth time. "The medical station is less than a mile away," she says with a concerned look. "I am fine. Just a little exhausted," I mumble. She nods. "Well, take care. Just three and a half miles more," she says and continues running. I watch her and am suddenly reminded of my awkward date with Simran a few months ago. My cousin pestered me to meet some girls in the Bay area. Of course, none of my relatives in the US knew about me. I reluctantly agreed.

Simran was bright, dynamic, and westernized in her ways. A good conversationalist and we share some common interests. I couldn't get myself to look into her eyes. Often, I found myself having to tear my gaze away from her. She seemed interested. And I was distracted. A bizarre thought about telling her the truth occurred to me like a flash of lightning. I dismissed it. I couldn't

trust a stranger. What if she told her sister, and the word spread in my community? Our meeting ended on a polite but awkward note. I didn't promise to call her. Neither did she message. Not sure what bothered her. I replayed that day in my head. We talked about books, movies, and workouts. Maybe she thought we didn't connect much. Well, good for me, I guess. I don't have to deal with the pressure of why I don't like that girl.

Mile 11

I am in Golden Gate Park. I see a barricade that separates the half marathoners from the marathoners. By now, the sun is beating down mercilessly. I feel sorry for those running 26.2 miles in this weather. How tough it must be. I stop by the aid station to sip water. "Good job. Almost there," said a volunteer. The inclines have leveled, and I find myself running on gentle rollers. The participants of the second half marathon are merging with us. It reminds me of how rivers join and meet at the ocean. I feel like a river collaborating with other rivers in the form of runners to reach the sea, which is the finish line. All it matters is I am a runner. And running doesn't have a gender.

My father's words about not being masculine enough post that race still haunt me. I wish he could see me now. I should take a picture post the finish line and send it to them. When I signed up for this race, I wondered what I was getting into. Back in Grad school a few years ago, I was still awkward and shy. During a conversation with one of my classmates, I honestly came out. It felt like a weight lifted off my shoulder. My classmate's expression was as regular as ever, as though I had just told him the sky was blue. "It's all cool, yo," he said. Later at his party, I met Robbie. Tall, sturdy, sculpted abs- the kind you get via bodybuilding. He was heavily into strength training. It took a while to get into a relationship. When I told Robbie about my reservations, his blue eyes exhibited compassion. To adapt to the stress of new cultural change, I took up running.

It started as a hike near UC Berkeley and eventually turned into a run. The first time I ran a mile, I was exhilarated. Probably higher than that time I had weed.

Mile 12

I am running on Martin Luther King Drive. The excitement begins to seep in as I am inching toward the finish line. Just a mile to go. I see bystanders. Is this really happening? I feel a strange sensation of my feet not touching the ground. For a moment, it feels like I am running on air.

When I first slept with Robbie, it felt like I had embraced who I was. For a brief period, I got rid of all that shame bottled inside me since the brink of puberty. I forgot all about the pressures of finding a suitable girl. I feel light enough to hover above the ocean, glide smoothly, until I become a spec of white. My head feels calm, and steady. I put one foot in front of another and find myself cruising like an impala.

Cheers, hoots, and claps fill the air. At a distance, I hear the emcee's voice announcing the finishers' names as they cross the finish line. I see an array of jubilant faces of all kinds. Of families, the young and the old. And then I see it. The big arch that says Finish line. The clock attached to it is clicking seconds. I see the energy around me. It's exhilarating. I want to jump. I want to fly. I surge, gathering every ounce of the reserve, and acknowledge the photographers bending down to click my photograph. I leap, sprint, touch the mat and run past it. I hear the emcee shout "Akash Verma from Mountain View."

Finish line

I cross the finish line with sweat dripping down my cheek and a goofy smile. I run into a cheerful volunteer who hands me the finisher's medal. "Congratulations. Good job!" she says. I can only nod and pant. She doesn't mind. I suddenly feel tired. I sit down on the side and watch the spectacle and happy faces everywhere. I search for Robbie. I don't see him anywhere. The music is playing, and the park feels like a carnival. Strangers meet my eye and say offer congratulatory messages. "You were running strong," a lady said. "I saw you by the bridge." I smile and thank her. I am basking in the moment of completing my first half-marathon! My first actual half marathon! I notice my watch is still running. I forget to turn it off. I do not know the exact time of completing the race. Never mind! The race officials should send a message anytime with my finish time. And then I look at the families of other runners, greet them near the finish line. I experience a strange feeling of sadness. Why does it feel as though someone punched me in my gut? I slump my shoulders and look around. I suddenly spot Robbie waving to me. The sight of him brings a smile to my face instantly. My face flushes, and I experience the same feeling when I first set my eyes on him. Robbie comes towards me and embraces me. We kiss.

"You did it Akash! Way to go!" He looks at me head to toe. I must look a sight. Dripping in perspiration, tired and hungry. But his smile was genuine and warm. I stand there holding out my finisher's medal with a grin, while Robbie takes a picture. The sun is hitting me hard. I continue to smile. "Here you go. Looking like a rockstar," he says.

Just then, my phone buzzes. I have two messages. One is from the race officials, which stated I had finished my half marathon in 2:10:46. Not bad, I think. I open the other WhatsApp message. I see photos of women-fair sharp features with thick curly hair that falls down their shoulders. "Lives in the bay area. Works in Google. Your father's friend's daughter. You might

want to meet her. This is her number." My mother's message read. I feel my face burn. I observe the celebratory vibe around me. I look at the skies above and shake my head. "What's wrong Akash?" Robbie asks. I shake my head and say, "Lets grab a celebratory beer at the beer garden." We grab our beer and take a sip. My head spins, as I take more gulps. Behind me, there is a loud cheer and the thunderous sound of applause echoes in my ears, as the emcee is announcing another finisher's name. I begin to experience a high. The phone vibrates one more time. Suddenly something snaps inside me. I think back to all those times when I repressed my identity, and sexuality, trying to live up to parental expectations. There was a part of the world which would accept me for what I was. Why should I tolerate primitive mindsets anymore? I take out my phone, pull Robbie closer, plant a kiss on his cheek, and take a selfie. Robbie looks perplexed. "Everything ok Akash? You never said a word about the race. How was it?"

I send the picture to my parents. "The race is over," I say.

"Huh?" Robbie looks confused.

I take a few more gulps of beer. Slowly and steadily, I began to feel a high. The sound of the phone dissipates in the swirl of the runners and alcoholic high. I see a trash can overflowing with paper cups and empty bottles. I stop and stare at it. I wonder what it would feel like to see my phone there. My phone continues to vibrate.

Dear Ma

October 6th, 2018

Dear Ma,

It is said that faith can move mountains. I am not sure if it's true. But I know that it's the only hope I can cling to. Several people in this world swear by this saying. Faith seems to be a garment that they'd like to wear. It has worked for some. The others who haven't been on the good side of faith blame it on Karma. I am unsure if my current situation will steer toward faith or my bad Karma.

Right now, I feel like I am oscillating between the sky and the earth. Even though the attorney has agreed to fight my case, I don't know how long this battle will take. I do not doubt her abilities. She is patient, kind, and polite. If not for Henry, I wouldn't have gotten in touch with her. It was a risk. She could have turned me in and reported me to the officials. But she didn't. Instead, she listened to me, probed me with questions, and said she'd get back to me. For two days, I didn't sleep. I kept gazing at the stars wishing they had arms so that they could engulf me in a divine embrace.

I remember doing that when I was little. When you and Papa were asleep, I'd slip outside and stare at the ink-black sky studded with stars. It reminded me of a Goddess's endless black hair adorned with ornaments. Yes, Ma, I may have been just eight. But don't think I didn't understand there was tension at home. You and Papa were always quarreling. I knew we were in dire straits. We hardly had enough to eat. You had dreams and aspirations for me. You endured so much to ensure I had a roof over my head, meals on time, education, and the American dream.

When I look at my situation now, I can't help wondering if life would have been less complicated had we stayed back in the village? Or if I just stayed back in India? Was I too ambitious in my quest to make you proud? To convince you I wasn't a failure. There is no room for failure, is there, Ma? Men who fail are left behind to soak in their troubles while others around them move on to greener pastures.

October 7, 2018

Dear Ma,

I could finally sleep well as soon as I heard from the attorney. That phone call dissolved my worries, at least for a short while. She said it was going to be an arduous journey ahead. I thanked her again. The mention of a difficult trip triggered memories of our journey from the village to the city. How can I forget that day?

The men coming. The stampede of dust. Papa falling at their feet. You part with your *Mangalsutra*. The cattle being taken by the men. Waking me up before sunrise that morning. Asking me to pack my bundle of clothes. Venture out into the darkness. Everything appeared gloomy that morning, including the weather. We walked for a long time until we boarded the bus headed to the city. The conductor looked at us curiously. He handed over the tickets quietly as soon as you took out the money from the little cloth purse you tied around your waist. Isn't Papa coming? I asked. You looked out of the window. Your silence conveyed a strong message. From that day, I realized Papa would no longer be a part of our lives. You watched the rain lash furiously while the droplets of misery continued to fall on my bundle.

From the time we reached the city's outskirts, we roamed around aimlessly. We slept in sheds and barns. For days, you knocked on doors to see if anyone would hire you as domestic help.

I remember you'd plead with the security guard of every apartment complex, begging them to find you work. After some days, you found a job in one of the apartments with servant quarters. You begged the family to let me stay. They were reluctant but eventually relented after seeing your tears. You seemed angry with Papa for being at the mercy of those men. And here you were, falling at the feet of every possible soul you came across in the city. I wonder if this was the price we had to pay for being greedy. For believing that the grass was greener on the other side. Perhaps I, too, made the same mistake.

October 8, 2018

Dear Ma,

Some days ago, I heard from Henry that lovely Mexican couple Lewis and Rosa being dragged by the cops. They lived just a few houses away. I've gone their place for dinner a few times. They make great fish tacos. The tacos are like the rotis you used to make. They were so kind to me, and they lost their only son. You know what Ma. I realize everyone is lonely in some sense. I am not sure what happened. But they are no longer here. I think they are being taken to some unknown place along with a group of strangers. It's so scary. I can't imagine what they must be going through. I feel angry.

It triggered the same feeling when that man in the family who employed us looked at you. The glint in his eye as he scanned you from head to toe. You didn't notice. I was enraged but helpless. As a little boy, I could do nothing but pray that the Almighty protect us from that evil eye. I remember that Sunday when his wife and kids visited their maternal grandmother in another part of the city. He'd keep calling you to the living room and order you to make several cups of coffee. Later that evening, you were flustered. You were huddled in our quarters, shaking lightly.

Your hair was a little disheveled, and fat blobs of tears poured down your face. I came up to you, but you pushed me away. Your silence once again told me everything, Ma. I clenched my fist and pounded on the floor. Don't you realize, Ma? Those men who came to our hut in the village were nicer than this monster whose apartment we were living in. Don't you think so?

October 9, 2018

Dear Ma

Today Henry asked me about my meeting with the attorney and how things were progressing. I feel sorry for him. He is such a nice man. I know he longs for his son. A son who doesn't care for him. At night, I hear him cry. In the mornings, his eyes are swollen. The pain he carries inside is killing him slowly. And yet again, I feel as helpless as I was when I was that eight-year-old boy.

I used to hear you weep at night. But what could I do? I was huddled up inside that room all day. I missed roaming around in the fields with Papa and tending to the cattle. Life in the village had its charm. I experienced a sense of freedom. Despite the opportunities, city life had its own limitations. In a way, I felt caged. Yes, there were problems in the village due to the drought season. But you know what, Ma? Even California experiences drought. Henry took me to the Central Valley and told me how they badly needed rains. The absence of rain poses a problem here as well. Every place has its share of issues. I often wonder if running away from Papa was a drastic step? Whether coming to America was a drastic step? Why do people in India feel that this is a paradise? It has its imperfections.

Henry is almost like a father to me. He gave me a home when I badly needed one. But I missed growing up without Papa. Didn't you ever forget him, ma? What did the city give you

initially? It rendered us homeless. There were predators disguised in sophisticated attire. They were devils in disguise. I am grateful to that watchman who referred us to the apartment complex he had previously worked for. Though it was in the southern part of the city, things began to improve. Especially after Mrs. Costa came into our lives. But yes, my biggest question here is should we have left the village? We had our own land, house, cattle, and though there were tough times, it was peaceful. No one could deport us anywhere. We were kings in our own land.

October 11, 2018

Dear Ma,

My situation is still precarious. But there are these moments that melt my worries. Did I tell you about Simran? She is attractive, and this spark in her eyes exudes intelligence. She seems to be an avid reader. I tried engaging her in a conversation a few times. But she appeared a little standoffish initially. Probably thinks I'm hitting on her or something. I don't blame her. Then the other day, I stammered her name, and she compared me to Shahrukh Khan. We got talking and she invited me to come along with her for a movie. I wonder if she likes me and was asking me out.

Then she told me about the book she was reading. I thought the author sounded familiar. Aditi Chaubey! I googled her and found out that she lived with her husband, Ajay, in a plush apartment complex in the southern part of the city. It's that same apartment complex you used to work at. And I think I heard you mention a certain Aditi *memsahib*. What a small world, Ma! Life indeed comes full circle. Isn't it strange how we all are interconnected in some manner?

October 15. 2018

Dear Ma,

I am holding up so far. It's not easy. Every time I see a cop, I feel he will arrest me. I may sound paranoid. But you can't imagine how grave the situation is with my current visa status. Or should I say my absence of visa status? Besides Henry and a few of my college friends, no one knows. I felt terrible about lying to Simran when she asked about me. I couldn't tell her the truth. What if she stopped talking to me? Even worse, what if she reported me to the authorities. According to her, I was a student on a semester break. People usually take semester breaks here, Ma.

You know me, those days after I walked out of the shared apartment reminded me of our initial days in the city. It appeared that this state of displacement was engrained in my destiny. There are a lot of homeless people here as well. It gets cold here at night, even in summer. Henry offered a place in his home when he saw I was about to camp in the garage next to Beans coffee.

I remember how as soon as you got that job, you heaved a sigh of relief, and we left the monster's house. I feel sorry for his wife and children, who probably think he's a great man. Or perhaps they know the truth and prefer to live in denial? Why did his wife say sorry to you when we left? I cannot forget that apologetic expression on her face. It made me believe that the city was a jungle. The rich always wanted to exploit the poor. It puzzles me how there are predators who prey upon women. And then there are people like Mrs. Costa who exhibit a lot of kindness, and empathy.

I still wonder what made Mrs. Costa develop a particular interest in me. Like Henry, was she too a guardian angel of sorts? Or perhaps she had an estranged son living in another part of the world? I can never forget how she taught me to read and write. The school was challenging initially

for me, as the kids were ahead of me. Their fathers would come and pick them up. One day when a boy asked about my father, I was speechless. I had to lie, saying he often traveled for work. When I asked you about Papa again, your eyes would turn red. You'd have that strange expression on your face that scared me. Were you angry or sad? What did you feel, Ma? Did you ever regret walking out on him?

October 16, 2018

Dear Ma,

I am reading that book by Aditi Chabey. Apparently, she, too, endured several hardships in life. I suppose no mortal can be devoid of difficulties during their tenure on earth. And look at where she is now. Affluent, accomplished, and well-settled in life. Such books give me hope. I hope that I, too, can survive this nightmarish ordeal. Let me count my blessings now. I have a roof over my head, three square meals a day, a job, and a kind person living with me. As gentle as a cow.

Do you remember how we'd count our blessings back in the city? We found a thatched roof on our heads with the money you earned. It was one of the biggest slums. But hey! Who cares? A home is what you make of it, right? Besides, it's the same area where Shantaram lived for a while. The sound of waves of the Arabian sea would echo in the stillness of the night. You'd catch the bus to go to your workplace. I'd accompany the other slum kids going to the same school. Until Mrs. Costa felt I should study in a better educational institution. She paid you a lot of money, didn't she, Ma? That's how you could afford my education. I am grateful for all that you did, ma. Do not think I am not. As any other mother, you wanted the best for your only son. But there are times I felt pressured by you. I know it wasn't intentional. The minute I began to harbor my American

dream, you had stars in your eyes. It was a moment of pride when I secured that admission and scholarship. For days and nights, you cleaned houses, cooked meals for them, and took up babysitting. No doubt, you earned money, Ma. Yet my life felt like a jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece. That gap I'd think could never be filled.

October 18, 2018

Dear Ma,

Every time I see Simran, my heart begins to beat faster. There are times I stammer. She looks more beautiful by the day. I sneak glances at her when she's not looking. I see her either immersed in the pages of a book or staring outside the window. I am not sure what she's thinking. I got to know she is from the same city as we are. In fact, she used to live near that garden opposite that bus depot. Not too far from our house. I am still unable to open to her. What if she rejects me after learning about my background and status? She comes from a good family. And I think she is a couple of years older. Not that it should matter. I mean, haven't older women dated younger men forever? I am pretty sure you would have loved her too. Is this how you felt about Papa? How did you guys meet? I keep asking about him even though I'll never get a response. But I need closure. What did he do after we left?

October 19, 2018

Dear Ma,

I used to dream about America a lot. I wanted to give you a good life and show you a different world. What aspirations I had. I'd graduate, find myself a job and send you a ticket to come and live with me. Alas! That remains a dream still. I am still grappling with my identity. Do

you recollect when we had no ID cards in the city? It was Mrs. Costa who got our ration cards made, including my birth certificate. Without that, I wouldn't have attended school. It's a pity how she died suddenly. I wonder if she is happy and peaceful in her after life? And then I heard about your death. I can never speak to either of you now. I am in a foreign land, nothing to come back to, nothing to hold me here. I feel stuck here.

October 21, 2018

Dear Ma,

The season is changing here. You would have loved to see the trees change color. Shades of yellow and red merged with green. Such sights remind me of our days in the village. The sheet of blue above us would spread across like a blanket. The sun would smile at us. The rooster would crow. The cattle would wake up. I remember those calves. Their large eyes were so soft and gentle. So much has altered since then, except perhaps my status. The attorney sounds hopeful and will begin the process anytime soon. She said I have a strong case as the situation was not under my control. She can say I was orphaned, as I lost my parent, and guardian, and my funds were stopped. I had no way to pay the tuition fees, and I can't go back. This country is kind to orphans, and she said she will fight hard. I must ensure that I don't end up being so wrapped up in that bubble that it begins to feel real. These days I'm unable to distinguish between reality and illusion. Henry is worried about me. He gently probes me. I tell him I'm ok. He knows I'm not. Too much has happened lately. Tell me, ma. How can I be ok when I know, I can never see you again? I will never see Mrs. Costa again. I hope you both forgive me. Forgive me for not being able to do your last rites.

October 23, 2018

Dear Ma,

I still see stars above. I count them. Sometimes I imagine seeing your and Mrs. Costa's face amongst them, smiling at me. There are answers I am still searching for. Questions that haunt my mind. There are times I see those men in my dreams. Papa begging and crying at their feet. At times, I even imagine his face amongst the stars watching me silently. Is he blessing or cursing me? Am I suffering the Karma for what you did to him? You took me along with you and left me behind. What if I didn't want to come along, and stayed back with papa? I would never know.

Sometimes I feel I should fulfill Papa's dream about plowing the land, harvesting, growing, and cultivating. It will be my only way to seek his forgiveness for what you did to him. Perhaps I should migrate toward Central Valley California. I heard there are *Sardarjis* who are willing to employ young folks. Maybe this is what I was destined for. Why else will Mrs. Costa suddenly die, and deprive me of funds? Why will you die? Why am I left here to do nothing? Excerpt serve coffee and do menial jobs.

When I went with Henry to the Central Valley, I experienced a surge of nostalgia. I longed to do something related to the land. Maybe this is a signal from Papa. Why else should Henry take me there and show me hope in the form of an attorney trying to fight my case? Perhaps, the lands here will envelop me in an embrace. Save me from my misery and current turbulent state. Save me from being transported with a group of strangers, to strange lands, facing hostile faces, meted to merciless brutality. It is better to tend to the land than to be pushed along with a herd that knows no destination. The land once gave me my identity, joy, purpose, and satisfaction. I was happy Ma. Didn't you realize? Maybe you gave up too soon. I loved tending to the cattle, walking with papa

to the fields. He was training me to take care of the land. Yes, to please you, I decided to follow the American dream. After all you were so focused on education, being a daughter of a schoolteacher. I think if I get a chance to stay here, I'll go join the farmers in central valley. Follow papa's footsteps.

Land in India, land in California, alas, the earth is round, and the ground beneath my feet is the same. Fear not, Ma, this very land will protect your son. Forgive me for not being able to fulfill your American dream. I see images, signs of cracks, drops of rain, patches of green, fertile carpet that will bring a smile to your face in heaven. I now bow down to the earth, the mud that will provide a blanket to my survival in a country not quite my own.