

4-2014

## **Rope**

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Rope

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of  
the Upper Division Honors Program.

April, 2014

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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

## Overview:

My thesis consists of eight short stories that are interconnected and follow one family as it moves from America to India and back again. Each story has one central character and explores the concept of identity and its isolation in one form or another. With these stories, I aim to raise questions regarding the nationality and ethnicity of my characters, and of any person that evolves from more than one culture. Can an Indian be Christian? This question is simple enough to answer. But can an American be Indian? Is being Indian an ethnic identity or a national one?

Although this thesis is short fiction, the investigative process has been just as intensive for me as that of a scholarly essay or scientific experiment would be. From the time of conception, each story evolved rather organically and worked with the others to form unintended concepts and themes.

When I first started to brainstorm ideas, I had just read J.K. Rowling's non-magical novel, *The Casual Vacancy*, in which a story is formed and characters linked around the absence (death) of a central character. I had wanted to write short stories that were tied together with something heavier than a common theme, and liked the idea of a cacophony of voices existing in the same time and place. I'd read other works in this style—William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* come to mind—and my short-story format facilitated this multi-voiced narrative style.

I've tried to portray a world that can't easily be fit into categories by pushing the boundaries of realism and illustrating the almost magic quality of life. I'd been interested in the narrative mode of magical realism and its ability to blur the lines between fantasy and reality, and decided to incorporate the mode into each of my stories to emphasize a key element. The fantastical characters or events serve a threefold purpose: to elicit from the reader a childlike wonder (the same that I think India as an experience elicits), to blur scientific, social and religious 'truths,' and to hyperbolically emphasize certain themes. I've tried to make this collection a social commentary as well as an enjoyment to read.

I've drawn from many authorial influences, some that have magical realist work and others that have written about culture. These authors include, but are not limited to: Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Aimee Bender, Kelly Link, Judy Budnitz, Karen Russell, Joseph Conrad, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

I've tried to incorporate generational tension between my characters to show that identities differ between parents and children as well as along country borders. I've also blurred the lines of the family: who is Evie's father, the one who raised her or the one who contributed his DNA? Are spouses still "together" if they don't love each other? Rather than creating a reactionary group of voices that arise from the absence of a central character, I have tried to unify these voices around the birth of a character. While Evie is not the focal character of the collection, she is nonetheless the character whose simple existence moves others to act.

Finally, I've tried to approach the difficulty of merging values from two cultures, particularly in regards to faith in religion. Merging cultures with opposing fundamental values can put a strain on religious beliefs, but can also solidify them.

In these stories, I want to replicate my view of a complicated world, in which current definitions don't work. People are coming together and being torn apart constantly, as individuals and as groups. Trying to define their relationships—trying to categorize them—is like trying to define individual droplets in a river.

I'm hoping that each story stands on its own, but also that they work in tandem to formulate my investigation. Though I present this as a finished thesis, my aim is to make the narrative arc more holistic.

**Order of stories:**

Before the Rain

A Knack for Knowing

Born in Sweat

Call of the Wild

Khatama, Finished

In Transit

Something to do With God

Rope

## Before the Rain

"I hate this place," she said. "The monkey told me the monsoons are pure hell."

"What monkey?" Her husband looked up from the paper.

"Sits on the twisted tree. Big yellow eyes. That one." The slouched figure was just visible through slatted leaves, sitting still on a branch. Tapering green ends of the Pipal tree pointed to him.

"What do you mean *told you*?" Ellis should have been wearing spectacles, the way he looked at her.

The window was smudged where Priya had placed her finger.

"You know how some animals mimic? Someone must have taught him," she said. It was possible. A guidebook of Agra mentioned dancing bears; she heard that in Mussoorie, men puppeteered cobras. She let the smudge hang.

"Those are parrots. Parrots mimic." Always rational. At the office Ellis was never wrong; they loved him for it. He looked back down at the newspaper.

Priya shrugged. "He talks." She left her toast crumbs for the maid to collect and joined the animal outside, fingers still soft from butter.

She sat on the cool balcony tile and watched him thread through orange fur, stalk ants and pick petals off the potted flowers. Every once in a while he'd grin, pulling his lips back over purple gums in a stretch. The monkey's voice was that of twigs and dead leaves, the kind of toothless men. Occasionally he'd smoke handmade beedis; tobacco wrapped in coarse tendu leaves and inhaled without a filter. He'd pass them to her, his calloused fingers touching hers, and she'd get dizzy. She wondered if he spoke to anyone else, hopping between rails of other balconies, or if perhaps he had found something

special in her.

“Do other monkeys speak like you?” she asked.

“They speak, but not like me.”

“Can you speak to them?”

The creature looked at her through his heavy frown. His brow was a precipice; she'd never seen it move.

“When I learned human words I gave up the monkey language,” he said. “You cannot be two things at once. It is forgotten.”

Priya thought of her early childhood, mired in rich Hindi. How the words had been so useless to her in Virginia. She could barely understand them now.

“Yes,” she sighed. “It is forgotten.”

The monkey continued to tell her about the monsoon. He spoke of a great storm, a vibration that would shake the air until the sky fell; a watery collapse.

"Be ready," he said, and his tiny pupils wouldn't let her go.

"Don't be an idiot," Ellis told Priya when she'd repeated the monkey's warning. "A storm is just rain." The monkey stared at her through the window. She didn't think he could hear.

“Besides,” said Ellis, always rational, “Monkeys can be dangerous. Nabil said they eat babies if they get their hands on them. I think you should stay away from it.”

“He's fine, he's my friend.”

“Make a less dangerous friend.” Her husband slapped his palm on the glass.

“Shoo!”

“But what if he’s right?”

Ellis was already moving to the door, heading back to his computer.

“If the monkey’s right, we’ll just stay inside,” he said, and left.

Priya and the monkey looked at each other. Before she could signal, he turned, lifting his tail to reveal raw buttocks. He crept away until he was lost in the leaves.

He didn’t return the next morning, or the next, though she left pistachios by his perch. Days passed, and she worried. The sky dimmed beneath clouds routinely in the afternoons, darkened yellow like a bruise, but it would not rain. She sat on the balcony in her swinging wicker chair, gliding through heady air while the maid brought her snacks. She watched the world sink beneath grey light, and stayed there, suspended, until the mosquitos gathered. When she had no more thoughts she slept, and her dreams were silent.

Priya woke one morning and the air was so thick that the brown Mynah birds were having trouble taking flight. The ones that had made it off the ground floated above the street, unable to swoop back down. The tree had no monkey in it.

The monkey had kept her entertained, filled her head with things she’d never seen. Without him, the house was boring. Ellis had promised to take her shopping, buy some scented candles for the guest bathroom, maybe even share lunch on a day when he wasn’t so busy with work. But when she peeked into the second guest-bedroom, where he’d parked his laminated desk and office chair, she found him asleep with his hand on the computer mouse. She could even see where the maid had mopped around him and left a bleach-bright arc. She’d let him sleep.

It had been an entire month since Ellis had dragged her here for his export license.



He'd been so busy with company planning, discussing this-or-that, and arguing with his partner Nabil that he hadn't taken Priya anywhere. She'd become overly familiar with their tetris-style townhouse, had felt the velvet interior of exactly two taxis, and remembered the husky smell of the international airport terminal.

At most, she'd explored through guidebooks, each with its own warning of shady characters. In this place, they said, everyone had a motive. Be cautious, they said. She'd been cautious enough by staying at home.

Priya sought out the maid as she was slipping on her shoes.

"I'm coming with you to the market," she told the woman, who may have nodded or shaken her head—it wasn't clear—before following Priya out the door.

"Come," the maid said as they stepped out of the taxi. She offered her hand to Priya, who ignored it. Samajha Nagar was barely more than a cordoned-off road with tables, baskets, and mobile stands that would have been illegal back in Ashburn. No insurance, no fire hydrants. Priya watched from behind as the maid carried her own woven plastic bags, shoveling in cucumbers, grapes and potatoes. Exchanges of money were made so quickly that Priya often missed them.

She noticed that it wasn't just maids and vendor-men moving about; a few silk-shirted women picked their way through the mess like queens. Each had an accompaniment—usually a thin man, perhaps the driver—that carried their purchases. Priya had worn socks with her sandals to keep the dirt off her feet, and felt embarrassed by her unfashionable state.

"Good tamahters," said the maid, her accent thick. Priya didn't think they were.

"They're a little pink."

The maid took them anyway. She buzzed around the stalls, landing on choice fruits and wet spinach leaves, blending in with the other marketplace maids until Priya had misplaced her. She couldn't remember the color of the maid's kurta. Vermilion? Or perhaps a country green. The woman's hairstyle had been no different from anyone else's, oiled and clipped up in a black pile behind her head.

Priya couldn't have been abandoned. She looked to the edges of the street, which were beginning to blur with fog. People walked around her in pairs, moving in tandem. She might have been the only one that was bumped down the street by herself, like a solitary bird on a large stretch of ocean. Where was the maid?

Priya began to feel the mechanics of her eyelids blinking, the effort of each breath. When her eyes worked, they were overstimulated: punctured by neon threads, crooked hairs, flashes of white teeth and not-so-white eyes, a couple of roaches, limes stampeded into the ground, bumps, crags, toes, lost sandals, toddlers, rogue newspaper cones and the matted humps of two sleeping dogs curled against each other.

Everywhere, calling.

"Madam, towels!" "Madam, sunglasses very sexy!"

"Want clothes, Madam? Males-Females-Children-okay!"

"Haati, deco!" A stubby finger pointed to a toy elephant.

"Con cheez, red apple or green?" Someone had his phone pressed between shoulder and ear, commanded by an unheard voice.

Priya felt waves of sound course around her, humming against her skin, raising the tiny hairs on her neck. She pitied the ants, who were likely throttled out of their

exoskeletons by such noise. Inefficient communication, she thought to herself. Everyone calling out, voices distorted into a static throb. Was anyone actually heard?

She missed her monkey. He listened more than he spoke.

She couldn't remember the woman's name. "Maid?" Her voice was sucked into the thrum.

A cold, heavy-blooded panic spread through her, though it was hot enough for the fruits to sweat. It was the same panic from her childhood, from being handed over to her aunt, not understanding why her mother had abandoned her, not knowing what the white shroud meant. "Maid!"

There was no way back home; her link to the world was gone. And the faces were not only strange, they were staring. They pressed against her, invaded the nooks of her arms where sweat-salts gather, sharing ample amounts of their own perspiration and dousing her with unadulterated body odor. She couldn't remember the maid's name.

"Help! Help me!"

"I'm here, Madam." The maid was behind her, wiry arms dragging bags. Priya held nothing.

"Oh, where were you?" She couldn't help it—her eyebrows were arching up. "I could have been snatched!" Priya imagined an arm tucking into firmly into hers, a blade pressed against her back. She imagined only being fed once a day; perhaps she'd come back thinner. Ellis would have to pay a large ransom. He might cry. He'd tell Nabil that he just wanted his wife back, that he should never have brought Priya to this place.

But she hadn't been snatched.

The maid shrugged, her shoulders lurching forward rather than upwards from the

weight of cornucopian bounty.

"Market," she said in explanation. "Shopping." Her kurta was cerulean.

The maid hailed a rickshaw after dodging through the crowd; her movements were like a jerky dance. She'd tucked a prickly jackfruit above her hip and wedged it there with her small forearm. Priya held onto the dupatta that wound around the woman's neck, using the cloth as a lifeline. She wouldn't be lost again.

Their rickshaw pattered by a slabful tomb, the centerpiece to landscaped gardens and cursive paths, everything tamed. Priya spotted a group of pudgy women in tennis shoes and bindis marching along the path in a procession of twos. There were no crowds, and the tomb was a landmark. No way to be lost. Perhaps she would visit this park next time.

When Priya returned, she wasn't surprised to find that Ellis had left for work. She slipped off her sandals, took the plate of unshed lychee fruit that the maid offered, and padded to the balcony, looking out for orange fur. Just in case.

He was there, familiar and large. All of a sudden she felt shy.

The monkey didn't speak at first. Priya asked him questions while she peeled the fruit—about the weather, about his family, about the rest of the city that she was too frightened to explore. Did they have hand sanitizer in the shops? Did they remove their plastic chappals before entering houses? Is it true that they didn't use toilet paper?

He sat between the pansies and stared through heavy lids. He was big for a monkey, certainly a Rhesus macaque like she'd seen in the guide, but bigger than the description. As large as a ten-year-old child, she thought. With the countenance of an old man; maybe

a sour man. His elfin ears didn't tame him, and instead made him look more sinister. He had fangs. She'd read that they never lived alone, even though this one had no companions. It was sad, really.

Priya pushed the plate of lychees towards him, hands sticky from peeling the red hide from the fruit.

"I've decided to give you a name, since you don't have one," she said. The monkey stared at the metal plate. "I'm going to call you Hanuman, after the Hindu monkey god. How does that sound?"

He reached down for some fruit.

"I read that he protects people from evil," she continued, "watches out for them if they bring him offerings. According to Hindus, of course." Her parents had been Hindus.

"I have a name," he said after a pause. "It is Pepsiwallah." He launched a lychee seed from between his teeth.

"What does that mean?"

"I used to sell Pepsi colas. Cold Pepsis to children on hot days like today."

Pepsiwallah told her about his human brother, Jamal, with calloused hands and charcoal hair. They'd walk through the gardens selling colas, the man pushing the cart and the monkey strutting in front, pulling children in with his long fingers.

But one day hoodlums had beaten Jamal to death.

"Even the park is not safe here," he said. The electricity in the air made Priya shiver, though it still hadn't stormed. "They carried his body away."

"My god," she said, thinking of those brave women in the park. "India is so dangerous." Her childhood memories of the place were blurred—she'd left with her Aunt

when she was four. She remembered arriving in Virginia, settling in the hug of her new bed, and the sudden silence of the world.

Priya tore the jelly flesh off a lychee with her teeth. It felt like eating rubber.

“Yes, so dangerous.” The monkey extended his leg for inspection, running his fingers to the ends of his toes. “Especially for people who don’t belong.” They looked at each other.

She noticed that his eyes were too close together.

“My parents lived here, you know,” she said. “I’m not a foreigner.” She could even find their city on a map, given a minute. “I was born in Calcutta. They both got sick after a train ride, but no one knew it was malaria. They tried to be strong and hide it. Afterwards I lived with my Auntie. My cousins are more like sisters.” But Priya hadn’t kept in touch with any of them.

“Well,” said the monkey. His eyes were deep-set and she couldn’t decide whether they were yellow or green. He turned his palm out as if he was giving her something. “Your husband seems more at home than you.”

Pale Ellis? Practical, *American* Ellis? Priya let the plate scrape as she pulled it away.

“I’ve only been here a month.” The monkey didn’t move. “It’s hard. He’s the one with the job!” She tried to keep her nostrils from flaring. She knew what he would say next, that she should get a job. That she should do things, make more friends; have her own life. Maybe she was thinking this herself.

“I’ve got a busy day, monkey. I don’t have time to chat.” She took the lychees with her when she left.

This time, days passed and it was Priya who avoided the balcony. She could see the creature sitting there, tearing the leaves along their veins, chewing on something he'd found. She bustled around her room, rearranging her closet, trying on party dresses to make sure they still fit. Each day the skies crept lower, and the chance of rain seemed bleaker. Priya and her husband began to speak in muffled whispers; the low-hanging clouds absorbed their voices. The neighborhood was quiet. The air was woolen.

There'd been no need to bathe while Priya had sought refuge in the dry air of the bedroom, nothing to make her sticky. No intrigue, no lychees. She was on a diet, too, just to see how quickly she could lose five pounds. No sweet foods. She showered only when she could think of nothing else to do.

The diet made her tired, and so she lay on her back above the sheets while she waited for Ellis to come home. She didn't know why she even bothered waiting; all he did was talk about work.

She counted geckos, but there were only two. She named them Hanuman, since she liked the name anyway, and Chelsea, after her coworker in Ashburn. She wondered if fat Chelsea still worked at the jewelry store; she resolved to look her up sometime. Maybe she'd finally gotten a proposal from that guy.

Priya counted her toes, and was alarmed when she miscounted nine. She made a snow angel in the quilt. She even thought of helping the maid with chores, but then remembered being lost at the market, and that she was still upset by the incident.

Finally, Priya sat up. Her head was light. "I need," she said to her reflection in the dresser, "I need exercise to go with my diet." She'd been inspired by those other women

in the nearby park, grunting through the steamy weather. *They* were clearly at home.

But what made them so different? They could speak Hindi, but that wouldn't prevent them from being kidnapped. They traveled in a pack. Ten weak fists were better than two. Perhaps she'd find them, walk in the middle of the group. Yes.

She looked around the room and spotted the fire-poker, useless in this country. She raised it like a sword, testing its weight and shaking it in the air. It was heavy but would do well. She could defend herself. "I'm ready," she said, though not another living thing heard.

As soon as she opened the door, Priya's oversized t-shirt wilted. Her bobbed hair, newly dried, corkscrewed into spirals. By the time she'd crossed the street, the humidity had made her look as if she'd already walked the length of the park, covering her in undeserved sweat.

"Shit," she muttered. Her eyelashes gathered condensation. The air surrounding the Moghul tomb was misty, and the dome seemed to levitate. Like a grey ship, she thought, buoyed by water. Like the boat that Noah had prepared. She imagined animals gathered inside, waiting for the rain.

There were steps on all four sides of the structure, so steep that she felt like a mountaineer when she climbed them. Good exercise. She clanked the poker on the stone for emphasis. At the top, she peeked through one of the four archways and could see straight through to the other side. The interior was a little gloomy, but simple. No surprises, no danger. Really, it was more like an elaborate bus stop with a fancy roof. She crept inside.



The tomb itself was a small stone slab that barely reached Priya's hip. No notion of anything organic, no decay. It had names scratched into it, probably with keys, by other people long gone. Maybe lovers. Priya didn't care to read their messages.

She spotted the knot of women marching on the edges of the mist, outfits dulled by the light. They seemed so far away, their progress so slow. She wanted to bay like the crepuscular peacocks did, calling for mates. She was impatient.

The underside of the dome wasn't smooth like she'd expected, but covered in moss. It was strange, she thought, that moss could grow in such a place. But then she noticed that parts of it moved. An infestation, she realized, of dark little bat bodies. She took a step back. What if one fell on her?

She thought of her monkey, and missed him. He might have told her that the flimsy creatures were harmless, that all they could do was flutter around her hair. But Pepsi wasn't here, and so she stepped outside with goosebumps. The ladies were close enough to spot her, calling out hellos in Hindi.

The one in charge was pert with a chubby face. She seemed to be the fuel behind the group energy. A drip wobbled from her nose as she spoke.

"I don't really speak much Hindi," Priya said.

The woman was impatient, and tried again in English. "Are you walking alone?"

"Yes," Priya said, feeling out of place with the iron poker in her hand. She'd noticed that none of the other women were wearing shorts. None had their knees exposed. She tried to discreetly push her waistband to a more modest level.

"It's very dangerous in the park." She sounded like a preaching mother. "Come, walk with us!"

Priya looked over the little group. Some carried single-pound weights, and others did arm circles while they stood. The woman in front had been swinging her arms, chopping the air with each step. They looked like a crew of overweight superheroes; they had each sweated through the long shirtdresses of their kurtas and their wide bras had become outlined.

"Alright," she said, remembering the monkey. She'd have a whole group of friends when they next spoke.

These women walked loyally every day, the leader said, except during dust storms. While their husbands were at work and their children were in school, they joined together in a chattering crowd and gossiped.

They plodded along in a line of pairs, following the gravel path. Priya was in front with Jeeval, the leader. The congregation reminded her of cows, bovine females that lurched around and never lost any weight. They made noncommittal noises and mumbled to each other. Priya couldn't understand them, at times even when English was spoken. She felt as if she were an entirely different species, a single without a match. Why had the monkey chosen this sort of life?

As she pushed through the air, her eyes became foggy. A person might've drowned breathing in the humidity. The sky was aqueous. And still, no water fell. Where was Pepsiwallah's monsoon? The slopes may have been beautiful when adorned with grass, but they lay dead, almost as grey as the sky. The world needed a good washing of rain; maybe Pepsi was wrong.

"This is a nice place." She said. "Do you ever bring your kids?"

The little woman halted her swinging arms and turned to Priya. "Never at all!"

Priya felt uncomfortable in Jeeval's stare and looked away. A line of planted palms ran along the park's edge, their trunks like rough elephantine legs.

"It's too dangerous," Jeeval shook her head.

"I've heard. I heard that a man was beaten to death by hoodlums here!" Priya looked around, as if the hoodlums might emerge from the mist. She was glad for the poker in her hand.

"Oh, no. Since then it's been safer. But we don't dare bring our children." Jeeval shook her head again. When the slope fell, Priya stumbled on the rolling gravel.

"Many things have happened here," Jeeval continued. "Other women used to walk with us. Neha would let her sons play while we chatted. The park is so big, and we let them go to the other side for cold drinks."

Jeeval wasn't chipper now, but her voice still had a cow-bell clang, like she might slip into hysterics. The others had hushed their mutterings and listened.

"Neha lost her sons. Guards came and beat the man who took them, but the boys were already gone."

"Dead?"

"Children are taken for many things. Healthy liver, healthy heart. Or kept alive as servants." Priya pictured two boys walking through the park, their insides removed. They must be dead.

"They caught the man? Why didn't they find the kids?"

"Police said the monkey took them, maybe in the drink cart,"

The monkey, who gathered cold drinks for children on hot days.

Jeeval continued. "But these policemen, who knows. There may be no monkey."

She muttered to herself. “We don’t bring our children here.”

The women had resumed their Hindi conversations. Priya recognized snippets, a few English words. Cooking, newly married Aisha, the tailor who charged too much. By their tone she could tell that they spoke of daily qualms, of irritants, of minor aches and slight mishaps, and they no longer spoke of the lost children.

Priya walked with the herd around the park's perimeter. Her brooding didn't stop her from noticing the black bark of the Jurassic-looking trees, the peaked hats of bulbul birds, the personal cloud of mosquitos that hovered above each of them.

She had questions for Pepsiwallah. At the painted gate the women tried to linger with her, make conversation. They asked about her husband, what he did. Was he a doctor? A prolific engineer? Was he a PIO, a person of Indian origin? Was she proud of him?

She closed each query with a curt no-no-goodbye, and left the knot of housewives with new, discussable fodder. She would not join them again. She might've looked as crazy as they did, cotton shirt wilted, hair wild, metal prod. She'd need to wash the park off with another shower. But first, the monkey.

Priya looked up at the balcony, and found him between the potted plants. His almost-green eyes met hers, and he grinned. She noticed how long his fangs were.

“Pepsi?” He moved closer to the ledge.

“Yes.” He said it gently, like a grandfather.

“People in the park are saying bad things about you.”

He stooped lower to look at her. She was worried he might fall. His eyes glowed.

“And you believe them?” A breeze moved her hair, almost as if it had come from

his mouth. Did she believe them? She was hesitant.

“Well—”

The monkey didn’t give her enough time. “You don’t trust me,” he whispered, and a cold gust blew around her head. “You went to the park.” The air whistled, like an animal howling in the distance. Her sweat was chilled.

“Yes, but—”

“You didn’t heed my warning.” The wind grew, pushing at her. The monkey leaned, hanging forward like a gargoyle. His fur was stark beneath the heavy sky.

“You are just like the others.” He shrank back onto the balcony, and she could only see the top of his head.

Dark booms of thunder echoed through her insides. Would her only friend have snatched her, too? Sold her heart for money?

“Wait, Pepsi.” She shouted at him to stay, to answer her, though her voice was sucked into a void.

She lumbered up the stairs, starting to sob without tears. The poker bounced off of the rail, the steps, the chalky walls.

When she reached the balcony he was gone. A few bright leaves scratched across the ground, lifted by the wind. Her hair blew around her cheeks.

She had failed him; she knew he wouldn’t return.

Priya felt anger. Abandoned again, alone again.

She thrust a pot off the balcony. An enormous crack reverberated as the clay shattered and the dirt returned to the ground.

Neighborhood guards poked their heads out of guard boxes. They must have

thought the white man's wife was crazy. A tempest roiled inside her.

"If you ever come back," she screamed, "I'll have my husband kill you. I'll kill you myself!" Her face broke, and tears flooded her eyes. She wouldn't let the monkey's words come true.

But then the sky collapsed, and water drenched the tetris-style house.

## **A Knack for Knowing**

Priya Porter smudged kajal around her eyes for the last time before she gave birth. There was no point putting it on neatly—it would just melt right off when she stepped outside. The last few days had been so hot that people were reporting spontaneous combustion, hair and fur and saris suddenly erupting in flames. Priya Porter had watched the heat swallow the world from her balcony, six fans swiveled towards her.

She would have the baby any day now, burst him into the open. The doctors wouldn't determine the sex from the ultrasound: too many females aborted in the country, they said. But Priya knew what he would be. She felt it. She'd talk to him while she watched the street. Her shirt would be pulled up so he could watch with her, and sweat would run down her belly in straight lines.

Sometimes she'd smell smoldering Gold Flake cigarettes and wish that he was out of her already, so that she could smoke just one. But mostly she sat in the swinging chair, simply aware of their joint gravity. In those times she could feel her body pulling things toward her, particles of light and dust.

Today she swung like a pendulum in the wicker chair, pushing off the marble with her toes and feeling the weight of her ass pulling her back. With every push she'd glimpse more of the scene below, a fenced plot of grass forming the center of the neighborhood. Dogs would slink in through the openings. Crows would rest atop the rails, their beaks open from the heat. Guards would go into the park to piss, but Priya never saw them at it. She just knew because the walls smelled of urine the one time she went down there.

A little group was using the last of the summer light to play cricket. The kids didn't have a bat; instead they were using one of the extra wickets. Their grins were flashes of

bright white amongst the shadows. One small boy didn't even seem to be playing; he'd just squat and throw his hands in the air whenever the ball made contact.

Priya's son would learn to play cricket. She wasn't quite sure of the rules, so Ellis would have to teach him, but she would be his biggest fan. Bigger than the die-hards. She imagined Ellis pitching with his long arms rounding like a windmill, and her boy—their boy—cracking the ball across the field, out into oblivion. Soon Ellis' throw would be too weak, and they'd hire a real coach. Priya's son would become a cricket legend, and she'd say that she knew it all along. No one would doubt her; she'd have a mother's knack for knowing these things.

She reveled in the idea of being secure, proud, knowing.

For much of her life she hadn't been the authority. Even her manicurist told her things she didn't know; that her toenails were a deep red, the color of marriage. She was too big to actually see them herself, and the woman at the salon had assured her that they gleamed like chilies.

Her baby would gleam, the moment he came out. He'd look like he stepped out of a sauna, rubbery with water. Was it really that hot inside of her? She felt the stretched skin with the heel of her hand. It was really that hot outside of her, too. The fans buffered lukewarm air towards her.

The tape she'd been listening to ended, and she played it again. It was hard now to slow the swing, to lift him out of it, to haul him over to the cassette player and lower him down so that she could press the button. The voice of a stern woman counted in Hindi. Priya chanted with her.

“Ek, do, teen...”



She stood on the mushroom surface of her yoga mat and stared at the branches of the twisted monkey tree. She hadn't had time to do yoga lately.

"Char, panch, che..."

She'd practice the lotus position after he was born. She'd succeed in tucking her feet above her calves.

"Saat," she said in an American accent. "Aaht, nau..."

The monkey tree held the solitary figure of a macaque. A small cherry-faced male that bared its teeth and pinned its tiny eyes right on her stomach. She'd heard they ate babies. The monkey would have frightened her once, back when the tree still had branches that twisted near the house, but they'd been removed. Ellis had called someone, and a line of skinny men had trickled forward and hacked away until sunset. She'd been furious—the peepal tree was holy to Hindus, and she'd added her own thread to the many that wrapped around it. But she'd calmed since then. Priya couldn't have monkeys around. Not with the baby.

"Das," she repeated. Ten.

She'd count his ten little fingers, and he'd grasp one of hers. She'd feed him milk ushered in from somewhere holy. He'd have full-moon cheeks and bovine eyes. She was breathing life into him, and with every breath he absorbed his country.

Priya moved to the edge of the balcony and looked over its concrete surface. Only a few weeks ago she had redecorated this edge with new flowering pots and some hopeful-looking tomato plants, but they had since dried and charred. They were little more than ashy limbs that might fall away like incense.

Her husband was below, grasping at the black handle of the gated entrance. His

white hands shone against the metal and then snapped back from the heat. The hinge clanked down, determined to burn his fingers again.

"Where's the guard?" Priya called.

Ellis's glasses flashed when he looked up. Usually he stared at her belly, but the balcony blocked it from view. Instead, his face found hers and he jerked his thumb toward the wooden guard box.

"Sleeping," he called, and rapped on the thin board that made up one of its walls.

The box shook with unmistakable signs of a waking animal. The guard's shift would be over in an hour or two, and he'd be replaced by an equally sleepy but more somber night watch.

Priya assumed they lived in the city, but she didn't know anything about them. They appeared like clockwork toys, sat woodenly in their box for a while and then vanished.

Occasionally they beat the street dogs with their batons. Back in Virginia the mailmen were the dogs' only enemies; here they had guards to contend with.

She moved her body inside to wait.

Priya heard Ellis' careful, shuffling steps rising to the second floor before she saw him. Falling onto marble was like falling on ice; the surface didn't absorb any of the shock. Ellis had had to crosshatch his work shoes with a knife after slipping in the first week. His left thigh had turned purple, and now he faced the stairs like an old man. When she heard the tap of his feet reach the stairwell, Priya heaved herself up from the chair she'd been sitting in.

She had Ellis sit at the dinner table. Usually they ate separately, with Ellis working

at his desk and Priya feeding whenever hunger struck, but she told him that today was a special occasion. They'd have a son tomorrow, she just knew. He was silent when she said this, and silent again when she told him she'd made dinner. Priya didn't cook often.

"Long day?" she asked.

"Mm. We lost a whole shipment. They're claiming water damage, but I think those Indian bastards are lying." She didn't like it when he called them bastards.

The maid was serving the food. She walked in as if she too were pregnant, clutching the full metal pot against her hips. The heat must have stung. She hoisted the pot onto the table, where it steamed. Ellis was drinking his second glass of wine, rolling the stem between his fingers so the liquid churned like a storm.

"What's for dinner?" he asked as he lifted his chin towards the pot.

"Chole bhature," said Priya, dabbing her forehead with a napkin. She looked at the damp white paper. "I hate sweating."

"What is that?"

"Chickpeas and pourris—a fried bread." She wiped her belly with another napkin. "You pick up the chickpeas with the bread, no utensils needed." It was amazing that they'd lived here for almost a year and Ellis was still virgin to the country's many dishes. While he'd been working, Priya had been learning. But she still hadn't learned enough.

Ellis pulled at the lid of the pot, letting steam out away from his face. It washed over Priya, undoing her napkin work.

"So where's the bread?"

"It's coming. I wanted it to be fresh for when you arrived."

Ellis plucked his glasses off his nose and wiped them on the tablecloth. Priya

watched his long fingers working the cloth. He did everything cautiously, with finesse. When they'd made their first dinner together, Ellis had taken the butcher's knife gently from her hand. He'd wrapped a Band-Aid around the small cut on her finger, pressing so lightly that she couldn't even feel him. Now they rarely touched.

Priya's own hands were small and fat and brown. They weren't piano hands. Fingers got in the way when Priya tried to thread a needle or pluck her eyebrows, so she didn't do dainty things. The same ill-fated touch seemed to apply to growing herbs or cooking with spices.

And it wasn't just her hands; she'd stumbled around in ballet class for a few years before the instructor had told her to find a different calling.

Her calling was motherhood. She was good at being pregnant, and her body had become a tireless factory, working even when her mind was exhausted.

"Smells good," Ellis said of the chickpeas. "I might have a taste since the bread's taking so long."

He pushed aside his glass, now emptied to a burgundy puddle, and scooped chickpeas onto his plate. The curry spread across it, reaching the edges. The chickpeas emerged from the sauce like tiny bellies that were just as pregnant as hers. Ellis was going to devour them. She felt nauseated.

Ellis dipped his fork into the sauce and brought the glimmer of a sample to his mouth. Priya waited while he sucked his tongue and looked at the ceiling. He was ugly like this. One side of his face stretched long over his cheekbone and the other bunched around his mouth.

"What do you think?" she asked, trying not to look.

"This is not bad." He stared at the mess on his plate. "Not bad at all!"

"I'm glad," she said. She was not. Priya didn't feel gratified that he liked the food because she hadn't really made it.

That morning, after managing to swallow half a piece of toast, she'd decided to prepare dinner. Her belly had rumbled, her son getting ready to emerge. An Indian dinner would be his last meal while he was inside her.

Gathering the ingredients had been simple enough; the maid kept them all neatly stored in the kitchen, even labeled. Priya hadn't been able to read the Devanagari script, but she figured her sensitive nose would help her pick cardamom from cumin. Looking up a recipe online hadn't been difficult either; she'd chosen one with five stars and stellar comments.

Finding the pots and pans had been harder. Priya looked in the most obvious of places, cupboards near the stove and the large drawers underneath. But they'd been stacked neatly on a high shelf in the far corner of the kitchen, a dangerous place for a woman with new life protruding from her stomach. She'd climbed up anyway, using the three-step ladder.

She didn't ask for help. The maid ruled the kitchen like a tyrant and often ushered Priya out when she tried to watch. So she'd begun cooking early in the day, before the maid arrived.

Her clumsy fingers spilled spices across the counter, leaving plumes of red, orange, and shades of brown. Mostly she got them into the pan, where they fizzled with the oil and stained the onions. But a dusting of yellow found its way between her toes, and the track marks of her onion tears were tinted orange. Priya was reminded of her seventh

grade chemistry class, experimenting over the Bunsen burner. One wrong addition might create an explosion.

Then the pressure cooker had erupted, making her scream and squat on the kitchen floor with her hands over her ears and her belly between her knees. She'd had trouble getting out of that position when the cooker's hiss finally faded. She'd never witnessed its release of steam from this proximity—she'd always been in another room.

Priya didn't like surprises, or even the possibility of them. She liked certainties. When Ellis had asked her to marry him three years ago, she'd bitten her lip and taken a long time to answer. How could she know that he'd be right for her in ten years, or thirty? She didn't say yes—she'd said okay.

The kitchen smelled of cooked beans, but the chickpeas were firm because she hadn't thought to soak them overnight. One crunched between her molars when she'd tried to bite it, and had tasted like bitter grass. She'd decided to simply cook the chickpeas again, pouring in another cup of water and struggling to reconnect the cooker lid, which looked round but wasn't. Then she'd turned her attention back to the bubbling pan.

She'd stirred the oily mix so that it wouldn't congeal before she could add the chickpeas. It had smelled good, but overbearingly of cumin.

“Damn it,” she'd said when she'd looked back at the recipe. The directions called for one teaspoonful, and by the smell of things she'd put in a tablespoon.

Priya had tried to fix it. After all, this style of cooking was likely coded into her DNA, she'd thought. Every part of Priya's body surely held instructions for Indian cuisine.

She'd added something that looked like basil but smelled like mint. She'd flicked in a clove or two and a hint of cinnamon, and she'd just been shaking more salt into the pan when the cooker erupted again. Priya had sworn and dropped the sachet into the sauce.

She'd tried to pick it up, gingerly, with four fingertips, but the sauce was oily and the salt packet had emptied into the curry. Shrieking, Priya had burned her fingers trying to pull the plastic out.

"Alright, I give up!" She'd held onto her wooden spoon and let herself sink slowly to the kitchen tile. She'd been there until the maid had found her, sobbing, with the spoon still in her hand.

So her cooking pride had been thrown away with the salty beans. The maid had conjured a fresh batch and had simultaneously cleaned the kitchen, burning nothing, dropping nothing.

Priya had crawled back into her bed, where she'd stayed for most of the afternoon before migrating to the balcony.

"Either way, it's better than your chutney," Ellis said now, as he speared chickpeas with his fork. She wasn't sure if he was praising her or making fun of past attempts. "It's far superior to your rice pudding."

Priya noted the ease with which he shoveled the food into his mouth. Her husband hadn't swallowed the news of her pregnancy quite so easily. It had caught in his throat, a rogue chickpea that was now growing into a human.

"My God, this is as good as the maid's," Ellis said. "Tastes really authentic!"

He knew. Somehow, he *knew* that Priya hadn't cooked it.

"I think you're finally getting the hang of this Indian food kick you're on."

"I am Indian. So all the food I make is Indian food."

Ellis shrugged. "If you say so."

Inside Priya rose a fury that made her heart wobble in its cage. She felt like a child around careful, expert Ellis. Perhaps she should have never agreed to move here. If they'd stayed in Ashburn, her husband might still be pleasant and timid.

"Ellis, there's something I want to tell you." She wanted to be the authority for once. Give her husband a fact that he didn't know. "And I think you have an idea."

Truthfully she couldn't be certain herself. She only had a suspicion.

"The baby..." But she was losing the heat from her face; it seemed to be pooling in her stomach.

"Well, the baby?" Ellis asked as he laid his fork down on the tablecloth.

Priya felt kicks inside her. Her child heard Ellis speaking. She thought of what might happen and images rained down on her—of flying back to Virginia alone, of pulling up to a hotel, of her son not learning to play cricket. Life without a husband.

"The baby, I've decided. I'm going to name him Ellis, after his father."

Her husband watched her, waiting for something else. She pushed the supposition out of her mind, down through the soles of her feet, and stamped on it.

"And..." her voice broke. "I didn't make the chickpeas. The maid did, you were right."

Ellis leaned back.

"Oh," he said softly. "Oh."

He removed his glasses again. And then he reached across the table, offering Priya his hand.



She bit her lip and hesitated.

“Indian food’s not my favorite, anyway,” he said, trying to make her laugh.

She took his hand just as the maid brought in a stack of air-filled pourris. Ellis thanked her, but neither he nor Priya reached for one immediately. Instead they held hands for a few seconds longer.

Priya Porter went into labor right after the meal, as if it had been decided by the conversation. Her baby was born on the hottest day recorded that summer, which locals referred to afterwards as the day Shiva got angry and set fire to the country.

Ellis went with Priya to the hospital, a spot of wine on his white shirt cuff. He let Priya squeeze his hand throughout the birth, and when the baby girl was washed, he lifted her to his chest.

“Congratulations on your new baby girl,” the doctor said through the bristles of his black mustache, and Priya started to cry. She hadn’t been right. She didn’t have a knack for knowing these things.

“Out of joy,” she told the mustache; she was crying out of joy. The baby started to cry too, barely more than a tiny red struggle. Her little body felt hot against Priya’s breasts, which were cold with the sweat of labor.

Ellis stood tall in the center of the room and Priya heard him laugh for the first time in months. He wanted to name the baby after his mother, Evelyn, who had died a few years ago.

Priya thought of her own dead mother, but the argument was not in her. She hadn’t considered names for a girl. She was deflated. The baby looked like an Evelyn, anyway.

“Baby Evie,” she said.

Not much of the child resembled Ellis. Everyone would eventually say that she'd inherited his long feet, after finding no traces of him in her face.

Priya would forget about the radio on the balcony that had wound Hindi numbers into the air. She'd forget how to count in anything but English. The machine would be packed up with the furniture when the Porters moved back to the United States, and would find a new home in an Ashburn cupboard. A toddler would eventually discover the cassette inside, and harvest its magnetic brown strands to make spaghetti.

## **Born In Sweat**

Gotam had been born in sweat; he had been the only heat inside his mother's body. They found out later that he'd been keeping her alive throughout the pregnancy, like a molten core within the folds of her brown flab. She hadn't had time to see him borne from her belly. She was as cold as the metal that had cut her by the time her husband saw the thing that emerged, the baby that exhaled steam in its first breath and heated the room by ten degrees.

Gotam's father Anton was a slight man, with a slight man's balloon of an ego. He'd been shouting at the doctor to do something, telling him where to cut and to move faster. It was miraculous that the doctor had saved even the boy's life, and as soon as the baby was slapped he'd been ready to leave the room with the hotheaded father and the steaming son.

Anton had looked from his lizard-skinned wife to the spill of vapor that the baby had emitted. The child was still raw, bloody in the doctor's steady fingers.

Anton had flown to the wooden cross on the wall and brandished it in front of his child.

"Devil!" he'd cried. "Leave my son." Before he could be held back by the nurses he'd brought the wood down onto the soft round head, which gave like fresh clay.

Until then the boy had been silent, smoldering like a resting volcano. He erupted.

The baby's head had been pressed into a heart shape. The doctor tried to pull him back from his father, but Anton was already clutching at the small red body.

"I've exorcised him!" he'd shrieked.

The nurses wailed with the baby. The doctor held his hands in the air, still sticky

with blood, and backed away; he would do nothing to provoke a crazy man.

And so Anton had checked out of the overfull hospital as easily as he had checked in, carrying his son in one arm and signing papers with the other.

"His name will be Gotam," Anton had said, "because my wife wanted it to be so."

Gotam's mother had been from the northern regions of India, where the people were as cold as the mountains. His father had been bred in Goa, an Anton son of Anton son of Anton.

"I would have given you a nice Catholic name," he'd told Gotam frequently, "but your poor mother objected. It's the last thing she did for you, give you your name."

And Anton would also remind Gotam of his exorcism, telling him that he'd been blessed. "Thank the Lord you have a father like me," Anton would say to his nine year-old son, patting the cleft on his head. "I knew exactly what to do."

But Gotam's heat continued to make the water bubble when he waded into the Goan ocean, and he continued to sweat.

When he began working for his father he was expected to wear heavy suits, ties that pushed the water out of his skin and shirts that pasted themselves onto his stomach. The attire wasn't for interacting with distributor clients—Anton wouldn't let him do that—but for intimidating the factory workers.

"They'll work harder if you scare them," Anton had said. "I remind them that you've been touched by Satan."

The men who pickled, dried and packaged mangos seemed more scared of Gotam's father. And Gotam suffered in his own heat. He'd tuck a dark rag into his business clothes for patting away moisture when Anton wasn't looking.

Gotam often wondered if the Devil had really lit a match inside his body. He thought that maybe he was related to Lucifer. After all, the Son of God had walked on earth. And the Devil seemed a far likelier character to impregnate women. Perhaps Gotam's mother had sold her soul to him.

But hopefully she'd just given birth to an anomaly. He thought of himself this way, as something that shouldn't have existed but did. He tried to better himself in every way. He found that if he kept up a daily exercise regimen, he could sweat out some of the water for the day. He made Herculean efforts. His figure caught the attention of every woman's eye, though there was only one that he'd shown interest.

A married woman, too. He'd completely betrayed his faith.

On the hottest day of the hottest summer on record, the day that Shiva let India burn, Gotam woke from a siesta. He found himself on the wooden floor, having slipped off of the waterproof mat on his bed. It was a common occurrence—the water that his pores leaked would become a force, driving Gotam off his bed in a river of sweat. Sometimes he simply slept on the floor.

This day was worse. He woke in the corner of the room with his head beneath the bottom shelf of the bookcase, bumping it when he sat up. He'd left a snail's path along the wood that his father would have beaten him for, trying to club the evil out with the same hospital cross. Before he'd died, Gotam's father had nailed that cross to a walking stick and had used it like a crutch. Up until his death it had aided Anton in disciplining his son, even when he couldn't use his legs anymore, even when Gotam turned thirty.

The book by Gotam's head was damp. He flapped its pages to dry them out and

peered at the charts inside. Astrological charts, carefully cutting space into reasons and meanings. He hadn't read it; it had been gifted to Gotam by a man who'd done business with his father.

“Read up on it,” the man had said after Anton had died. Everyone knew of Anton’s dismissal of other religions. “The time has come for you to inherit the business. Read up on it, and you’ll read your future.”

Then he’d shaken Gotam’s hand and left with a boxful of dried mangos.

The first chapter spoke of cosmic time and space. It wasn't as simple as Gotam knowing that he was a Sagittarius and finding his love match—it was heavy Hindu calculation. There were people out there who made more money than he did by reading futures and pinpointing the place where someone would be buried.

Was the Devil trying to turn him into a Hindu? He wasn’t the most devout Catholic, even before the tryst with Priya in Delhi. Gotam suspected that his father had beaten the faith out of his mind early in life, before he could begin to examine it for himself.

With his mind barely dredged out of sleep, Gotam resolved to visit one of these Vedic astrologers. His father had always said that there was a reason for everything, and Gotam's sweat had led him to the planets. Maybe he could ask about Priya.

The nearest Vedic astrologer held an office near the nightclub with the woman's pink silhouette flickering above it. Gotam thought the neon sign was tacky, indicating a sugar-rush excitement, and it looked even worse when the light was off for Sunday. It reminded him of a damp receipt. It reminded him of the way he'd felt when Priya hadn't called.

As usual, his kurta shirt had suctioned itself to him during the ride. He rode a moped because he liked to feel the salty air on his skin, and because his father had condemned it.

“We are rich now,” Anton had said. “You think I made this mango-shmango business so you could putt-putt around Margao like a cheap tourist?”

But today was different. It was hotter. And Gotam felt at ease.

The sun had boiled the sea until the entire city was bathed in sweat, and for one day, he was an anomaly no more. Everyone held rags to their heads, and everyone asked their God the purpose of such madness.

Gotam looked around as he parked his bike. It wasn't that he was embarrassed, going in to see an astrologer. But he did feel sort of like he was wading into a party full of teenagers, or sneaking into a Mosque. Had he eaten beef recently? Would the astrologer know? He might be thrown out. Hindu heifers were a serious matter.

The waiting room was simply adorned with a raised wooden counter holding an old television and a shrine to Lord Ganesha. It was empty except for the man behind it, who gave him a clipboard with questions cramped all the way to the edges of the page.

Gotam knew the exact time that he was born, because it was also the minute that his mother had died. His father had liked to remind him of that. He jotted down handedness (right), weight (100 kilograms even, all muscle and water), his father's name, his mother's name and his job.

He answered questions that he'd never thought about, questions regarding the length of his second toe on his right foot and the coordinates of the hospital that had birthed him. Surely these were pointless. The astrologer was an illusionist, hiding his real

source of information with layers of rubbish.

“Coordinates,” he said to the neatly combed man. “I don’t know the coordinates of my birth.”

“Were you born in Goa?” The man pulled out a captain’s log-type notebook.

“Yes, at the old hospital before it burned down.” It had caught fire two days after Gotam and Anton had left, and under suspicious circumstances.

“Good riddance,” Anton had said.

The receptionist jotted down a note and the door behind him creaked open.

The astrologer was a woman. She looked quite similar to Gotam’s old pediatrician, a no-nonsense woman who wasn't afraid to stab a screaming child with a needle. She came out with a young couple. The man looked gleeful, saying something about love being 'written in the stars' and the girl just nodded silently.

"Doctor Ahuja will see you now," the receptionist said to Gotam. "Please make your way into room number two."

Gotam wondered why there were multiple rooms for the one astrologer. He'd expected room number two to have more than just a barren desk and a poster depicting constellations. He'd expected crystal balls, tiger patterns and planetary mobiles that orbited around the ceiling. There was no spectacle.

"I'm Doctor Ahuja," said the astrologer, pushing the door with her foot as she carried in a laptop and his questionnaire. “Please, sit.” She could have been Gotam's assistant, in a drab blouse and with her hair pulled back. Where were the flowing clothes, why didn't she smell of agrabati?

"What am I supposed to do?" asked Gotam.



Dr. Ahuja clicked open the laptop, which took up the greater portion of the desk.

"Sit silently while I formulate your chart."

Gotam sat silently. The astrologer keyed in a series of numbers and checked his filled-out form, frowning at the way his handwriting looped through the designated lines.

"Are you really a doctor? With a degree?"

The woman didn't answer.

"You want your full horoscope, no?" she asked him instead.

"Correct," said Gotam, but he had the feeling that Dr. Ahuja hadn't waited for his response.

He didn't know how long he sat there; he never wore a watch because it would stink from sweat after two days of being on him, and most stopped working. It must have been a good twenty minutes, with Gotam sitting in silence and regretting his decision to come.

Finally Dr. Ahuja spoke.

"I see that your ascendant is ruled by—"

"Please just tell me what's going to happen," Gotam said. "I don't need to know my sun sign or the location of the planets."

The astrologer snapped her lips shut and glared at him. Perhaps this scientific part was what she enjoyed.

"Well," she said as she scanned the computer screen. "It looks like your mother will have a violent death, and you will receive trauma to the head in the same event."

Gotam widened his eyes, surprised that it was working.

"That already happened," he said and swallowed. "At my birth. Go on."

"You are followed by the heat, wherever you go. It's in your blood."

“Yes,” he cried. “Do you know the meaning of it?”

“It keeps you separate from others, and you will have trouble being loved. It is the heat of opposition, a positive thing if you make it so. You are strong-willed.”

“Hmph.” It was not a positive thing.

Dr. Ahuja continued.

“Your daughter has inherited this from you.”

Gotam held up his hand in objection. “I don’t have a daughter,” he said. “I’m not married.”

Dr. Ahuja’s eyes patrolled the screen, back and forth.

“You do or you are about to. It’s evident here, in the yod, with the conflicting—”

“How is that possible?” Gotam asked.

The astrologer exhaled through her nose.

“Well, you must have had sexual relations,” she said and tisked. “And out of wedlock too, shame. Which caste are you?”

“I’m not Hindu,” he said absentmindedly. There had only been one...

Dr. Ahuja groaned and folded up her laptop. “That explains it,” she said. “No morals.”

“Wait!” Gotam placed his hand on the woman’s arm, his palm hot.

She jerked back and the clipboard clattered on the floor.

“Please, I need to know. Please,” he said.

The woman rubbed the skin where he’d touched her, but complied, looking back to her computer.

"She is yours and not yours. She is American, and America is a bad place for you. Your paths will never cross. If you are to be happy, you should put her from your mind."

Dr. Ahuja closed her laptop. "Please pay at the receptionist counter before you leave."

Gotam stood in a daze.

"Anyway," the astrologist said, "You are not Hindu, so why... why believe in Vedic horoscope?" He could tell she'd never said such a thing before.

The words followed Gotam back to his house like the night above him. He'd already been to America once; he'd visited a factory-management conference in Chicago. Everything had been organized for him, and he hadn't seen much of the country. He'd gone from taxi to meeting to hotel and back again. But he'd been just fine.

Dr. Ahuja was probably wrong about a daughter, too. Perhaps she'd seen Gotam's future child, or perhaps he'd be charitable and take in an orphan beneficiary. Multitudes of women smiled when he spoke to them; eventually he'd marry one and prove the astrologer a fraud.

Priya was the only American that Gotam had ever slept with. And that had been many months ago. She would have contacted him by now.

The nightclub was ushering in a line of people as he passed it; the neon sign of the woman left a mark on his eyes when he looked away. What if he did have a child that he didn't know about? And what else had the astrologer said—that his daughter was like him? Gotam wondered if the baby had killed Priya when it was born—if it had been born—just like he'd killed his mother.

Speculation swam through his mind as he reached his house, lifted himself up the

steps and unlocked the door. He frowned as he dropped his keys onto the kitchen counter and reached out for the phone. What could he do? There was nothing. He had no number to call. He let his hand drop.

He picked up the astrology book that had started it all. Its pages were wavy from being damp, and it took up more space than it should have.

“Hindu bullshit.” He may have been a poor Catholic, but he belonged nowhere else.

Gotam carried the book all the way to the beach, picking through shell shards and broken bottles to the sand's wet edge. He couldn't see anything except the stars. What did the stars know? They couldn't predict his life.

He dug his nails into the firm sand floor. Grit pushed under them and lodged itself there angrily, but Gotam didn't mind.

He dug until there was a crater, big enough to squat inside, and then wedged the book into the bottom. He pushed the sand back into place. The tide would come in and drown the thing, along with his doubts.

Gotam didn't bother to brush the granules off his arms as he walked the two miles back to his apartment door, kicked off his sandals and rolled onto his bed.

The sand was Gotam's only reminder of the hottest day of the hottest summer on record, and he chose to treat it as if it had never happened.

## Call of the Wild

*The edges of a city are like the edges of a leaf*, Lee thought; dying has to start somewhere. When the sun begins to cook the corners, too much oomph for the chlorophyll to take in, the plant begins to burn. With a jerk of his arm, he pulled his suitcase onto the escalator.

*Dearest Evelyn,*

*They named the child after you. Turns out it's a girl.*

Death travels systematically along the veins, major roads, and busy markets, until it's sucked dry the juice from the ink-black ribosomes and permeated the heart of the leaf. Just like any city; the leaf falls. The tree barely notices. And his son had chosen this leaf to nest in, a leaf in the middle of the jungle.

Lee was sure that he'd landed in the decaying part of the city. *What a strange place to put an airport*. If he were in charge, he'd have given it a good pruning. Make way for the fresh and fragrant. The terminal would open up onto India Gate, or the alien petals of the Lotus Temple. He enjoyed presentation. Anything was more presentable than dust.

As it was, Lee stood in the center of the widened curb, batting flies away from his nostrils though it was ten o'clock at night and well past fly retirement. His eyes were dry from the flight and his creaky eyelids did nothing to fend off the heat. There was a breeze, but the air that it pushed around was hot.

*I am going to see her, the new Evelyn. You'd be excited to travel. What if I die here? I suppose I'll leave everything to Ellis, that's what you'd want.*

He might have thought to wear something more practical than a woolen suit, but Lee was not the kind of person to wear anything else. Even on Sunday mornings he'd

have the *Richmond Times* propped open on his suited knee, looking like he had an important itinerary. He'd kept this up even after his wife had died.

Now that his itinerary involved navigating this charred city, Lee was hesitant. He did not want to meet his granddaughter.

There was something wrong with the night, too. Either the air was murky or Lee needed to clean his contacts. He smeared the last of his eye drops into his eyes, but the haze didn't go away. When Lee tilted his head back down and let the fluid run like tears, he noticed a gathering.

They were all shorter than him by at least a head, all with hard limbs that grew out from their billowing shirts. One of the younger ones patted Lee's arm before he could pull it back.

"Tea, sahib?" The man used one bony finger to point to a cart with peeling yellow paint.

Lee hadn't had caffeine since his layover; he'd been brushing his teeth when the stewardesses had served drinks.

"Why not," said Lee. "I'll have a cup."

"Twenty rupees." The vendor's teeth were outlined by orange residue.

Lee shuffled crisp yellow notes aside in his wallet. They dragged like autumn leaves between his fingers, and all bore the face of Gandhi. A smart man. At least they knew a smart man when they saw one. Although his loincloth was in poor taste.

"Did you say twenty, or two hundred?"

The man laughed, a sound like an oven buzzer.

"Twenty-only!" He said it as one word.

"I have five hundred notes. I need change."

"No change." The man had that sharp and enduring bad breath, the kind that doesn't go away after brushing. Tobacco and something that bordered sweet and sour.

"Five hundred rupees is fifteen dollars. I'm not paying that for some tea." Lee eyed the cart, which had a stack of tiny paper cups hanging from the small red roof. "Looks like a fairy cup anyway."

He made to turn away, but fingers had hooked into the flesh of his sleeve. His eyes met black ones, panther irises that sat in yellow globes.

"Okay, sahib, have change. Fifty rupees."

"You said twenty."

"This is special. Indian tea," the man said.

No tea was as special as Earl Grey. There was a trick to tea that Lee knew; one had to let the bag sit just right on the water and sink down in its own time. It was the only way to achieve the full-bodied taste. It was marriage.

There was nothing quite as relaxing as a cup of tea—the first virgin sip—he liked to imagine the stained hands that had pulled the tea leaves from their stems, just for him.

This twiggy asshole was the middleman, the one who got to profit from the tea. The one who could jack up the price. Those lined teapicker hands doubtfully saw enough money to sustain the body they extended from. But tea was panacea, and if Lee could find it here, on the sharp rind of the dying city, then perhaps it wasn't as uncouth as he had presumed.

*They believe in reincarnation here. Maybe I'll find you, reborn. Maybe you're the new baby Evelyn.*

"All right, fifty. But I need the change." The back of Lee's throat was hardening into a fossil.

The little gathering moved like resettling fruit flies as the tea man prepared a set of cups. The flimsy paper dribbled its liquid down Lee's left hand, gluing his wedding ring to his knuckle. He took a sip.

"This is different." It infused his mind with sweetness.

After he'd hit his throat with two cups Lee felt heavy, as if suddenly the liquid from two small paper cups was a milky ocean in his neck. It was warm against his tongue; it whitewashed his taste buds and left scented memories hanging.

"Mmm, good-tea yes?" The black eyes were earnest.

*Was it good?* Lee assessed. What if it was poisoned and these men were going to steal his passport? What if the milk wasn't pasteurized, what if Lee got tuberculosis? Or he might wrench vomit out of his gut for five days straight, might drift in and out of consciousness like a waif, spend his visit in a hospital gown in a room filled with flies and a creaky ceiling fan. His last smell might be the smell of this place.

But Lee felt good. He'd never dressed tea in such a way, with spice and sugar and milk. Maybe they didn't take out the fat from the cow's milk, or process it through tubes of metal before it hit his lips. Maybe it was real milk straight from a real cow, squeezed into a pail and dragged onto a tea cart.

"Good tea," he said.

"Chai."

"Sorry?"

"Is chai."



The man pointed to the painted side of his cart, where Lee could read the homemade words "TEA MAN." The man then pointed to curlicued squiggles that grew out of one horizontal line, like rebellious leaves on a tree branch. Hindi writing. The brown finger pointed to this figure again, tracing each sound.

"Chai," he said.

"Okay, chai. Very nice flavor, Thank you."

Lee wasn't tired. He'd become creaky from the plane, a straight thirteen-hour flight from Chicago to Delhi, but he wasn't looking forward to being shut in a guest bedroom at his son's house for a sleep that he didn't need. He might walk awhile.

*Sometimes I feel that you're not even there. Are you listening?*

Besides, Lee was used to solitude. He explored. In Virginia he'd sail his shining car through the night, letting his whim steer. It had been this way for three years. Lee found that he enjoyed more time alone, almost as if his wife's death had cut him off from the world. He felt a quietness now that he couldn't shake, a silence that wouldn't perform for anyone.

He turned to face the terminal doors with their fluid stream of people, so much hair and cloth and skin. So much chatter. He turned back to the tea vendor and his friends.

"From where can I get a taxi?"

"These men all taxi," the vendor said.

One of them stepped forward.

"This way." He gestured to a black car, its model reminding Lee of an older world ruled by the British. These people needed a kick into modernity.

Lee sat in the front seat, despite the driver's protests.

The man was young and drove like it. He gyrated the car between trucks and around bends; all Lee saw of the city were colors faded in the darkness.

India. Smelled like— Tasted like— Sounded like— it was its own beast. It was the elephant that the blind men tried to label, it was a writhing crop of dry-and-moist and earthy-and-oily and sweet-and-stabbing flesh, an entire collection of skin issues on one large animal.

Lee stopped the driver at the gated entrance of his son's neighborhood. He didn't want them to see him on the street and pull him into their bright living room. He didn't want to hug his son, didn't want to be offered Priya's poorly-cooked food. He didn't want to see Evelyn's replacement, the child that all the fuss was about.

So once he'd paid the driver Lee began to walk, slowly so that his suitcase wheels were quiet. The yellow light from the streetlamps gave him a cape of shadow.

The projector light cast the world in reminiscence. Shapes and shadows had familiar washes, and Lee was taken back to a film he'd seen. Evelyn had turned to him and was chattering, happy to be taken to the movies. They'd been younger then, maybe about forty-five, and her face was pulled more up than down. Popcorn traveled across the carpet as it missed the dark mark of her mouth.

"We should go to one of these places," she was saying, and pointed to the forested screen. "Out into the wild, into the jungle!" Onscreen were ants as big as Lee's thumb, a bloodthirsty Aztec tribe, and crocodiles churning the river water.

Lee shook his head. Evelyn didn't understand the safety of knowing laws, of having a rifle in a safe place in the closet, of telephones and able policemen. Where were the cops in this jungle? Evelyn had wanted to go anyway.

"Africa or India" she'd said, because they were "the most in touch with nature."

*Does dying hurt?*

Now Lee had come to the jungle alone. He wasn't wearing a safari shirt and cargo shorts, though he wished now that he'd brought some. His woolen pants gathered the heat in their columns and held it captive. His knees pined for a breeze. His suit jacket was starting to smell like his armpits, a smell that Lee hadn't experienced in years. He peeled it off. *That's better*, he thought.

The street vibrated with an insect orchestra, each voice coming together in one supreme tone. Other than that, all was still, perhaps preserved by this unending note.

The street looped around an oval park like a massive cul de sac. The houses pressed their shining faces towards the park, gathering around it like animals at a watering hole, mouths gleaming white with thirst. Nothing moved.

And then something did, a black cutout that swooped across the sky like a shadow without a source. Lee crouched and almost fell; it took a moment before he realized that it was a fruit bat or an owl, a regular monster of the night that meant him no harm.

*One has to be careful in a place like this.* But danger existed everywhere. His own wife had simply fallen asleep, perhaps dreaming, perhaps dreaming of places like this.

Lee turned his head back towards the park. Something in the air had changed. He could sense energy lurking behind clay pots and iron spikes, ducking around pillars or darting under the cover of banana leaves. Lee felt a prickle along his neck, as if someone had come close enough to stroke his smallest hairs. He knew there should be a sound there, in the silence, and clenched his jaw while trying to listen.

The insect screams held Lee's heartbeats taught.

And suddenly they were there: flitting through the trees, smoky silhouettes in the submarine light. They were speaking to each other in barks and beeps, a language Lee couldn't understand. They had surrounded him. He crouched.

The way they moved—it wasn't natural.

They attacked.

Lee did not die. The aftermath stung, and he was bloodied. One of their little bodies was limp at his feet; he'd somehow snapped its neck and the rest had run away, shrieking.

His skin was covered in holes. They weren't bleeding yet, just opened to the air. He felt as if the wind flowed through him.

Something had been punctured when the first monkey bit. Something had been let out.

"Ow," he said. "Oww." It came out as a moan, and it kept coming. It was unhappiness.

He threw back his head and unstuck a bellow, not caring that he'd wake the neighborhood. The sound was relentless. It poured from him into the night. Dogs joined him and car alarms set off. Window lights came on and people shouted at the street.

Lee howled for hours, so that when the Muslim priest started his call to prayer over the loudspeaker, not a single person heard. For the next week, newspapers reported sirens, an escaped lion, a terrorist attack, an elephant stampede, anything that could explain the mysterious call of the wild.

Ellis and Priya had found Lee that morning, collapsed beside the soft monkey corpse. His bites were treated in the hospital, and he remained bedridden for the entire

week of his visit. But Lee did not mind. He was handed his granddaughter in the hospital bed as if he were a new mother, and hugged her to his chest.

She howled in complaint.

“Oh, sorry, let me take her back,” said Priya, but Lee just smiled.

## **Khatama, Finished**

From the kitchen, the woman on the television sounded to Priya like she was dying a drawn out, strangled death. Priya couldn't tell what she was singing about so astringently— perhaps she was being coy as she refused one suitor for another.

Priya poked her head into the living room, and the sound became pinched, a voice compressed by nasal passageways. Priya's daughter Evie had thrown less abrasive fits when she was a toddler. The backs of three heads blocked the screen: Evie's, Dodi Nana's and Karan's. The old woman and the boy had a curious non-glow about them, as if they were made of something heavier than flesh.

When Priya returned to the kitchen her onions were charred. So used to kitchen upsets, she barely swore, barely clanged her spoon as she salvaged what she could. After a few scrapes, she put the entire pan in the sink. What was the point of cooking? She didn't know if Dodi Nana even tasted things anymore.

The old woman and her servant boy had shown up at Priya's doorstep the night before, giving her quite a shock. In a daze she'd knelt at her grandmother's feet and brought her hand gently to her forehead in pranaam; *I am deferent*. The boy had touched Priya's own feet and she'd shuffled them in from the rain. In the incandescent light of the threshold, she'd seen them clearly. Priya had cupped the soft part of her tummy with her hand and had been wracked by nausea; the two had died eight years ago. Had she been mistaken?

"You're ghosts!" she'd exclaimed. But Dodi Nana was more solid than she'd been before, and Karan translated her animated story into English.

Dodi Nana said she'd waded through the swamps; she'd trekked across Western

Asia and much of Europe before dropping into the cool Atlantic. She hadn't realized that even ghosts are heavier than water.

"I dropped like a stone into a well and fell until I reached the bottom," she said.

Miraculously, her sense of direction and the currents had brought her to Priya within a few years. The worst part was nearing the shore. She told Priya how the waters had swirled salty grease around her eyes so that she was walking blind, and the muck had trapped her ankles.

Karan spoke of the turbid Atlantic waters. They'd had to hold hands for much of the way for fear of being scattered apart into the abyss. They'd worked together to cross the ridge, a colossal trench that threatened an eternity of being lost. Columns of charred minerals had flown up from cracks in the rock, reminding the pair of the incense sticks they'd left behind in the shrine room. Dodi Nana's sari had caught endlessly on the ballooning seabed, and she'd lost both her chappals in their first day underwater. Luckily, ghosts have a talent for seeing through darkness. They smiled together, sitting on the living room settee and smelling of fish.

"Beti kahan hai?" Dodi Nana had looked around the room, at eight p.m., for her great-granddaughter. The last time she'd seen Evie, the little girl had been a year old.

"She's at a friend's house, Dodi Nana," Priya had spoken as if the ghost were deaf. "She'll be back tomorrow morning...ah, abhi nahi. Tomorrow."

She'd upset the dead woman on her couch, as if by some divine knowledge she'd been meant to prepare for her grandmother's arrival and she'd fallen short. Dodi Nana's face went slack.

"Oh," she said, trying English. "Teek. Dhomorrow." Priya became suddenly very

conscious of the gouache nude that hung behind her.

Why hadn't the family called ahead? Did they know that their matriarch had crossed half of the Earth, stopping in Virginia for a visit? Priya resolved to call her cousin as soon as she'd entertained the ghosts.

"Well, I only have one spare bedroom, so Karan will have to sleep on the floor."

"Haahn, teek heh." Dodi Nana tilted her head in acceptance.

"And there isn't much space in that closet," said Priya, thinking of her winter coats.

"Teek, teek." Dodi Nana hadn't brought anything but the battered sari she'd died in.

"And we set the alarm at night, so no opening windows or venturing out."

More head tilts.

There was a silence. The worry uncreased itself from Priya's forehead.

"Dodi Nana," she said. "Did it hurt to die?" Her grandmother's rickshaw had been mowed down by a bus. "What happened to you?"

Dodi Nana shook her head.

"Nothing has changed yet," Karan translated for her, and nodded in agreement.

Later that night, Priya called her closest cousin.

"Rita," she hesitated. "Dodi nana is here."

"Kya?" Rita said. *What?* Her voice crackled and barely assembled in Priya's ear.

She'd moved back to India after she'd gotten married, and now she lived in Calcutta with her husband and two sons. "The connection is bad, I don't understand you."

Priya described the ghosts and felt her cousin's hysteria building.



“Priya, do you have medicine you need to take?”

Priya sighed. “No, I’m not hallucinating.”

“Did you notice their feet? Are they backwards?”

“Not when I said pranaam.” Dodi nana had looked like any other living person, perhaps a little more substantial.

“And you’re sure it’s our grandmother? It could be a joke.”

“It’s her. Karan is here too.”

“Where’s your husband?” Since she’d been married, Rita had gotten into the habit of referring to people by their relationships.

“He’s in Delhi, visiting Nabil.” Ellis was still keen on his exporting business. “He won’t be back until next week.”

“Where’s the bhut now, what did you do with the ghost?”

“She’s sleeping.”

“Outside?”

“In the guest bed.”

Rita was aghast. “You let her into your house? Bhaapre. So inauspicious, and on a new moon night!”

“I couldn’t leave them, it’s raining.”

“Are you afraid?” Priya checked herself. In life, Dodi nana had been the family’s matriarch, bearing crises in waves, like a stone withstanding a river. For Priya she was the link to the rest of the family, the one who had taken over when Priya’s parents had both succumbed to malaria. Dodi nana was the mother of mothers. The family had fallen apart without her; now there was no hub, and everyone battled their troubles alone.

“No, I’m not afraid,” Priya said. She repeated Dodi nana’s words. “Nothing has changed with her.” If anyone could fight death in such a way, it was her grandmother.

“Good. They can smell fear like dogs. Be careful of possession.”

“I don’t think Dodi nana’s going to—”

“We did the ceremony, Dodi nana has moved on. This is an evil spirit. Do you want me to call an exorcist?”

Priya hesitated; Rita was more an authority on supernatural matters. She knew more about the cycle of life and reincarnation and purgatory. She prayed to Krishna every day. But she hadn’t seen the crow’s feet that had appeared when the ghost smiled, and she hadn’t felt the warmth of her skin.

“No. I’ll figure it out.”

Priya continued to think about her grandmother’s answer into the night. Did they come back for a reason? She’d never known anyone who had experienced death, except for a boy in high school who’d been struck by lightning. He’d told everyone that he’d been dead for a minute before the paramedics could revive him. “No brain activity,” he’d said. He’d described going into darkness, simply ceasing to exist.

Dodi nana and Karan had died quickly, but their death was violent. The policeman said that the bicycle rickshaw had tangled their bodies together, and the man cycling them along had disappeared beneath the bus. In one moment, the old woman and the boy who served her were simply removed from the world. It seemed conceivable enough that in another, they could simply have returned.

When Priya fell asleep, her dreams were fitful, and everyone in them walked

around with backwards feet.

In the grey light of the morning the ghosts were still there. Priya found Karan perched on the edge of the couch, knees together and back straight, the TV remote held by both hands as if he didn't know how to relax. He was watching a car chase with the volume turned down, and when Priya shifted in the silence he jumped. The TV went dark.

Karan offered her the remote.

"It's okay," she said. "You can watch." His eyes were so dark she couldn't see his pupils; he was something impenetrable. He'd died and had crossed an ocean and was still content watching TV—she was mystified.

The car chase flickered on again, and a truck was eaten by flames. Karan didn't blink.

"Are you okay watching this?" Priya asked. "You can change the channel."

The ghost tilted his head in a shake. "I like this."

Dodi Nana was wiping dishes with a foreign rag found in some nether part of the kitchen. She made endless circles with the cloth, pulling it around and leaving soapy records before replacing them again. She did this for a long minute and then rinsed the entire thing away, turning towards Priya.

"Please, Dodi nana, you're a guest here." Priya would have cleaned a little more if she'd anticipated company. Instead she'd been drinking a few glasses of wine and was wondering if the house would feel quite as empty when Evie grew up.

"Khatama," Dodi nana said. *Finished*. She put her hands up in the air and the suds

traveled to her wrists.

Priya was tempted to ask her grandmother if she'd traveled from India simply to check up on her and wash her dishes. Maybe ghosts returned to do chores.

The doorbell rang twice without a resting beat. By the time Priya made it to the living room, Karan had already pulled the door back to reveal Evie, framed and collecting morning light.

Behind her daughter, Priya could see a flash of waving palm and a navy station wagon disappearing down the lane.

"Hi, sweetheart," she said.

"Who's this?" Evie pulled her backpack off and stared at Karan. "Do I have a brother I don't know about?"

Dodi nana cried out.

"Eebee!" She held out her arms and trundled forward like a zombie.

"Mom, who are these people?" Evie still hadn't moved from the doorway, and from behind her a breeze pricked at Priya's bare feet.

"This is your great-grandmother and her servant boy, Karan."

Dodi nana reached the doorway and pressed Evie to her bosom. Her hands were still wet. "Mera sundar beti," she said. Evie stood still and tolerated the ghost's embrace rigidly. She stared at Priya from beneath Dodi nana's armpit, eyes widened in accusation.

"They came for a surprise visit, all the way from India!"

Priya wanted her daughter to say pranaam, but she couldn't remember if she'd taught Evie how. What did Dodi nana think of Priya's daughter, with her tangled hair and

thin knees showing? What was Priya's parenting like, dislocated as she was from the rest of the family? Maybe Dodi nana had come to make sure that Evie was turning into a nice Indian girl.

An hour after they'd met, the three were watching TV together. Priya had found a lonely Hindi channel amongst the clutter of sports and religion and switched it on. While her charges were entertained, Priya decided to impress Dodi nana by making lunch. She'd wanted to prove that her household was more Indian than it seemed, but the onions had charred in the skillet and she'd given in to pasta with peas from a can.

"Mom, Karan said he's dead." Evie had crept into the kitchen like something of a specter herself. Priya turned around, a can in her hand.

"He said that Dodi nana's dead, too, they got hit by a bus and their skulls were crushed down into their guts."

"He didn't say that!"

"He didn't say the last part, but I think that's what happens when you get hit by a bus."

"Well, how can they be dead? They're watching TV."

Evie was too smart.

"I asked that. He said they're still waiting for their next life, and they wanted to visit us first."

They still believed in reincarnation. Priya had thought that the ghosts might be less religious in death.

"I don't know what's going to happen, sweetie," she said. "Just be nice to them while they're here."

When Priya couldn't find any pasta in the pantry, she decided to take Evie and the ghosts to the supermarket.

The ghosts took a long time to get ready, just like the living did. Dodi nana emerged sopping from the bathroom, evidently having bathed and put her sari back on without drying. It was a habit of the grandmother's to avoid nakedness, as if her natural state was being shrouded. She moved down the hall slowly, leaving the floor looking rained-upon.

"Dodi nana, you can't wear wet clothes in my car," Priya said, glancing at her cherry wood floors. Last time she'd visited the family home in India, there'd been perpetual water trails around the kitchen and the bathrooms. "Everything's not made of marble here."

Motioning to her grandmother to stand still, Priya opened the door to the guest bedroom. Other than the water, the room seemed unaffected by the ghosts. The bed was made— had Dodi nana even slept in it? She pushed aside the winter coats in the closet and grappled with fabrics she couldn't see. Dodi nana wouldn't wear a simple t-shirt or sweatpants; dignity equated a sari. Priya would give her grandmother one of the only two saris she owned in a sort of reverse inheritance. They were for formal occasions, made of silk that crunched when she sat on it.

"Nay." Dodi nana was standing silently behind Priya, shaking her head. "Nay," she repeated. Priya offered her the peach cloth. "Nay," Dodi nana pushed it back; she wouldn't take it.

"Please, Dodi nana, I don't get the chance to wear it anyway." Priya had actually never worn the sari; Dodi nana had given it to her when she'd gotten married to Ellis

twelve years earlier. At that time she'd taken it with halfhearted thanks, knowing that her future as a Western wife would never merit any occasion to wear such things. It was too foreign for a fancy dinner, and too fancy for a costume party. Even in India the outfit seemed inappropriate for Priya, as everyone would have tried to speak to her in the mother tongue that she had forgotten.

Dodi nana struggled with the words.

"Por you," she said. "Dodi nana...khatama." *Finished*. The ghost waved her hand as if she were waving her life away and a drop wobbled on the heel of her palm. She wiped it onto the purple cotton of her own sari.

Their entire relationship had been acted out in this way; sentences poorly translated, meanings warped, gestures taking the place of conversations. Dodi nana's gestures had been generous. She'd sent money and provided the newlyweds with household appliances. She'd padded relatives with gifts for Priya when they made the journey to America. She used them as her agents, through them paying for dinners and plane tickets, clothes for Evie and lockable suitcases.

"For when you come to India," she'd said in Rita's voice.

But Priya hadn't returned to the family home in Calcutta since she'd left it as a child. It had been up to Dodi nana to visit her after Evie was born. They'd been living in New Delhi at the time, Ellis still hopeful about his entrepreneurial export business. He'd been baffled when Priya had decided not to make the overnight train journey to her parents' city.

"Come on, honey, she's old. Traveling is a lot harder for her," he'd said. "And

she's already got those calloused feet."

"I can't take the baby to that place."

She remembered looking down at the puffy little forehead, worry lines mirroring her own. "Do you want her to die from malaria like my parents?"

So Dodi nana had made the journey from Calcutta to Delhi, bringing only Karan and one suitcase with her. She'd stayed for three days, and Priya was so consumed by the newborn Evie that she'd hardly noticed her grandmother. That was the last time they'd seen each other; Priya had moved back to Virginia and then Dodi nana was hit by the bus.

"I wasn't thankful, was I?" Priya said to the ghost. Dodi nana stared back blankly. "Here, please wear this." She offered the sari again. Dodi nana shook her head, and Priya gave up.

She lay down towels in the passenger seat of her car and strapped her damp grandmother in. Karan and Evie sat next to each other in the back, and Evie assailed the boy with questions about the ocean floor, sea creatures, and how it was possible that he could breathe underwater.

As she was backing the car out of the driveway, Priya's phone rang. It was Rita.

"Is it still there?" Rita asked.

Priya looked across at Dodi nana.

"Yes."

"Okay. Remember my friend Diksha?"

"Mm-hmm."

Rita's voice became excited. "Well, her uncle knows a holy man where you are and



he's agreed to perform rituals to banish the ghost."

"She's not doing any harm."

"Evil can work slowly, infiltrate trust," Rita's voice was low and foreboding. "I gave him your address. He's going to visit this afternoon."

"Rita!" Priya's passengers jumped. "You can't tell people where I live!"

Rita was dismissive. "Oh hush, he's practically family. I have to go, I'm cooking. Call me when he arrives." Priya swore when Rita hung up.

"Mom?" Evie prodded Priya's shoulder.

"Quiet," Priya muttered. "I have to think." She clutched the steering wheel and frowned behind her sunglasses. Would she trust the living or the dead? She looked across at the ghost of her ancestor. Dodi nana's hair had a halo of frizz from the drying top layer. She hadn't brushed it. Priya hadn't offered her a hairbrush, and Dodi nana had never asked for one. She never asked for anything at all.

"Okay, we're going out for the day," Priya said, looking at the twin expressions in the rearview mirror. She turned in her seat. "Should we show them the mall?" Evie gave a whoop. "And eat at the food court, what do you think?" Evie whooped again. Priya pulled the car along the concrete shoulder of the highway. She didn't know if she believed in evil forces. Ghosts were just unattended spirits— maybe they needed a push. Dodi nana muttered something.

"Nana-ji is asking if you're scared of us," said Karan.

"Scared?" Two of Priya's passengers had quiet hearts; she was at least a little unnerved. "I'm not scared. I just want to know why you're here." Karan smiled when he relayed Dodi nana's reply.

“Do we need a reason to visit family?”

“Well.” Priya couldn’t argue without sounding bratty. “But why haven’t you been reincarnated?”

“We wanted to visit you, that’s all.” The boy was increasingly answering for the grandmother, as if their minds were connected. “We wanted to see where you live.” They were quiet for the rest of the ride. The ghosts’ heads turned to follow buildings and streets, trees that were foreign to them.

Evie jumped out as soon as they’d parked.

“Can we go to the game store?” she asked.

“After we have lunch. I’m starving.” Priya’s hands shook and she wondered if it had been the right decision to bring the ghosts here, in public. But no one would notice. Their eeriest quality was their normalcy; they squinted in the bright sunlight like humans.

“Everyone stay close to me, or I’ll make you hold hands,” Priya said. She heard Evie groan. “I’m serious. What would I tell security if I lost one of you?” She imagined the ghosts showing up as orbs on security film.

“Where are all the people?” asked Karan as the doors slid open for them. There a few shoppers dotting the large hall, some resting shopping bags against cushioned chairs, others weaving in and out of shops. The food court was bustling with young teens.

“This is as full as it gets,” Priya said. “It’s not like Indian markets.” It was true—she seldom worried about what her feet might have stepped on, and never had no elbow her way to the storefronts. The mall was almost tranquil by comparison, with its elevator music and its cold air.

“Oh.” Karan, who had crossed the northern reaches of two continents on foot,

seemed impressed by vast and lonely space. “So much room,” he said.

“What about the Lotus temple?” Priya asked, setting her purse down on an empty table. “That’s enormous! Or that big hall in the Presidential Residence.” She remembered taking guided tours in Delhi.

Karan frowned. “But those places are not just for buying things.” He held a plastic chair out for Dodi nana to sit in.

“The mall isn’t just for buying things either,” said Evie, fishing in Priya’s purse for some money. “There’s also food.” She pulled a ten-dollar bill from Priya’s wallet and ran to her favorite burger place.

“What do you want to eat?” Priya asked the ghosts. “We can go to any of these. There are great kebabs here.”

Karan looked from Dodi nana to Priya and back again.

“Is there any pure vegetarian food here?”

“There are salads and stuff,” said Priya. “What do you mean pure?”

“Untouched by meat.”

She frowned. “Usually they keep things pretty separate.” That ruled out kebabs.

“Even the stoves?”

“Even the stoves—you mean separate stoves for meat and vegetables?”

“Yes.”

Priya shook her head. “Then no, it’s not going to be separate.” She tried to picture the pimply teens behind the counter thinking about the foods on their menu that might be vegetarian. She doubted they’d even consider lard in the ranch dressing or rennet in the cheese. “Does it matter so much?”

Karan nodded. “Of course. We don’t believe in eating meat. But all okay,” He made a small wave with his hand. “We will go without lunch.”

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“We are ghosts. We do not need food.”

Priya’s stomach growled. Could she eat kebabs in front of her guests?

“How can you still have beliefs?” she snapped. “You are dead and meant to know everything by now.”

Karan shrugged. “That too is a belief.”

Priya gripped her wallet so that the skin of her palm stretched taught against the leather. Alive or dead, was it possible that people were the same?

“You have no more wisdom now, after going through death? You don’t know who God is, or if there is a God?”

Karan shook his head and said, once again, “Nothing has changed.”

“Then I’m getting some damn kebabs,” she said and marched off.

The videogame store that Evie led them to was dimly lit and had life-sized cutouts of various gruesome characters. Priya had still confined her daughter to games with bright colors and soft contours, no guns and few cheap scares; but she had a feeling that gorier premises wouldn’t faze Evie. Indeed, when Priya turned she found Evie inspecting a half-decayed cardboard zombie.

“Hey Karan, it’s you!” Evie joked, pointing to the grey figure.

“Evie, don’t talk like that. He’s sensitive.”

The ghost-boy stared at the zombie, which waved under the AC vent. He was

nothing like the creature. He was warm, and hesitant.

“Most people think dead things that come back are evil.” Priya said, putting a hand on Karan’s bony shoulder. “But they also believe in good ones. They just call them angels.”

“He’s not an angel,” Evie said. “He doesn’t have a halo, or wings.”

Priya glared at Evie. “You never know,” she said. “He could be one.” She was constantly baffled by the defiance of the little girl that had sprouted from her.

“And he didn’t come from Heaven either. Did you?” Evie was restless, shifting her weight from one foot to another and back again.

“No.” Karan was glum. “I came from India only.”

“Are you looking at any game in particular?” They jumped. The store clerk was behind them, pulling at the hairs of his goatee. He glanced at Karan.

“Yes, I want Wishing Apples 2,” Evie replied.

The man motioned for Evie to follow him. “Which console?” Priya heard him ask before she turned back to Karan.

He was just a boy, and had only been twelve or thirteen when his life ended. And for a good portion of it, he’d had to follow orders. Dodi nana had treated him well, but Priya wondered what he might have done if he’d been able to make his own choices.

“Karan, it doesn’t matter what you are,” she said. The boy’s large eyes didn’t leave the cutout. Priya patted his shoulder. “You’re still living,” she said. “In a way. You crossed the ocean! Who else gets to do that?” Karan gave a small nod. “Now let me pay for Evie’s game, and then we can go to the gardens. It’s too nice to be inside.”

The sun had dried up the storm from the previous night, and waxy leaves shone from the hedges. Next to the parking lot was a small path, winding through carefully groomed shrubbery. Priya's favorite part of the garden was the center, which harbored a stone fountain. She always dipped her hand in it, and the water was always cold.

The ghosts seemed happier outside, too. Dodi nana sat on a bench by the path and tilted her face towards the sun. Though the rest of her hair was rolled into a bun, the top of her head radiated with wisps like a medieval halo. She spoke.

"She says that we didn't see the sun for a long time," said Karan. Evie was walking the circumference of the fountain, arms out for balance. "Sometimes we would see flashes of light, strange fish that glowed, but otherwise all was dark."

"How did you know where you were going?"

Karan shook his head. "Somehow. We just knew."

Priya brushed her fingers along the wood panels of the bench. She had so many questions, and the ghosts didn't seem to be able to answer. Dodi nana spoke again.

"Some things are okay as a mystery, she says." The old woman looked weathered, with lines that ran deep into her face. The sandals she had borrowed from Priya were strapped gently to her feet, their texture smoother than hers, newer than hers. She was like a marble carving. And then Priya noticed that she was missing a toe.

"Dodi nana! What happened to your foot?" Priya bent down to inspect it. "Oh my god, you really have lost a toe!" One of Dodi nana's smallest toes was gone; in its place the skin was roughly hewn. There was no blood.

"How did this happen?" asked Priya, looking around for the digit.

Karan looked at the foot. He and Dodi nana mumbled in Hindi.

“They *are* like zombies!” Evie had skipped over to investigate. She saw Priya’s face. “Well, a little bit,” she said.

“Does it hurt?” Priya asked. Dodi nana shook her head.

“We think we are falling apart,” Karan said, holding out his hand. He held a loose index finger, slightly crooked like a spider’s limb, and showed the gap where it had connected. Priya looked up at them, their faces solemn. “It seems to be the natural way of things.”

“But this,” Priya tapped the space where Dodi nana’s toe was. “This is your soul. Your bodies were cremated. How can your soul fall apart?”

Karan shook his head again. “I do not know.”

Priya thought he might be frightened. A young boy, dealing with his own death!

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’ll keep you both in the house, safe. We can wrap you in blankets and make sure you don’t move too much. You can just rest in front of the TV.”

“No.” Karan’s face was determined. “It is the natural way of things.”

Dodi nana’s expression was soft, benevolent. Her skin was warm from baking in the sun, and she pulled Priya back onto the bench with firm hands. She said something.

“She says that it was never our plan to stay very long.”

Dodi nana reached her hand out for Evie and spoke again.

“She says that she wanted to see her great-granddaughter, the future of her blood.”

She pulled Evie onto her lap. Evie was awkward but complied, and the four of them sat together on the bench. Dodi nana squeezed Priya’s hand, and Karan translated her final thoughts.

“She says, too, that she is proud of you both.” They were all silent, and let the

calming slap of the fountain blur their thoughts.

Priya would let them go. *They are of nature*, she thought, as dead as rock can be dead, as able to vanish as any substance. They would change form maybe, crumble into dust, separate in the wind and then disperse. Maybe Priya would exist like that someday.

They would become part of the sand that Evie played in, they'd fuel the trees that she climbed, they'd bury into the groundwater that she drank. They would continue to be a part of the world that Priya and her daughter lived in, even if they couldn't be sensed. They were endless.



## **In Transit**

From the very first bite of his stir-fried rice, Gotam noticed that the girl to his right was watching him. By his second bite, she was smiling. She seemed familiar. She was about eight or nine and had been short enough for him to read the menu while he stood behind her in line.

She'd gotten the noodles, he the rice.

His rice wasn't what he'd wanted—he was used to slender basmati that rolled as smoothly as the white planes outside, long and individual. In his carton he'd found stubbly grains that clung together in a glutinous mass, stained brown by the soya sauce. Even the egg had been stained, even the broccoli. He felt the oil coating his stomach already, blocking any nutrition that might be hiding within the clump.

She was some sort of Southeast Asian, with almond eyes that stared him down without reservation. Her hair was the same pithy black as his, except that it fell straight around her ears and reflected the blue light of the flight screens. His would never reflect; it was as much as he could do to get it from rising into a dark cloud above his head, especially after eighteen hours in the stale plane air. As usual, he was sweating.

“Are the noodles good?” he asked. If he could get her to speak, he'd remember why he recognized her.

She wiped brown noodle juice from her lips. “They're okay,” she said. Her accent was American. It chirped from her and surprised Gotam, as if a bird were speaking. Maybe he didn't know her after all.

“I should have gotten those instead.” He showed her his food. “My rice is terrible. They can't cook Chinese very well here.”

The girl shrugged. "I don't like Chinese food anyway."

Gotam glanced at her. She was definitely Asian. "What about Japanese? Or Thai?"

"I don't really like any Asian food."

She kissed her napkin and left a soya stain.

"I'm just hungry and my parents are fighting with the ticket people." She pointed to the gate 5 desk, where a tall white couple blinked at the person behind the computer. The woman adjusted and readjusted her shiny shoulder bag, and the man drummed his fingers on the counter. They both had thin lips.

"Those are your parents?" Gotam asked.

"Yep, and they're pretty angry. Our plane is late and we're supposed to be home."

"Where are you going?"

"We live in Missoula." Gotam couldn't place it. "You know, Missoula-Montana," the girl said. She was folding her napkin into a stained paper plane.

"Where are you from, originally?" Gotam picked out some scrambled egg with his fork.

"Missoula, Montana." She said it matter-of-factly, swinging her legs because they didn't reach the ground. "We went to Europe for vacation."

"But where are your real parents from? Your other ones?"

"Missoula, Montana. Those are my real parents."

Gotam frowned and pointed to himself with his fork. "Where do you think I'm from?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Where do I look like I'm from?"

“I don’t know, you could be from Missoula too.” The girl pulled out individual noodles and nibbled them like a rabbit.

“Do I sound like I’m from Missoula?”

“Maybe,” she said. And then, “Not really.”

Gotam leaned back in his chair. “I’m from Goa. Do you know where that is?”

The girl shook her head. The noodle hanging from her mouth wiggled in opposition.

“Goa is in India. I’m Indian.”

“Oh.” It didn’t seem to matter to her.

“So,” he pointed his plastic fork at himself. “I’m Indian. Are you Korean?”

“I’m Kathy,” the girl said.

Gotam stared at the girl. His heart wobbled, probably from the change of air. Goa had been so fresh, and it seemed hard to breathe in the New York airport terminal.

“Okay, you’re Kathy.”

Not that it mattered. In the airport, like in Goa, an assortment of skins and languages passed through the same halls; drank the same water. The airport was a good place to find a misfit; everyone here was one-of-a-kind. But this girl didn’t even know that she was a misfit.

The line for Chinese food had been steadily growing, and now it reached past their tables. It wore heels and knotted sweaters and had big blocky headphones. It dressed in rolls of fat and was covered in hair of every color. It had strong perfume and pants as crisp as polystyrene foam. Gotam tried to take a deep breath. It was difficult.

Kathy was pushing the nose of her plane into her mistreated noodles, where it

collected oil and onion bits.

“Look, it’s a plane crash,” she said, and crumpled the napkin on top of her food. The rice churned in Gotam’s stomach. He took more bites to quell the odd feeling in his gut—a painful hunger, perhaps.

“You’re not scared of that happening?” he asked.

“I’m not scared of anything.”

The rice was becoming hard to swallow. He tried to move it down his throat with a sip of his icy soft drink.

“But you’re so young,” he said. “What would you leave behind in the world? You haven’t made a mark.”

Her black eyes stared straight at his face. “I’d leave behind my parents,” she said. “What would you leave behind, anyway?”

Gotam realized who she reminded him of now. “My...daughter.”

The girl blinked. “You have a daughter?”

“Maybe.”

Her expression was as opaque as a parrot’s, bright and still. He didn’t know what she was thinking. Maybe she didn’t know what he was thinking, either.

“I don’t know if she’s my daughter.” He remembered the first time Priya had sent him photos of the baby girl after he’d done business with her husband. *My god*, he’d thought. *That’s my nose*.

“She has my nose.” Her name was Evelyn, after her father’s mother. Her fake father; it seemed that everyone had a fake white father.

“She doesn’t have your nose,” Kathy said, as if she could see the other girl clearly.

“What?”

“*You* have your nose. She has her own nose.”

He couldn’t tell if the girl was being difficult on purpose. She swung her feet, each with its own rhythm, so that they were uneven.

A lady was telling her son to push in front of someone, that he was little enough to convince them to let him skip. That he only wanted a dumpling or two. The line grumbled and shifted, but let him in.

“She looks like me, is what I meant.” He’d saved the folded letters, too. He reread them sometimes, when he wasn’t trying to push the girl to a place outside of his consciousness, to a cozy and untouched area of his brain where he also kept his childhood.

*Here’s our little girl, Evelyn, on her second birthday, they said. Here’s our Evie in the snow.* He’d always taken the ‘our’ to mean his, but the letters were signed Priya-and-Ellis, Priya-Ellis-and-Evelyn.

Gotam’s stomach felt rent, as if the meal were an animal that was trying to claw its way out. It burned like pre-vomit.

“So what she looks like you? Do you have to look like your parents?” Kathy’s legs had stopped their swinging.

“It’s just that she looks more like me than her other father, so I think she’s really mine.”

Kathy tilted her head as she stared at him, so that one side of her shining bob grew longer than the other. “She already has a daddy?”

“Yes.”

“Then she’s not yours. She might look like you, but she’s not. I don’t look like my daddy.”

Kathy pulled her knee up towards her chest and began to pick at a browned scab, making the edges white. “When I fell down, my daddy picked me up because he’s my daddy.”

Gotam couldn’t look away from the dark patch.

“If you don’t pick that girl up when she falls down, you’re not her daddy.” The scab was uprooting in one corner, and he could see the beginnings of a wet red drop. He’d never picked up his daughter, not once. Was she his daughter then?

“Stop that, you’re bleeding,” he said. He was going to throw up.

“It’s okay, it’ll fix itself up again.” Kathy pried the corner up with her fingernail. “Look, this is what I’m made of.” Her eyes, her hair, her blood was bright. It rolled down her knee as if it knew where to go.

“I’m going to be sick,” Gotam said.

“Why? You’re made of it too. We’re all red inside, red people with different insides like candy bars.” Evie—Kathy—stretched her leg out and turned it so the blood traveled in a different direction, making a zigzag.

“See? We’re all blood.”

Her mother had caught sight of the girl’s knee and had started to walk over to them.

“Excuse me,” Gotam said. He stood on wobbly legs. He felt his skin dripping.

The boy in line called out when Gotam pushed him aside, and someone said something about a heartless prick. He didn’t look back at the little Asian girl. The bathroom sign shone with the stick-figure of a man, as if all men were made the same.

He reached the only open toilet and didn't bother to shut the door behind him. He gripped the black plastic seat and let his knees hit the floor, where his jeans instantly soaked up cold water. Someone farted in the stall beside his. Someone flushed two stalls down.

Gotam braced himself as a heave wracked his body, triggering first in his mind and then growling up from the pit of his stomach. His eyes closed as vomit hit the toilet bowl, and when he opened them he was surprised to see that the water was red. Was he dying? He should have written a will, left the factory to someone.

Gotam wiped his mouth and spat. He looked at the toilet water again, and saw that there was no blood. He sighed. He was just imagining things again.

### **Something to Do With God**

"I had a twin, but I ate her." Evie held up the x-ray proof. She grinned at the mouths that popped into *ohs* in front of her. She liked this.

"There you can see my back, and that's my spine." She pointed out vertebrae, curving like beads on a necklace. "And right there, that's also a spine. A little baby one. That's hers."

The other kids had that look on their faces, the one you get when you have lots of saliva in your mouth right before you throw up. Signet was next to Evie, waiting for her turn to present, and she had leaned on the corner of her Native American diorama so the teepee was wilting over the campfire.

Evie pointed to the bump poking through the back of her school shirt. "If you press really hard, you can feel the shape of it a little. Doctor Reed said I swallowed the rest of her."

One of the smaller boys stuck his hand into the air. "So is she dead?" he asked.

"Of course she's dead, dumbass," another boy said, looking at Evie. "Right?" Evie shook her head.

The teacher had had enough. She interjected with a "Thomas, no swearing" and a "Thank you, Evie. Very interesting show and tell." Signet shifted up to the front table without taking her eyes off the x-ray. Her diorama fell onto the floor and broke.

They asked Evie more questions after school, while she was waiting for her mother on the front entrance steps. She usually had a following, but today it was bigger. They wanted to know about her sister.

"So she's really not dead?" The smaller boy was asking again. Evie couldn't take his



face seriously because of the two large teeth that covered his lower lip, even when his mouth was shut.

"Yeah, she's not," Evie said, using her finger to smudge little black ants into the pavement.

"So do you have conversations in your head?"

"Sometimes," Evie said. "She doesn't talk much. Mostly I get these feelings, like when she's afraid and tries to stop me. She's a wimp."

Michaela asked if Evie's twin helped her with spelling hard words. Michaela was always trying to get her own sister to take tests for her, since they looked so much alike.

"Actually, Evie's twin could only help if she had a brain." Karen was one of the smart girls. "Does she have a brain?"

Evie didn't know.

Her classmates scattered into the river of cars; there was nothing left to ask Evie, now that the twin was determined useless. Evie could see her mother waving from between a minivan and a convertible, but the wind whipped her calls in the opposite direction.

Evie's twin throbbed on her back. It wanted to get inside, to sit by the fireplace. "Alright, I'm going," she grumbled, and pulled herself up from the steps.

Evie's mother was still trying to grow her hair out. It almost brushed her shoulders now; a length that looked awkward both left down and tied up. Priya hoped to have it long, long "like the girls at the temple," she'd say, and to one day braid it all the way down to her bottom. Evie wondered what would happen if the braid grew so long that it

fell into the toilet when her mother sat down. Would it pull her with it when she flushed? Probably not. Her mother was too big.

Priya came back from the temple at five o'clock in the afternoon. It was always a whole-day affair, because it took an hour and a half to drive there and an hour and a half to drive back. And still every Saturday she went, as if she needed to prove something. She said it had something to do with God, and that Evie would understand someday. Evie didn't understand now; she didn't understand why her mother had to drive for three hours on Saturdays or why God would appreciate her geographic location. Her mother wasn't even very good at driving. She probably killed more people on her way to the temple than she saved with her prayers.

Two days earlier she'd fractured Evie's big toe while pulling out of the garage, and Evie had had to hobble around during P.E. The fat kids had overtaken her. Evie was usually fastest in the class, the one courted by the middle school track team, even though she was just a sixth grader. And then suddenly she was the slowest. She'd stumbled and the new girl had reached out to help her. Evie had pulled away from the brown hand on her own brown elbow, startled to see her eyes staring back at her from another face. Evie had sworn at the girl, pushed her. At recess she'd complained to her friends, and they'd danced around the new girl, tipping her lunch tin over and calling her Ali Baba. The food that had poured out was yellow and smelled like feet. It was like the food that Evie's mother tried to make when her grandparents visited.

"Guess what happened at the temple today, Evie," Priya said, unwinding the tight scarf on her neck. Evie guessed that Priya had found God. "Don't be silly, cupcake. You know God is everywhere."

"Well then, what happened?" Evie had unpaused her movie, and her mother had to speak over the excited voices coming from the TV. She didn't seem to mind, and sat cross-legged on the carpet next to Evie.

"I actually got to talking to one of the girls, her English is good enough, and it turns out that you go to school with one of her daughters! I've invited the family over for dinner so that we can get to know them."

Evie didn't know any Hindus at school. She wasn't even a Hindu herself—how was she supposed to recognize them?

"Is she black?"

"Evie, Hindus aren't black! She's Indian, like us."

"Like *you*. I'm American, like Dad," Evie said. "Can I just finish my movie?"

Her mother stood up to leave. She turned and said, "You're more Indian than you know."

Over the next week, Priya made arrangements. She pulled Evie by the hand through the Bangladeshi grocery store, poking at vegetables and sniffing badly wrapped boxes of curry powder. Evie watched as she slipped into a storage room at the back and had her eyebrows threaded by a woman with patches of pink skin among the brown.

They picked out tea candles and tiny clay diya pots. Priya showed Evie how to fill them with oil so that they burned for hours with bigger flames. Evie could stare at the flame until it died, and when she closed her eyes she could still see it under her lids. This was one of the rare occasions that Evie and her twin took pleasure from the same thing; the fire joined their minds.

The day before the guests arrived a man came to replace the fire alarm and work on

a light fixture in the kitchen. Evie's mother was upset, because his fiddling had uprooted a layer of dust. It had fluttered down onto the countertop, and also onto the cube of white paneer she'd just unwrapped. Priya was shrieking. The man was arguing that it wasn't his fault, that she shouldn't have left food underneath the fixture, and hinted that maybe Priya should have dusted before calling an electrician. Priya threatened not to pay. The man threatened not to work. He left without putting the fixture back on, and the naked bulbs flickered while Priya unwrapped a new cube of paneer.

Evie had watched the argument from her stool on the other side of the counter. She had a history book open and was pretending to copy down Egyptian names while she watched her mother grow with anger. Priya fluttered around the room after the man was gone, disinfecting the counter and moving dishes from one inconvenient spot to another.

Evie looked at the ceiling where the fixture had been. There were four bare bulbs fanning out from the center, like petals on a flower. One of them was blackened, as if it had pulled in all the darkness rather than pushed out light. Together the other three flickered, casting light on Evie's mother and her rounded shoulders, her attempt at a braid and her bottom squashed flat by her jeans. The bulbs sent a shiver down both of Evie's spines. Her twin was scared, and so she retreated to her room.

"Put on that nice salwaar suit from your birthday," was all Evie's mother said to her when she came home from school the next day. Evie pictured herself in the green top and dark genie pants that always made her hot and itchy. She grew sweat patches on her armpits and she didn't even have hair there yet.

"I don't know where it is," Evie replied. She'd stuffed it into the back of her sock drawer.

"It's on your bed. I found it in the sock drawer. Can you imagine?"

Evie groaned. "It's so uncomfortable," she said. Her mother wasn't listening. She was already in the kitchen, lighting tea candles with the kitchen lighter. She held it like a weapon.

"Evie!" Her mother whipped around at the sound of the cupboard. "Don't eat! I've made all this food for tonight. You'll fill yourself up on white bread and then you won't touch the paneer kofta." She'd thrust the lighter at one of the dishes while she spoke.

Evie didn't like paneer. There was a half eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich in her bag. She'd eat that in her room. She climbed the stairs two at a time, hauling her backpack up like she was a mountain climber, holding onto the banister like it was her rope. She stopped when she saw that the hallway had changed.

Tea candles lined the skinny table, and a new patchwork tapestry hung on the wall above it. She hadn't seen it before. The pictures looked like cave paintings, flat and crude and the cloth was rough when Evie felt it. There were small mirrors woven in, and Evie could see her own eyeball when she looked closely at one. She twirled her finger around a stray thread and pulled. The bottom of the tapestry crumpled up, and then fell back into place when she let the thread slip from her finger.

Evie's room had also changed. Her mother had infiltrated it, removed stickers from the mirrors and wiped them clean. Her salwaar suit lay like an extra person on the bed. She ran her hand along the prickly surface of the shirt, pausing to pull a sequin off so it wouldn't look so gaudy. Her twin thought the suit was beautiful. Evie's twin liked to wear such things.

The guests arrived late, but Evie's mother said this was normal for Indians. The tea

candles had burned low into their metal shells, and Evie had discreetly picked at the rotis to quiet her stomach. She was tired, too. When the doorbell rang she had just laid her head down onto her sequinned arm, and her mother pinched her as she made her way to the door.

"Evie! Call your father," her mother said as she patted her hair. Evie left just as the door opened, but caught a glimpse of four brown faces over her shoulder. Evie's father rarely came out of his study. Some nights Evie would tiptoe to the kitchen for a glass of water or a snack, and she'd see him asleep in his chair, leaning back as far as it would go.

"Hey, dad?" Evie tapped her knuckles on the doorframe. Her father swiveled around in his chair, still in his work shirt and tie. "The people are here."

Ellis sighed out through his nose and rubbed the parts where his glasses had made marks. "Thanks, Evie. Tell your mother I'm just finishing up with some work, and I'll be out afterwards." He swiveled back around. She watched the back of his pale head for a second as he typed. Typical, leaving her to wrestle with Priya herself.

This is what he did when her mother's relatives came around with their sweets and their bags that smelled of incense—when they pinched her cheeks so hard that they kept their red marks. Ellis was here, or at his office in the city, working overtime. It was as if he took great care in balancing out Priya's efforts to accommodate by being particularly absent. Sometimes Evie felt that she was the only thing her parents had in common.

Evie was usually left to Priya and her demands, feeling more like a henchman than a twelve year old. That's what she'd had to suffer as an only child; becoming her mother's best friend. Except that she wasn't an only child. She had her twin.

Priya's voice was radiating from the living room. She was being especially loud, a

habit she adopted whenever she thought she might be talking to people who didn't speak English. The other voices were heavily accented. The woman was talking through a hooked nose, Evie could just tell, and the man had a laugh that could have come from an old movie.

"Dad's a little busy," Evie said as she poked her head into the room.

"No matter, no matter, come say hello!" said Priya, though her eyes turned to the corridor, as if she could see straight through the walls to where her husband was sitting. Evie's twin was right; there'd be a fight later.

She shuffled in and stood by the couch full of visitors. They were darker than her mother, like toast that gets put in twice. They were the same color as Evie was, except that they wore it like Indians. Evie's skin didn't dictate anything about her—maybe more of the black girls liked her because of it. The visitors were different versions of the same face, round and full, like droplets that were getting ready to fall. They seemed to be in awe of everything.

"This is my daughter, Evie. Evie, say namaste to our guests: Mr. and Mrs. Joshi, and their kids Ankur and Mallika." Evie's mother smiled with her mouth, but her eyes held the demand.

"Namaste," Evie said.

"Hello Evie, so nice to meet you!" The mother's hair was twisted up into a bun. Evie could see her own mother staring at it, replicating it in her mind. "I think you know my daughter from athletics class." She gestured to the brown girl in between the father and the son. "This is Mallika."

Evie knew the girl. She was the one that had helped Evie when she fell, the one

they'd called Ali Baba. The girl that was new to the United States. When Coach Mann had introduced her, Evie imagined that she'd just flown in on a magic carpet. She was like Jasmine, except Jasmine was pretty.

"Hello Evie!" chirped Mallika.

"Hi." Evie didn't know what to say. The last time she'd interacted with Mallika, she'd tipped over her tin of food. She could say sorry, except she wasn't really very sorry. Mallika was wearing an orange t-shirt and jeans. Evie looked down at her own salwaar suit and decided to chuck the long scarf dupatta at the first chance she got.

"While we're waiting on my husband for dinner, why doesn't Evie show Mallika around her room?" Priya asked. "Go on Evie. Show Mallika your toys." Evie looked at her mother. She was twelve years old; she didn't play with *toys*. She had a bear on her bedside table, a fluffy polar bear bought by her mother as a sorry present when she ran over Evie's toe. But that was about it.

Mallika picked her way around her mother and stood next to Evie. "Go on Evie!" said Priya. She might have sounded enthusiastic to the guests, but Evie knew that she spoke in an I'm-going-to-take-away-something-that-makes-you-happy voice.

Evie took the stairs two at a time again, showing the girl that she had only been slow in P.E. because of her injury. She didn't need help. Mallika followed her with slow steps, too polite to move any faster.

"Want to see a trick?" Evie asked when Mallika reached the top. She moved to the candles below the tapestry and tried to pick one up. The metal was too hot. "Well, normally I pick them up, but you'll have to look real close." Evie passed her index finger through the flame.



Mallika gave a cry that faltered when Evie presented her unhurt finger. "How?" she asked.

Evie smiled at the girl. "Magic," she said, and pushed the candle back beneath the tapestry. She would have fun with Mallika, she thought as they moved into her room. By this time she had pulled off her silly dupatta and tossed it on the table in the hallway.

"Do you know why I've got this lump on my back?" Evie asked once the door was closed. Mallika said she couldn't see a lump. "Here, feel." Evie took Mallika's finger and pressed it along her second spine.

"What is that?" asked the other girl, feeling her own back for the difference. "It feels like—bones."

"It *is* bones." Evie started on her story. "I had a twin when I was in my mom's tummy. We were joined up at the back. But then I ate her. And when we came out, both of us were in my body."

Mallika pulled away from Evie. "You're lying," she said.

"Am not," said Evie. No one ever called her a liar, except for her mother and sometimes the kids at school. "Ask anyone. Ask my parents." Evie sniffed. The smell of her mother's cooking had penetrated the second floor.

"Why did you eat her?"

Evie sat on her bed, pulling the quilt out from under the mattress where it had been tucked. "I like to eat little girls. I'm really a cannibal." Evie made her eyes wide. "How old are you, Mallika?"

"Eleven—almost twelve," the other girl said as she backed away.

Evie sighed. "You're too old for my taste. Little girls start to get sour after ten."

Especially little Indian girls like you. They start to turn into all the yellow and brown food that they eat."

Mallika leaned on Evie's dresser, still wary. "But you're Indian too. Mama said you were born there."

"So?" Evie bunched up the quilt. "You should see my dad, he's as white as notebook paper. My twin was the Indian half and I gobbled her up. I'm just as American as...cowboys and Indians."

"There are plenty of cows and Indians in India," Mallika said with a smile.

Evie glared at the visitor. "If it's so great, why'd you come here?"

"Papa took a job here. And we moved so my brother and I could have a better education."

Evie wondered what schools in India were like. She pictured her own middle school, which smelled sometimes because it was downwind from the hospital. She pictured history class, with Miss Smith who couldn't pronounce Nicaragua. She thought of the eighth grade girls who unwrapped tampons and stuck them in people's pockets when they passed by. She thought of the Spanish teacher who threw a chair out the window last year because she was having a nervous breakdown.

"School in India must be really bad," Evie said.

"It definitely isn't as good as America," said the other girl, but she didn't look at Evie when she spoke.

Evie's mother had told her that girls in India went to school on Saturday. Priya said everything was harder there, especially the math. They even called it mathematics. When Evie nearly repeated third grade, her mother had threatened to ship her off to an all-girls

convent school where she'd learn her fourteen-times tables off by heart. She'd worked hard after that, making solid C's.

Evie thought of all the things Mallika must have memorized.

She stared at the girl sitting on her dresser. Mallika was the opposite of Evie. She wore her jeans timidly, as if she didn't feel comfortable in them. She had a habit of tucking her hair behind her ears, even though it wasn't falling in front of her face. Evie could feel her own hair radiating out from its ponytail, uncontainable. She liked it that way. She decided then that she didn't like Mallika at all.

"Do you smell something?" Mallika asked.

"It's my mom's stinky Ali Baba cooking," said Evie. "I'm surprised you didn't recognize it, since you eat it everyday."

"That doesn't smell like food."

"Yeah, cause it barely makes the cut."

"It smells like something burning. Do you have a fireplace?"

Evie's father loved the fireplace. Her mother didn't like to burn wood on normal occasions, but she would do anything for her guests.

"My mom probably has a fire going for your parents. She thinks its fancy or something."

"That's what the peasants do in India. They can't afford heating."

"Well, we're not poor."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that." Mallika wouldn't fight back. She was more like the daughter that Evie's mother would like; Mallika could grovel. But she was right about the smell—it was stronger than usual.

"Do you go to the temple with your mom?" Evie asked.

"We all do," Mallika said. "Even though the temple here is plain."

"What do you do there?" Evie bunched the quilt around her knees. "My mom wants me to go sometimes," she said. "She says they give you free candy."

Mallika tilted her head to the side. "They give you prasad. It's sweet food that's been blessed by God."

"Oh." Sweet food could mean fruit. Or milky Indian sweets. "What else do you do there?"

"You pray, of course. That's what temples are for." Mallika was swinging her legs now, happy to tell someone about her life. She may not have had any friends.

"I've never prayed before," Evie said. She wasn't sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Never?" Mallika pushed herself off the dresser. "Not even for good health or prosperity or for your family to arrive safely when they travel?"

"No, not really." Evie wondered why she should. Why did so many people pressure her to? "I get those things anyway," she said. "I don't think it would be different if I prayed."

Mallika was frowning. She was sort of scary with her thick black eyebrows and her orange shirt. "Don't you care about your family? How can you not be thankful to God?"

Evie wasn't sure what she should be thankful about. Maybe that her parents weren't divorced? But they didn't love each other. She knew that. Maybe that she was the lucky twin, the one who didn't get eaten. Maybe that she had been stronger.

"You're in America," Mallika continued. "Other people wouldn't waste their

chances like you do."

Evie stood on her bed and pulled up the quilt, so that it flowed from her arms like a gigantic robe. "You're right, I do waste my chances," she said as she heaved the quilt above her head. "I should have eaten you earlier!" She hurled the quilt at her guest. Mallika was small, and the quilt engulfed her easily. She squealed.

Evie jumped off the bed and pushed the quilted figure. It fell back, harder than Evie intended, thunked on the dresser and toppled to the floor. Evie knew she'd be in trouble. She left the wriggling mass and opened the door to her room.

She smelled it then. She saw it too, or rather didn't see it because of all the smoke. It looked like the wall was on fire. She moved closer. It was the tapestry, made sharp from all the flames. The beaded people were reduced to dark outlines as the cloth around them burned. Evie couldn't move away, even as her face got hotter. The tiny mirrors were still intact. Their threaded harnesses burned away and they dropped to the floor with soft taps.

There were screams from the staircase below. Evie sneezed as smoke washed over her. The air darkened like the water that Evie washed her paintbrushes in. She started to back down the stairs, away from the tapestry. Her nose took in the darkness. She couldn't see anymore. She couldn't breathe. Her skin stung, and she might have been on fire—her stupid salwaar suit was synthetic. It was all her mother's fault for making her wear Indian clothes. It was all her mother's fault for inviting guests over.

Evie remembered Mallika. Where was Mallika? Twisted up under the quilt, choking? Why hadn't she gotten out yet? Evie had moved down four stairs. She was too close to safety—she couldn't go back.

But Evie's twin made her. It lurched inside her, threw her onto the banister. It pushed her up two, then three, then all four stairs. She grabbed at the carpet. The bones dug into her shoulder, dragging her forwards. She'd felt a similar feeling when she'd ridden in a shopping trolley. Her teeth had hummed against each other, as they did now.

Evie's room was on fire. The stuffed polar bear in the corner was alight. Her girly magazines would flake into black ashes. Her homework was gone, and she'd need to get another worksheet on Nefertiti from Miss Smith.

Mallika hadn't made it out from under the quilt. Evie felt a hand and pulled. The other girl came along with it, and the quilt dragged behind them. Evie hauled them both through the flaming doorway. Everything was dark except for the fire. The lighting would have been perfect for a ghost story.

When Evie reached the stairs she fell. She took Mallika with her, and they rolled up into the quilt as they tumbled to the first floor. Evie might have laughed if she'd had air in her lungs to laugh with.

She felt for the other girl as the screaming got louder. Mallika wasn't moving. She felt the girl's face with her fingers, pried open her mouth to see if she was breathing. Evie couldn't tell. Someone lifted her up and the pressure made her cough. She coughed out and out and out and it turned into minutes, and she thought that now might be a good time to pray.

## Rope

The only thing that she remembered about Mama was her hair. Mama was the hug of hair— quiet, braided, impossibly opaque. In Priya’s mind it flowed like a river, stemming from the holy source of her own memories to harbor all of life’s events: it curled around her American childhood, snaked its way past her college graduation, wrapped around her marriage and cradled the birth of her only child. It was an idea begot from a picture of the Lord Shiva she’d seen on her Grandmother’s prayer dais. From his scalp poured forth the river Ganga, fueling crops and bathing the land.

As a teenager, Priya had bathed in her own tumultuous hair, wearing it like a mantle down her back. Even though her cousins had theirs feathered out, glossy and in vogue, Priya had kept hers plain. She wouldn’t dry it with dyes or slough it into a style. She braided it and thought that perhaps it moved with Mama’s spirit. Her cousins still had their mother; they couldn’t understand.

But when it came time for Priya to make decisions, her hair got in the way. It tangled her thoughts and kept her worried. In college she began dating boys, and was afraid that Mama wouldn’t approve. Was she being slutty by wearing that dress? What should she do if he wanted to spend the night? Should she move her hips when she danced? The questions netted her, creating awkward silences.

It was never Priya’s intention to be coupled as her mother had been, partnered with a suitable boy that was chosen by the family. But she wasn’t like her cousins either. As a preteen, she didn’t profess her love to boy-banders or join in on giggling conversations about crushes. She’d asked her aunt about fidelity once.

“Why do you let them go out with all these boys?” she’d asked. “Isn’t it

promiscuous?” Later she’d cringe at the memory, chalking the question up to prudish fear.

“I let them have their fun,” her aunt had said. “Anyway, here it’s normal.” And so it was. Priya’s cousins had been born in Virginia and knew no other life. They were American PIO’s— persons of Indian origin— and they were perfectly content with that status. Priya was more than a PIO. Though she’d left India as a four-year-old, the country’s culture was deeply rooted into her being, sprouting from her head like Shiva’s tumbling Ganges.

Advice came from everywhere in a cacophony of voices, but none of them voiced Mama. Priya’s aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, and friends tried to lay on her their fundamentals. She followed their advice until she found that it conflicted, pulling her into various directions until she was stuck, unlikely to do anything at all.

And then in college she’d cut her hair. She’d made the decision after posing for an annual family photograph, which she couldn’t bring herself to look at afterwards. It wasn’t so much that she was embarrassed of her past as an attempt to shed a layer, to reveal something more substantial than a blood bind.

“It’s a free country,” she’d said to the mirror in her dormitory room before lopping a chunk of hair off. She reminded herself that in America, obedience was not a proud virtue.

She’d said the same thing when she’d married Ellis in a small garden ceremony with only his parents as witnesses. They’d graduated together two days before, he with an accounting degree, she with one that had focused on religion. Rather than solidify her sense of place in the world, the courses had muddled her idea of truth. She’d found that



even the scholars—especially the scholars— conflicted.

By that time, she wasn't thinking of her long-dead mother. The winding strands had been a burden. Her hair had transformed into a rope, pulling her back, tied to customs whose meanings were vague. When it parted from her shoulders she'd felt an ugly power. She was no longer anyone's ideal, and at last she belonged to herself.

It worked for a time. Priya eased out of visits to India, limited phone conversations, and answered questions brusquely, as if she'd become occupied by other things. She tried to forget what her mother might have wanted for her. She tried to make her own life, using Ellis as a crutch. He'd completed Priya's dissection from her birth family— pale as a lighthouse beam, with a sense of nervous humor that had made her quotidian life lighter.

But even Ellis had been snared by the lure of India, striking up a deal with his businessman friend and riding on a dream of profit. "I'm going to start a business with Nabil," he'd said to her one night. He'd been tentative when he'd slid into the bed, and his feet had been cold against her leg. "We're going to export things from India and sell them for higher prices here," he'd grown animated. "It's not a new thing; people make a fortune doing it." He'd had a boy's excitement, and she'd conceded.

Later the struggle of the business had become real, and Ellis had started to disappear from Priya's peripheral sight. He'd told her that they'd had to move, that it was easier to sort out the legal details from Delhi. She was bored with her job at the jewelry store anyway, and she'd conceded again. The prospect of returning was terrifying— Priya's mother reared up in her mind, reminding her of the dangers of the place. But perhaps it was a chance to find herself.

Priya's hair stayed in its bobbed cut after the move like a premonition on her neck. Though she tried to nestle herself into her surroundings, the place was uncomfortable. She was a beef-eater but a non-Muslim, a woman who stared back at the poking eyes of men. And then she became a mother.

Perhaps it was this that made her hair spring forth an inch, or perhaps the pregnancy hormones had just told everything to grow. She trailed her hair across her daughter's head. Evie liked to touch it, yank it in her little fist. She cried behind the curtain of hair, and Mama Priya shielded her. Priya's daughter would have a mother with a guiding lanyard of hair, she decided, one that would give them both an identity. And maybe this time it would work.