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Love of My Life

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Peter Raffel

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Introduction

Love of My Life was conceived, written, and edited while living in Pune, India where I studied abroad for four months. The novel is an attempt to understand the city – geographically, culturally, and emotionally – and portray it in writing. I undertook this project with a certain level of naiveté: I didn't know what I'd see, what I'd experience, or what I'd eventually write. The process by which the novel came about was long and arduous, and yet helped me understand the world in which I lived – and eventually create a piece that is inherently tied to my own life, albeit set in a foreign place.

The novel tells the story of a young Indian boy named Mitra, and his attempt to find meaning and happiness in his life; the tale starts with his first memory and ends with his last. Told almost entirely from his viewpoint, Part I deals with Mitra's childhood, and the events that shape his understanding of the world around him. He's the son of an overbearing single mother who is angered by the social structures that confine her to the roles designated for women. As the story progresses, their relationship becomes more fraught as Mitra attempts to follow his own path while his mother tries to maintain control over him. From there, he encounters numerous people that have a profound impact on his life: a wise beggar, his dangerous cousin, his soft-spoken best friend, and eventually the woman he loves.

The themes present in Part I are tied to Mitra's lack of agency throughout the novel: his attempt to be taken care of, to be told what to do, and to not be alone. Each character represents a possible solution to this isolation, and a potential path to the enlightenment that he craves: Nikky presents an immoral, and yet titillating lifestyle; Shree presents companionship, yet an uncomfortable closeness; and Aditi presents herself as a dominant love, yet dangerous in her

motives. None of these characters are able to give him what he seeks, and his disillusionment by the world and the people he has trusted grows as the novel progresses. Moreover, Mitra represents the idyllic man: a person with the ability to transcend the horrors of the physical world; however within Pune, and the greater world, the novel posits that infinite solitude is impossible.

Part I also deals with several other themes: the construction of gender roles, and what is expected for both men and women within the culture of India; the temptation of evil, and a stark nihilism that leads to the denigration of goodness; homo-social relations between men, and the implications of betrayal; and finally, the idea of being both attracted to something and repulsed by it – wanting it, and yet at the same by wanting to push it away. All of these concepts present themselves within the first part of the novel in the various relationships that Mitra has, and in the events that propel him forward into adulthood.

When Part II opens, eighteen years have passed. Mitra lives in the same apartment, but is now married and is caring for his handicapped mother while working at a watch shop. He feels a certain distance from his wife that he cannot overcome: the novel maintains a world in which monotony has overtaken him – until the day he sees a deer on his way to work, watching him from across the street. This ignites the search for meaning that he had all but given up on, presented to him by Pune. The journey leads him through the city he's known all his life: remembering past loves and losses, and struggling to overcome the obstacles that stand in his way. In the end, the city provides an exit to this cycle, and he takes it: he finds the transcendence he's been waiting for all his life.

In Part II, the themes of loneliness and futility continue, furthering Mitra's feelings of isolation and disillusionment – working at the watch shop provides a background that constantly

reminds him that time is moving forward, despite the stagnant feeling he knows to be true. Furthermore, the city plays a much larger role in this part of the novel: if the first part is Mitra's attempt to find solace in other people, the second part is his attempt to find solace in the city. Eventually, he submits to Pune, and accepts his complex relationship with the place that has birthed him. This part also explores the ideas of possession, present with his wife; the horrors of mankind, present in the terrorist attack he witnesses; and the always-present theme of loneliness, and the attempt to combat the existential questions that plague us.

By writing *Love of My Life*, I sought to take what I experienced in Pune, and apply it to my worldview: one that is, admittedly, pessimistic, but I believe realistic. Mitra's experiences with loneliness, isolation, and submission are all feelings I myself have succumbed to, and in many ways Mitra represents an Indian version of myself. Mitra's attempt to find happiness and meaning in his life is much the same as my own, and yet his failings do not serve a commentary on India, but instead a general commentary on our world: despite our hopes and dreams, we are tied to the social structures around us, and eventually are alone. It is an obviously negative view of life, but one that I wanted to represent in my writing as a depiction of the world as I have seen it at times.

And yet, the novel also represents moments of happiness and tranquility. I wanted to illustrate the highs and lows of life: the moments that Mitra has with Aditi, albeit eventually tragic, are happy ones, as well as his moments riding through the city with Shree. I tried to paint the world as a beautiful one, which was what I truly saw in India. Despite the poverty, the social inequality, and the terrors of life, there is a certain beauty to the world in which we live, and for me Pune served as the perfect paradox: a place that could at one time be horrible to live in, and yet at the same time be more beautiful than anywhere else. For all of the pessimism that

embodies *Love of My Life*, there is a joy that Mitra can find in the city. Pune is, in many respects, a character in the novel – living, breathing; with faults, and yet with amazing strengths. Living there felt as though I could communicate with this character: at times we would be angry with each other, and at times we would love each other. And that’s really what Mitra experiences through the novel, especially in the second half of the book. The city serves as a caretaker for him in a way that humans never could.

The inception of this project really came about from my relationship with Pune: observing the city, and attempting to understand what it would be like to be born there, and die there. As an outsider, I knew that I would never be able to fully conceptualize the city, and see it as anything other than a tourist – but the novel served as a way to understand what I was seeing, and to imagine myself in it. In fact, much of the events depicted in the novel are things I witnessed or heard about from locals: the incident at the watch shop happened to me; the host family I stayed with had an elderly grandmother who couldn’t walk; Nikky’s tirade about terrorism was something my host father said while playing cards; all of the restaurants are real places I visited and ate at; all of the names are taken from specific places (for example, Shree and Janhvi were two characters from a popular soap opera we watched every night); the cavern Mitra falls into was something I came across while walking with some children in the mountains; the school beating is based on an incident a professor related to me about her own child; and the entire basement program in the second part of the novel is based upon a Ganpati Festival I attended, including the rendition of “Que Sera Sera.” There are numerous more examples and allusions that exist within the text, both to things I witnessed, and to historical events and religious myths: the four-headed deer that appears at the end of the novel is based upon a Buddhist carving I saw at Ajanta Caves, with each body meant to represent one of the four basic

emotions. So much of this novel came from things I experienced while living in Pune, and was shaped by my experiences, that I can imagine it would be a very different novel if I had even lived with a different family.

There were also numerous influences I looked to in writing this novel: most generally the works of Modernist writers, who I had read prior to leaving for India. In particular, the works of D.H. Lawrence were a large influence – most notably his novel *Son and Lovers*, which is also about a young man attempting to find happiness in the world around him while plagued by an overbearing mother. Lawrence has the subtle ability to insert concepts into the text without overstating them: the homo-social elements of *Sons and Lovers*, and the main character's relationship with his mother were examples of elements that don't necessarily need to be fully realized in the plot for them to be present – and I thought a lot about this when writing the characters of Shree and Maha. I also looked to Lawrence for a lot of the more abstract prose of the novel. For example, a line like: "His heart was hard against her," from *Sons and Lovers* (298), is a relatively vague phrase, and yet packed with emotion and obscurity that a reader feels more than fully understands. In addition, the works of Joyce, Woolf, and obviously E.M. Forester's *A Passage to India* were texts I looked to when developing the style of the prose. The aesthetic behind Modernist literature is something I've always been fascinated with: the futility of life that's represented in their work, and these nihilistic concepts appear in *Love of My Life*.

I didn't only turn to older texts, however, in writing this novel: before leaving for India I read Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, which clearly influenced my understanding Indian culture, and ability to write about a place that is so visually rich. Upon returning to America and continuing to edit, I also read more contemporary authors in an attempt to cut down the saturated

prose I'd developed: reading works by George Saunders and Matthew Batt's *Sugarhouse* allowed me to realize how effective shorter sentences and descriptions can be in some areas.

Other than literary influences, I wrote much of the novel while listening to music: American in origin, and yet following many of the feelings I attempted to write about. Many albums that came out during my stay in India I consider to be embedded in the text, at least in feeling: Arcade Fire's *Reflektor*, King Krule's *6 Feet Beneath the Moon*, and Darkside's *Psychic* were all albums that I listened to incessantly, and the emotions of isolation and mystery present in these albums influenced the tone of the writing. For example, I wrote the final scene of the novel while listening to the Dirty Beaches' song "Alone at the Danube River," which features a distant guitar riff on a lo-fi recording, and to this day I can't read that scene without hearing the song in my head. Additionally, the films of Stanley Kubrick, and the mysterious nature of his works, are something I constantly returned to for influence: his ability to leave room for interpretation, and the general surrealist tone of his films was a large influence. There are many more works of art, literature, music, and film that influenced me in the writing and editing of this novel, and all contributed to a piece that I see as deeply rooted in the culture by which I am surrounded: although the book is set in India, many of the attitudes and ideas are adopted from American culture, and my own attitude towards the world.

I foresaw a potential conflict with inflicting American ideals, attitudes, and art into modern-day India: what do the works from Modernist writers, and a handful of pop culture influences have to do with a place very much removed from these things? Moreover, as a white American man, it's obvious that I can never fully understand the Indian experience, and thus why write a novel set there? For me, however, writing *Love of My Life* served as a way of understanding Pune in the best way I knew: through writing. The world I was observing was new

to me, and yet colored with what I'd already known – and this fused together in the writing to create a relatively unique outlook of the city. While writing, I knew the story had a very limited scope in what it could accomplish – and could only encompass a small percentage of what I witnessed while in India. Still, as I see it, the writer's job is to synthesize what is going on around him or her, and to find truths in it – subjective truths, but truths all the same. *Love of My Life*, although written by a foreigner in a foreign land, is how I saw India through my own personal lens, and is my attempt to understand what I was seeing. And my hope is that it came out as successful, and is an honest portrayal of Pune as a newcomer saw it – someone who was feeling, living, and breathing the city, and attempting to capture it through prose.

Each day, I would walk from the ACM Offices to my home – about an hour and a half journey – and take in the city. If there is one thing I miss most about India it is this: as romantic as it sounds I can still close my eyes and see the roads before me, the intense heat pouring down, and the people surrounding me. Each step I had taken before, and knew I would take again – and yet it felt distinctly new each time. And although this walk was only a portion of India, it influenced the writing in ways that are beyond imagination: simply being within the city, and watching its workings. When I would reach home I would write or edit, sometimes for six hours at a time, and attempt to synthesize my experiences and emotions into prose. It was an incredibly creative time, and for this I have only the city to thank: perhaps it is not a flattering depiction, or a holistic one, but to me it is an honest one. *Love of My Life*, in many ways, represents these walks and these musings – a place where the thoughts that I'd internalized over the course of my life could multiple and manifest in the world I was moving through. I can only hope that I did Pune justice.

Love of My Life

I. School

In Mitra's earliest memory, he's four. And he's watching death.

He's four, and he's walking with his mother down the cobblestone street, as the bustle of the city is sloping away – the pulsating motorbikes, the infinite swell of shops, the howling of the river – and now they're entering into their own haven. Music is pounding, but the levels are off and the sound is pushing its way out of the speakers in madness, clawing into the world. This forms a foundation for the people, who are clutching tickets, brandishing them frantically at a table, forcing themselves on a man who will reluctantly take the ticket and give them what they crave: an idol. An idol for their worship, an idol for their devotion, an idol for their bodies and their minds to access another plane, if that plane is even accessible. And they're all grappling and pushing to reach that plane and it's scaring Mitra. He wants to go home, to leave this alley. And yet his mother pushes them forward, pulling his retreating hand.

Mitra's mother forces her way through the crowd and breaks to the table; once she's there she's raising her ticket as well, but there's a power behind her that makes the attendant take it right away. It's her eyes more than anything: in a crowd of Indians, her eyes are the only ones. They're sharp and stunning, set just a bit further apart, and a bit narrower. There's a fire behind them that resonates all over her body – a fire that makes her look like a woman: a real woman, both fully sexualized and asexualized. This is something an Indian man will notice, and this Indian man does.

He takes the ticket and moves towards the building behind him, into its innards until he vanishes; and as he does Mitra's mother pulls Mitra down the table to where there's more space for them, away from the gridlock of patrons. Mitra can see what's happening from underneath the table: the movement of shuffling feet as they enter and exit the shop, bringing forth a coveted

prize. Mitra is waiting, his breath sagging beneath the weight of his anxiety; he's trying to remember what the attendant looks like. Who is this man who brings forth his god, his unknown, his becoming? Who dares hold it in the palms of his hands like a common man with no potential, no ambition, no intention? Will he come?

The man does come, and Mitra sees his feet land on the pavement with a heaviness, until he reaches the table and sets the idol down, handing Mitra's mother her ticket. Mitra's mother places the silver tray she's brought between the two of them, removing the folded blue sheet, and waiting before the attendant.

There is a pause as Mitra's mother watches the man. "Well?" she says, raising her eyebrows slightly. The man is still, but after a moment he speaks.

"We'll need your husband here for this, Tai."

Mitra's mother is taken aback. "What?"

"We'll need your husband here to perform the ritual. To bless the Ganesh."

Mitra's mother lets her eyes speak before opening her mouth: "My husband has expired."

The man doesn't move, but the people around him do. They're watching Mitra's mother now with a curious intensity, as she stands firm in her footprints. Mitra looks up at the crowd around him, wondering what will happen. They may move, but his mother won't.

The man, who sees the crowd's interest, moves a bit closer to the table and takes Mitra's mother into his confidence. "Do you have any male relatives who can be here to perform the ritual? Anyone who can accompany you?"

"Why do I need someone to accompany me?"

The man doesn't answer this question, but instead continues looking at Mitra's mother, trying to search the eyes that give him no emotion. Eventually, the man repeats his question: "Do you have anyone who can perform the ritual?"

Mitra's mother can sense the tension; so can Mitra, and so can the idol. It sits watching them, unmoving. Mitra's mother is still holding her ground and the man's question is still hovering in the air. Silence has fallen over the crowd as they watch the standoff. The attendant, however, can no longer take it – not the eyes and not the silence – and so he leans over the table, peering down at Mitra, and then back up at his mother. "Your son can do it?"

He poses this as a question, and it catches Mitra's mother off-guard. She looks down at her son, who is holding her hand, looking back up at her. She can feel his tiny fingers grasping hers, and his widened eyes peering upward, and suddenly he's much older, he's much younger – he's timeless. She turns back to the attendant: "Fine."

The attendant wastes no time in moving around the table; he lowers himself to a squat, handing the tray to Mitra. Mitra looks down at it; he can see his face in the reflection, but it's a distorted, disfigured image looking up at him from the ancient metal. The man sprinkles rice onto Mitra's tray, then orange powder, then red powder. He takes an orange shawl and folds it in half, placing it around Mitra's shoulders; even after he's done this the shawl is still sweeping the ground. He takes the idol from the table and places the Ganesh onto Mitra's tray. Mitra can feel the weight of the idol, but he holds it all the same, his arms shaking. The man takes one final dip into the red powder and places his index finger between Mitra's eyes, leaving a red impression that he will feel for years and years to come. And then, as he looks into Mitra's eyes, he says, "Ganpati Bappa."

A few people call out “Morya” in response, and Mitra can hear himself saying it. Mitra’s mother doesn’t say it. The attendant places a cloth over the idol and stands to face Mitra’s mother, but she’s already turning, pushing her son from behind so that he almost drops the idol. Tripping over his feet, Mitra follows her out of the crowd and onto the street, where she’s moving, almost flying. Her sari billows behind her, swimming in the wind of her rage, fluttering orange, flickering blue.

Suddenly she stops and Mitra nearly crashes into her; she’s turning around, wheeling on her son. Mitra’s mother bends and in one motion snatches the idol from his hands so quickly that the cloth falls to the ground, revealing the elephant. Holding the platter in one hand, cursing with the other, she swoops down and picks up the cloth, returning it to the idol before pulling the shawl from Mitra’s shoulders and placing it around her own. And then, finally, she extends her thumb and wipes the red from his forehead, with a pressure that sends him back a few steps. Now she’s turning and racing towards their home, with Mitra running to keep up.

Mitra climbs the stairs; his mother turns the key to their apartment and forces her way in. Then, placing the idol on the table next to the door, she gets down on her hands and knees. Mitra watches as she takes a blue powder and furiously dribbles it on the floor: footprints. She does this quickly, but with a grace – as if it’s not her doing it, but her sari still sweeping up the earth’s dust and dropping Ganesh’s steps on their floor. She leads the footprints to the small alcove of their apartment that serves as their devghar, before hurrying back to the door, stepping outside, and pausing in thought. Now she’s running into the kitchen and coming back with a dish of water, stepping outside again, and washing her feet. When she’s finished, she stands and places the red powder on her own forehead. Then, finally, she picks up the idol and walks to the devghar, placing the Ganesh on his chauranga. And then she sits. And then she prays.

Mitra watches all of this as one motion: the motion of mother. The motion of maternal; the motion of Maha. Now she's sitting, cross-legged, before the idol. Silence encapsulates the apartment, and Mitra inches towards his mother who has become a statue. She's crying – slow methodical tears from her long eyelashes – but you wouldn't have known the tears had come from her. Perhaps somewhere else, somewhere heavenly.

Eventually, Maha opens her eyes and lights a match, burning incense and letting its scent engulf the room, filling the house with its essence. She's murmuring something – a prayer that came out of nothing, as if she's been saying it her whole life. Mitra never moves. She prays until the sun goes down, and then continues to pray until she dies.

For five days, Mitra's mother did this. Every night she would sit before the idol, light the incense, and pray, with Mitra curiously watching behind her. He wanted to join, but he didn't know how, or why. He loved his mother deeply in those moments, or rather the idea of her, or rather the idea of the idol. It was a compounding series, in which the love grew and shrank and burst and imploded, so that he could never quite grasp its actuality. They were really one in his mind, the idol and his mother, and he wished he'd never seen her do anything else but sit there and pray. It was the one time when she was beautiful to him. She was giving herself to something else; she was submissive. And the only entity she would ever accept this from was her god – she wouldn't even accept it from herself. And Mitra saw beauty in that: his mother, the wondrous, handsome creature, letting herself be taken.

On the fifth day, Maha prayed, her long slender figure heaving before the idol; and although Mitra watched her as he did every day, he knew that something was different. There was something in her, something that seemed final. It was the normalcy ending; it was a good friend you'd never again see; it was a location you'd never again visit. The change was felt in the

room, and when she stood, she turned to Mitra. “Run to the bathroom and fetch the bucket, Mitra. Fill it with water.”

Mitra did as he was told and brought the bucket to her, which she placed before the idol. She seemed happier this day than the others. “And now, Mitra, we put the idol in the water.”

Mitra looked from the idol to the bucket. “Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” she said. “Because it’s what we do. The idol dissolves in the water, and then it’s gone for the year. It’s the tradition.”

Mitra looked at the idol. “But he’ll drown in there.”

“Drown in there?” Mitra’s mother repeated, laughing. “Mitra, he’s an idol! Besides, he’s not going to drown; he’s going to dissolve in the water – it’s the tradition.”

“But he’ll drown, Ai. I don’t want him to drown.”

“Stop being foolish, Mitra. He’s an idol. He’s a symbol.” Mitra’s mother turned back to the idol and slowly picked it up, bending to the bucket and dipping her hands inside, submerging the idol as Mitra watched in horror. And then, finally, the idol was completely underwater, and Mitra’s mother stood and closed her eyes, beginning a prayer. Mitra inched to the side of the bucket, peering in at what lay inside.

It wasn’t like how it had looked on its throne, with its grandeur and power. Now a mirage separated Mitra from it, and the image swayed and swam under the water. And Mitra knew, in his heart of hearts, that it was dying.

He stood, fearing to speak over his mother’s prayer – but there in the water the god was dying; Mitra could see his form slowly losing oxygen and could feel the idol letting his life slip away. He needed saving, he needed salvation, but there was no one there to give it to him, and because of this he would die. He suffered slowly, painfully, a horrific death, and Mitra watched,

powerless to the world around him. Death was watching him and he was watching it back. It was a righteous act of torture, and Mitra felt the terror, the suffering, before he even knew what these concepts were. They had, however, been instilled in him before time, before space, and were now taking on a physical manifestation before his very eyes. This was, in a way, the only moment of his life to matter, to vibrate through the years until he himself could follow in these footsteps and finally transcend.

That night, Mitra lay awake while his mother slept beside him. He looked up, into the darkness, and tried to let his mind go – to approach the crescent of sleep – but he could not. The incandescent glow of the streetlights shone over him, and lit his soul indefinitely until it burned him alive. And then there was the noise of the city that beckoned him, tempting him, wanting him. And then there was the idol. He could not sleep with death so close. He could not let death take a friend, a guardian, a lover, in such a slow and painful way – a death that would echo forward into the infinity that was his life. A death with no purpose and no meaning. An undeserved death. And so, because he knew this in his heart, he quietly rose from the bed and tiptoed out of the room into the darkened hall.

The bucket still sat in its corner. Mitra didn't breathe as he moved towards it, and then he was upon it. He didn't want to look inside, but he forced himself beyond, until he was peering into the bucket, letting himself fall into its depths and tumble forever. The idol lay silent, untouched since he'd left it. It made no noise – Mitra thought it would have made a noise. He thought it would have called for him, would have cried for him, would have sung for him. But it stayed silent, watching. And out of this silence grew a gentle hum, growing and growing in Mitra's ears until it was ringing amongst the gods, a glorious tone that was somewhere between heaven and hell, trapped in his own apartment. This tone guided him as he reached into the

bucket, down to his elbows, and then further, until the sleeves of his shirt grew wet, and he was able to grasp the idol with his palms and lift it out. There was a breath as he did so, and as the idol surfaced the air converged. The water dripped off the idol, which now faced him, staring into his eyes. It was a look that Mitra never forgot.

The hum exploded behind him, and Mitra turned to see his mother standing in the doorway. A light switched on and he was thrown into day, his eyes narrowing and fuzzing to the change. Through his haze he saw his mother, approaching until she was towering over him. It was here that he lived now. She put her hands down so that they were level with Mitra's head and waited. And then, as Mitra looked at the idol, seeing its eyes, and then at the floor, he lifted it up and she took it from him, relieving the weight from his body. His arms were dripping wet, and a puddle was beginning to form at his feet, the water sliding across the slanted floor, beginning its trek into the unknown. She stepped around him, kneeling at the bucket, and placed the idol inside, until it was fully submerged, back home once again. She paused there for a moment with her eyes closed; Mitra didn't dare move. Then she rose, and reclaimed her position before her son. The silence now destroyed anything else. "Look at me, Mitra," she said. Nothing moved. "Look at me." She was stern and her voice was far away, yet intimately close. Mitra lifted his face until he was meeting her eyes. But before he could register her face – her emotion, her life – she came down upon him. A hand broke the night sky and shattered the room, as Mitra's head snapped back from the sting, sending him reeling. A hot pain shot up in him that lasted until it felt like leaving. The sound reverberated through the apartment until that felt like leaving as well. But neither ever felt like giving back their space.

Mitra's mother raised her hand again, but this time didn't touch her son; instead, she pointed to the bedroom door, ajar in the darkness, and held herself still. Mitra, not meeting her

gaze, turned and followed the finger, a hot shame crawling over him, until he had passed through the door and into the night.

Mitra never knew his father, and his father never knew him. They saw each other, but their identities remained blurred and anonymous, as Mitra went unnamed for twelve days, and it was on his sixth day that his father died. He had been on his way home from work when a truck had collided with his motorbike, killing him instantly. Because of this, Mitra's father had only known his son's shapeless features, and no matter how much he studied his face, he was never able to call it by name; and because of this, Mitra knew only the small portrait of his father that sat in the corner of their apartment. His father had been a good-looking man, with sharp cheekbones and a head of white hair – but in the colorless photo, Mitra could never tell what shade his hair truly was. The picture always made Mitra feel as though his father knew something that he himself didn't – as if he held Mitra's name in the glint of his eye, even though he hadn't lived to see it committed to him. However, Mitra suspected that the name his father knew didn't match the one he'd been given, and that his true identity was flowing in the current of the river among his father's ashes.

Mitra's mother knew she wouldn't remarry, and she knew the repercussions of not doing so. It would be a life devoid of companionship and compassion, one that a husband and a community were supposed to provide her with had they been there. Why, exactly, she chose this life no one could say – but they certainly didn't ask. At first, whispers of the society circulated – about her lack of character, about her poor son and the curse upon him – but over time the whispers left as well, and people simply avoided her. She knew she was alone, and she knew she

would be alone in raising her son – and yet, she wouldn't have had it any other way. Her jaw hardened and her eyes focused on the horizon ahead of her, and she moved forward.

She took an occupation almost directly after the death of her husband, thanks in part to a connection her own father had procured during his lifetime. He had worked as a pharmacist for many years, and their name still held a certain weight within the shop where he had been employed; thus, her employment there was no complication; and thus, Mitra spent the majority of his childhood within the pharmacy.

Those years instilled in Mitra a sense of pain, one that he garnered both from the visitors to the shop and the vast medicines it held. Regardless of appearance, everyone who came to the pharmacy had some sort of ailment that required a cure, and so Mitra became aware very early on that there were hazards to modern times. All walks of life appeared before him: colds, coughs, fevers, flus, disablements, disfigurements, and he watched them all trudge off, with no resolution to their stories. The only customer he remembered was a woman with boils all over her skin, who came in weekly to collect a balm, and had the ability to both horrify Mitra and make his heart soar with empathy. His mother, however, remained neutral to the customers, her face constantly mute to their repulsions. In fact, she gave nearly everyone the same expression, except for when Mitra would occasionally see the fire in her eyes that appeared when he had failed her. This look swelled more fear within the boy than anything else; neither the boiled woman nor any of the other terrors of the world could distort him like his mother's fury.

As Mitra grew older, however, he did not stay behind the counter with his mother as often, as his body and his curiosity grew. She did not allow him to move beyond the block, but he was allowed out in front of the shop, where the sidewalk was always busy with people passing by: men in button-down shirts holding hands as they walked, their rubber chappals kicking up

dust; women in saris carrying a child on their hips; dogs trotting aimlessly, sometimes stopping in front of him to bite at their fur. There was also the street: a constant cacophony of motors that blurred together into one epic vehicle, forever moving forward with exhaust streaking behind it. Mitra marveled at the rickshaws, the scooters, the motorbikes, the cars, the buses, the trucks – they were all infallible to him in their orchestra, and although he never saw where they went, he felt as if they would move forever, the meters always running, the horns never silencing.

Mostly, though, Mitra spent his time with an old beggar who had made the spot outside the pharmacy his home, where he sat everyday on a dirty pillow with a silver cup in front of him. He dressed in what once must have been a white kudta that was now dark with decay, and had a long beard of grey that he would often stroke thoughtfully. His skin was darker than any Mitra had ever seen, blackened from his years in the world – much darker than Mitra’s skin. People knew the old man rather well, well enough to call him Kaka and drop a few rupees in his cup when they passed; some would even stop to chat with him, spitting wads of tobacco into the dirt while Kaka spoke to them of the world. Kaka never asked anyone for money, but by the end of the day his cup was full, and so he continued not to ask. “Never ask for money,” Kaka would say. “People don’t want to be told what to do – if they’re going to give you money, they want it to be their idea.”

Often Mitra sat with the man, playing in the mud beside him, never aware that when he left with his mother at the end of the day Kaka remained there, sleeping on the pavement as the night curled around him and the heat morphed into a rippling chill, howling against his bones with the dogs. But neither child nor man seemed to mind their stake in life: Kaka seemed perfectly content giving his words of wisdom, and Mitra was perfectly content serving as his main pupil.

In those days, Mitra's sessions with Kaka were what informed most of his world. It was a contained environment that kept him within the boundaries of what he could witness, but didn't confine him to a nominal existence. If the world was made up of that street, those cars, those dogs, those patients, that pharmacy, and Kaka, it shielded Mitra from what went on the expansive, more realistic sphere. Because outside of Kaka's stories, a world was brewing: a world of suffering that contained no limits, a world that couldn't be quantified no matter how hard one tried – a world that was Pune. And Pune was, in a grandiose sense, a city that was both bustling with possibilities and bristling with promises. The city was vibrant but also viable; it was voluptuous but also volatile. Pune looked into the heart of man and didn't turn away from his monstrous creation. And if Mitra had thought to step outside of Kaka's stories he would have seen this dear heart: the huts concocted from scrap metal and bamboo, hanging together precariously, rusted over the years, compacted into a prism constantly growing; he would have seen the heaps of garbage that humans rifled through for anything: food, clothing, something to sell – the humans and the dogs side by side, the putrid smell of decaying filth throwing open the gates of condemnation; he would have seen the children, walking barefoot in the streets, tugging on the shirts of passersby, putting a hand to their mouths, begging for food, their clothing torn and stained, their gaping mouths with yellowed teeth, some missing, some barely clinging to life; he would have seen the exhaust rising to the sky, the untreatable air; and the stained walls of the buildings rising too, screaming in agony to reach higher, higher. He would have seen a real world, one that he wasn't prepared to see, and would never be prepared to see. Eventually, he would have no choice but to come face to face with it, and he could only hope that it wouldn't consume him the way it had so many. But until then, he stayed within Kaka's stories.

Kaka spoke of the mythology that lived beneath the city, a time previous to what lay before their eyes. A time of gods and men – a time of endless possibilities. Kaka told him that there were thirty-three thousand gods, and an infinite number of stories to go along with them. He spoke of Lord Vishnu and his incarnations; of his four arms and his powerful gada. He spoke of Ganesh, and how his father, Lord Shiva, mistakenly cut off his head, only to replace it with that of an elephant's. He spoke of Krishna and his magical flute, and his legendary battle in the Kurukshetra War. He spoke of Sita and Rama, the two lovers who lay in the forest, hiding from the evil Ravana, and the beautiful golden deer that Rama chased through the brush after Sita had declared she must have it. Mitra could picture himself running in the woods, pursuing the glittering deer, drawing his bow as he moved between the trees, attempting to capture the creature for his wife.

“But why did Sita want the deer?” Mitra would ask when the story was finished.

“Because it was beautiful,” Kaka would answer. “And people want beauty. And if you pray to Vishnu, perhaps you will get some beauty yourself.”

Those were Mitra's days, as Kaka's stories grew in his mind and the world around him became the setting for the magical tales he'd been told. The sick patrons who visited the pharmacy were the unclean, sinful subjects of deceit and denigration; the dogs were the epic creatures that roamed the country doing the bidding of their masters; and the people walking the streets were the gods: interacting, moving – stories crossing and uncrossing as each day took its form. And as Kaka pointed all this out to him, the world became full of color and adventure, and a beauty that most failed to see. And so, before climbing into bed at night, Mitra would pray to Vishnu for safety and protection: for his mother, for Kaka, for the people of the streets, for the

dogs, for the vehicles, and even for the sick who came to the pharmacy, who had simply taken the wrong path and were looking for forgiveness.

When Mitra didn't go with his mother to the pharmacy, he went to his cousin Nikhil's house, a small bungalow not far from Mitra's apartment. Nikhil, whom everyone called Nikky, was Maha's nephew by marriage, and his mother, Meera, was one of the few people who was willing to watch Mitra when she could not take him to work with her. Mitra would spend the day at their home, unaccustomed to the luxury he experienced there: the walls were well-painted with a caramel trim; the rooms were airy and flowed seamlessly in and out of one another; they even had a large television set that Mitra and Nikky could watch whenever they felt like it. Because Nikky's father worked during the week in Mumbai, it was often just Nikky and his mother, and their live-in maid whom they called Aji. Meera had chosen to dedicate her life to the decoration of their home: it was decisively beautiful and westernized, unlike the barren walls and the dank fluorescent light of Mitra's apartment. To Mitra, their fish tank and their television and their leather recliner seemed like images out of a luscious, distant fantasy that had come to life.

Because his mother was often busy with whatever project she was undertaking, Nikky was left to his own devices, and thus Mitra was left to Nikky's devices. Nikky was the same age as Mitra, except a little bit bigger, with a wider set face and a perfectly cut head of hair. His mother often dressed him in nice collared shirts, which Nikky would ruin by the end of the day, after playing furiously around the house or in the park. Nikky was a rather wild child, unruly and more talkative than most his age: he would speak freely regardless of whom he was with, and would say whatever crossed his mind regardless of whom he hurt. When Aji would make them lunch, Nikky would often theatrically spit out his food and refuse to eat another bite, and Aji would have to take them to McDonalds at Nikky's insistence. If his mother asked him to quiet

down, he was even louder, simply to spite her. All of this surprised Mitra, who – compared to the silent nature of his own home – rarely made any noise at all. But it also intrigued him, for Nikky had much more than him, and although he was unwilling to share, it was still exciting for Mitra to see him play with whatever new toy he'd gotten. He enjoyed cricket, and had a small pink plastic bat that he would carry around the house with him during all hours. Sometimes, he and Mitra would play, but this usually consisted of Nikky hitting Mitra's pitch and watching it bounce all over the house with a gleeful shout. "Did you see that one?" he would yell to Mitra. "Run and get it – throw me another!"

To Mitra, these days with Nikky were often exhausting, but also exhilarating. He looked forward to them, and at the same time dreaded them, knowing that it would be a nonstop event, for Nikky rarely took time to rest, even when they were watching the television set. When they did, he would jump up and down on the couch and insist Mitra join him, as he sprang higher and higher. "Your mother works all day, so that's why we let you come here," Nikky would say to Mitra. "So if we let you come here, you'll have to play with me – otherwise it's not fair." And although Mitra felt himself essentially another one of Nikky's toys, he didn't mind. It wasn't the exploration of the street, but it was relatively easy to follow Nikky's instructions. Under Nikky's command, life was simple, and Mitra enjoyed this.

Sometimes Mitra would try to repeat the stories that Kaka had told him, but he soon realized that he wasn't nearly as good of a storyteller as Kaka, and that Nikky wasn't very interested. "I know those stories," he would say, groaning. "I've got a video that has all of them in it." Mitra couldn't understand how someone could not enjoy these stories, but he didn't argue with Nikky. He continued to toss the ball and jump on the couch.

Often Nikky would take up a new hobby, before giving it up a few days later. He tried classical dance, but hated the instruction; he tried Bollywood dance, but hated that instruction too. He tried swimming, but hated how difficult it was – and although he fond of cricket, he didn't really want to practice it much. Once, Nikky had seen a guitar on television, and demanded that his mother get him one, saying that he wanted to be a famous musician. She had gotten it, and Mitra was at the house when she handed Nikky the glistening instrument: it was black, with nylon strings, and Nikky held it in his hands carefully – even he knew the majesty of this machine. He plucked at a few strings, looking up at Mitra and smiling as they resonated through the house; Mitra watched, fixated. He could see his cousin's tiny fingers working against the wires, glistening in the light of the afternoon sun; he could almost reach out and grab the noise reverberating around them. Nikky plucked at them a few more times, before strumming the guitar, and then finally drilling his hand along its strings, making loud sonic noises and singing at the top of his lungs while Mitra laughed.

After about fifteen minutes of this, however, Nikky got bored and cast the guitar aside, and when it came time for his first lesson, he had sworn off the instrument, refusing to touch it. “I don't want to learn how to hold down strings,” he said, when Mitra asked why he quit. “It's all just boring stuff. And it hurts too.” The guitar ended up in the closet as Nikky moved on to his next endeavor.

Mitra, however, could not seem to forget the guitar. Its beauty was one thing – the sheer aesthetics of it – but the sound the strings had made when he had watched Nikky pluck them: it was truly incredible. He asked Kaka about it. “I had a good friend who played the sitar,” Kaka said. “He was very good at it; he played professionally for a while – might still be for all I know. A beautiful instrument, absolutely beautiful.” Mitra had hoped that Kaka would perhaps have a

story about the sitar – like Krishna and his magic flute – but this was all Kaka had to say. Instead of quenching his thirst, however, it only made Mitra want to know more – and want one more. He considered asking Nikky to have his, for the guitar was simply collecting dust, but he was afraid to ask – he’d never asked Nikky for anything before, and this might make Nikky want it more if Mitra expressed interest. He didn’t want to risk this, so he decided that if he really wanted one he should ask his mother and perhaps she would get him one herself.

It was nearing Mitra’s sixth birthday, and when he’d gotten up the courage he went to her one day while she was working in the kitchen. “Ai?” he said cautiously. “For my birthday... I know what I want. I want a guitar.”

This had apparently been the wrong approach, for Maha soured immediately. “Don’t I do enough for you?” she snapped. “Now you expect something more for your birthday? And a guitar at that? Do you have any idea how expensive that would be?”

“But I really, really want one,” he pleaded.

“Wanting is not something we have the luxury of, Mitra.”

Mitra paused for a moment, and then pushed forward. “Nikky has one.” At this, Maha – who had continued making dinner during their conversation – stopped, lowered the onion she was cutting, and turned to Mitra. She had her hands on her hips.

“So,” she said, looking down at Mitra, who suddenly felt very small in the presence of his mother, “Nikky has one, so you think you should get one? Is that what you think?”

When Mitra didn’t answer, she continued: “And you expect me to get it for you? Because Nikky has one?” Mitra looked at the floor, embarrassed for having asked. “Listen, Mitra, we all want things. But we can’t always have them. There are lots of things that I want that I don’t have. And there are lots of things that Nikky probably has that you want. That’s just how it is.

Now, I'm sorry I can't get you everything you want, but a guitar is too much." She turned back to her food, and as she continued cutting the onion, she said, "You'll be lucky if I get you anything, after how you've acted today. Asking me for something more... Bap rei...." And then, as she sighed to herself, Mitra slowly turned from the kitchen and left, his face red with shame.

This became, in a way, Mitra's first view of inequality – and his first realization that he had less than others. As Nikky pranced around his house with all that he could ever hope for, Mitra felt as though he was living in a separate world: a realm he could only watch, but not enter. When he was with Nikky, it was as if he was dreaming, before entering back into the reality of his own home, and the silence that it entailed. And although he wasn't jealous of Nikky and his possessions, he did find himself wondering why – why did Nikky have more than him? What had Nikky done that he hadn't? Had he himself offended the gods in some way, and this was his punishment? Or perhaps the punishment was having to see this world – to know that it existed and that it would never be his – and that at the end of the day he would have to return to his own hollow.

When Mitra turned six, he began school. It crept into his life flawlessly, until one day he realized that he was in a classroom he didn't recognize, with people he didn't know. And trying to find a place in this new world – a drastic change from what he had known – it was almost too much for him. The twirling fan above him, emitting a dull wave of breeze; the rusted metal desks of blue, green, yellow, red; the bottle on the windowsill that housed a dying plant – it was all so different, so nubile, and yet so disgustingly old. Instead of taking him to the pharmacy, Mitra's mother now walked him to the iron gates in the morning, where he gazed up at the peeling, baby blue colored building. He had the sudden feeling that he was alone in the world – that he was the last child alive, left behind, and that this was where he was doomed to spend his days.

He had been thrown into prison, and they had not told him when he'd be released. They squeezed him into blue shorts and a yellow button-down; they put a dark blue tie on him, choking and chafing his neck; they gave him socks and loafers and a backpack; they did all of this, and never asked him what he thought about it all. He was a doll they dressed and sent off to school. He was scared, and it was a fear he had not felt before. He didn't want to be scared; he wanted to be like the heroes of Kaka's stories – he wanted to be brave. But he couldn't turn away from his heart, and the knowledge that the prison doors would be shut with him inside each day, inevitably, indefinitely.

After school, he'd walk these new streets back to the pharmacy, where Kaka would call to him, "There's the big schoolboy! Look at you – what a uniform! I'd go to school if they gave me clothes like that!" He would laugh at his joke, and Mitra would smile – but now he only stood beside the old man, for fear that sitting would get his trousers dirty.

Mitra wanted things to be the same between him and Kaka, and although Kaka still told him stories, things felt irrevocably different. Maybe it was because Mitra had moved off of the street that they had made their home; maybe it was because he was being told something other than stories now; or maybe it was simply because he was older and the stories were, in fact, only stories. He had tried to pray for beauty in the school, and it hadn't come. Kaka had been wrong, and since he wanted so desperately for Kaka to be right, he had to stop listening to him. It was the saddest Mitra had ever felt, and he wanted the old man to hold him, to tell him it was going to be all right, even when they both knew it wouldn't be.

Mitra never found himself intrigued by his new education. He wasn't particularly smart or motivated, and he felt like the school hated him because of this. His teacher was a large, sweaty man with a thin mustache, and disappearing hair that he combed over the top of his

shining scalp; he was constantly pasting it down to his head as he spoke. He wore a short-sleeved button-down and a pair of black slacks, and had large, thin-rimmed glasses with two bridges across the center. He often pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the perspiration from his brow, but within a few minutes he was dripping again. He frequently yelled, and Mitra was deathly afraid of him. He could see the sweat glimmering in his mustache, and this scared him even more. All of Mitra's energy was devoted to keeping the man from acknowledging his existence; however this wasn't particularly hard because Teacher didn't seem to care about any of the children.

Mitra interacted little with the other students, and generally kept to himself. The only thing that connected them was their communal standing whenever an adult entered, saying in unison, "Good morning, Teacher. Namaste, Teacher." Other than this, he felt no association with them and their shared experience. He would see the other kids, playing and chasing each other after school, but he rarely followed them, choosing instead to leave as quickly as possible. This made him lonely, but he didn't desire companionship – he desired freedom, and inside the iron gates he could not achieve this.

When Mitra was eight, he was finally noticed. It was the day before Gandhi Jayanti, and Mitra was sitting at his desk while Teacher spoke to the children. He had written Gandhi's name on the board and was telling them about all of the wonderful things he had done for the country, as Mitra drifted towards the window where a bird that was building its nest in a tree. Mitra could see the bird between the bars that separated them; it was pecking away at the twigs it had collected, occasionally looking up in alarm when a car honked. Next to Mitra, he heard the scribble of his desk mate's pencil, as she furiously took down Gandhi's name.

“Now, in honor of the day,” Teacher said, pacing back and forth in the front of the room, “I want all of you to compose a poem to praise Gandhi and all he’s done for us.” He stopped and folded his hands behind his back in front of the children, who were all still staring at him. “Now!” he said loudly, and there was a furious rustle of paper and pencils as the children began to move frantically, pulling out their notebooks and adjusting themselves.

Mitra, who had been watching the bird outside, looked around him as the children began writing; silence had filled the classroom, occasionally disrupted by the squeaks of the desks as the children squirmed, anxious with their own energy. Mitra turned back to his own desk and pulled out his notebook, opening it to a new page and placing his pencil to the paper, slowly writing out the word *Babu*. Next, moving his hand to the right, he wrote *Babi*. He continued: *Kaku, Kaki, Kaka*, and now he was mumbling the words out to himself: “Bapu, bapi, bapa, papa, papi, mami, mama...” He was writing, letting the words fall onto the page from his mouth, as he spit his poem out: *Bapu, baba, bapa...*

Suddenly there was a loud wringing voice behind him, the shrill sound of a child: “Teacher! Teacher! Mitra is writing mean things on his paper!”

Mitra’s first thought was that a boy knew his name, and he wanted to turn back and look at him, to know him – but then he felt the sinking sensation taking over his stomach: he was being identified, and he was no longer invisible. He wanted to run in that moment, but a heat was taking him over that was numbing his arms and legs with an intense burn. Teacher, who had been reading something at his desk as his glasses slipped down the brim of his nose, took his index finger and pushed them back up into place, standing before the class. “What?” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“Mitra! He’s writing mean things about Gandhi! When tomorrow is Gandhi Jayanti, sir!”

Mitra still didn’t look back at his accuser, but instead looked down at his paper, to see if there was any validity in this boy’s statements. All he could see was the rudimentary poem about Gandhi – nothing much to show, let alone to find offensive. But as he looked down, he heard Teacher’s heavy steps moving towards his row, and then finding his desk. The footsteps stopped, and Mitra looked up at the man, who was even sweatier close up. He was holding out a hand.

“All right now,” he said, his other hand on his hip, “let’s see what you’ve got there. What have you been writing?”

When Mitra didn’t move, Teacher snatched the notebook from the desk and held it close to his face, pulling his glasses back down to read the paper. His eyes searched over the document before stopping, pausing, and then tossing the notebook back onto Mitra’s desk. “So,” he said, as the whole class waited in an eerie silence, “you think you’re rather clever now, don’t you?”

Teacher was standing with his hands on his hips, glaring down at Mitra. Mitra looked back at the paper and then up at the teacher. He didn’t know what to say. His senses were swarming within him, and he was afraid he might throw up. “Think you’re rather funny, do you now? Think you’re a clever little boy? Well, what do you have to say for yourself?” When Mitra still didn’t answer, he picked up the notebook again and began reading aloud: “Babu, bapi, baba, papa, papi...” He stopped. He looked at Mitra, and threw the notebook back down. “So you think your little poem here is funny, do you? Rhyming Gandhi’s name with ‘papi’ like that? Calling one of our greatest, most blessed men a sin? And so close to his day, of all days! How shameless, utterly shameless!” Teacher was now shaking his head and crossing his arms. His voice was loud and reaching into every corner of the classroom. It was one of the few moments Mitra witnessed where none of the children were fidgeting in their desks.

“You know, if it weren’t for Gandhi, you wouldn’t be sitting here. You’d be out on the street, begging for change from rickshaws. Performing little tricks with a hoop and clapping your hands together. Smacking yourself on the head. And maybe it would have been better that way!” He was practically yelling now. “This is how you thank him for all he’s done for you? You mock him? How dare you! What do you have to say for yourself?”

Mitra sat, his whole body aching in terror, as Teacher looked down at him, panting from his anger. “Well, what do you have to say then?”

Mitra didn’t move. “Speak, boy!” Teacher yelled, and Mitra shook a bit, his eyes blinking furiously. His voice would not work – he could not find it living within him anymore. After a few moments, Teacher stomped back to his desk, shuffling around in his drawer and pulling out a long wooden ruler, charging back to Mitra with the ruler raised. “Place your hands on the desk,” Teacher said. Mitra looked at the ruler gleaming in the light, and watched it vibrating back and forth from its journey to his desk. “Put your hands on the desk!” Teacher screamed, and Mitra jumped, letting his hands fly out before him, placing his palms down. His hands were shaking a bit, and he was holding back tears that were starting to blossom in his eyes. The silence of the room seemed to be exploding around him, and he could feel the eyes of the children boring into his flesh – he could feel everything in that moment. “Now, you will be reprimanded for each word you’ve written there, for they’re all an offense to our great leader!” There were fourteen words on the page. “This will make you understand the seriousness of what you’ve done. And the seriousness of what Gandhi did!”

And then the gleaming light was coming down and a sharp cry was emitting from the ruler as it found Mitra’s hand and a pain shot through him, a tight blow that set fire to his nerves and moved throughout his body. But before he could register the pain, and recover from it,

Teacher was coming down on the other hand and it was beginning again, sprawling all over him like echoes through a cave. The room filled with the sound, bouncing against the walls and knocking over desks, breaking windows, causing the school to crumble until there was nothing left. And then it continued, until Mitra knew the seriousness of what he'd done, and the seriousness of what Gandhi had done.

When Teacher was through, Mitra unclenched his eyes and his jaw, and slowly looked down at what had once been his hands. They were severely red, and his left hand was bleeding a bit. Teacher was still standing above him, hitting the ruler against his palm, smiling slightly. Mitra fought back the tears; his lips were quivering, and to keep himself from bursting apart he looked down into his lap and let his eyes swim in and out of focus. Finally he heard the footsteps of Teacher moving back to his desk, heard the creak of the chair as he sat back down, and then the scribble of pencils starting up once again. It was only then that Mitra started crying, silently, to himself. Whether it was the shame or the pain, he didn't know. It had melded together within him to create another being, something he couldn't reckon with.

He left school with his hands in his pockets, as the sun fell into a deep red around him, and everything seemed to fill with the heat that was pounding against his chest. Every step that he took was another that moved him away from his humiliation, and yet seemed to bring him intimately closer to it, as if he had been branded for life, and now wore the mark for what he'd done. He hadn't known that *papi* meant sin, but that wasn't of much consequence now. What truly mattered was that he had done wrong, and he realized that the punishment wasn't the beating, but the school itself – it was the answer for his own sins. What those sins were, he wasn't exactly sure, but he knew they existed. He himself, he belonged to the leagues of people visiting the pharmacy – he was one of them, amongst the suffering. He suddenly pitied them, as

he pitied himself. They were all wrongdoers, and he must now be with his people. And as he walked home, he saw the suffering all around him: the dilapidated shacks, with women squatting outside, cleaning pots with their hands; the men peeing freely, as the smell of urine fell into the air and continued on; the babies who lay crying on the side of the road with no one to care for them; the dogs with open sores, dirty blood tracing their fur; and the motors, all headed into the fire, no one to save them from the flames. And it was then that he truly felt like he was in Pune – the Pune he hadn't known about, but now could not turn away from. The Pune that had tried to hide from him, but could no longer be hidden. He belonged to them now, to the souls below him and above him. This was the fate he had received, and the punishment was the prison he would return to in the morning.

When he got to pharmacy, Kaka's pillow was empty. It sat alone, waiting for its owner, however its owner never came. Mitra stared at it for a moment, his hands still in his pockets. Then he went up to the pharmacy to greet his mother.

When Maha saw her son's hands she didn't yell at him. Instead, she sighed and said, "Babu is a great man, Mitra. You had no right to say those things about him, even if you were only making a rhyme." Additionally, she refused to provide any relief for him. "If your teacher wanted your hands mended, he would have done it himself. No, those will heal when they are ready."

Other than this, she did not make reference to what had happened, even as he winced that night while eating. She showed him no anger, but she also showed him no mercy – and it was this ambivalence that was hardest for Mitra. He would have rather seen an emotion attached to his agony than nothing at all.

The following day as Mitra exited the school, a small boy stopped him. “Hey,” the boy said, turning Mitra towards him. He was about the same size as Mitra, but had a round face like a rupee coin, and wide eyes that seemed to be brimming with tears. “Let me see your hands.”

Mitra pulled his hands out of his pockets. They were still very red, and the left one was beginning to scab; Mitra felt the shame beginning to wash over him once again. The boy examined Mitra’s hands, and reached up with his own to run his fingers over the wounds. He paused for a moment, looking down at their connection.

“Listen,” the boy said as he released Mitra, “I was the one who told Teacher about what you had written. And... well, I wouldn’t have said anything if I’d known he would do that to you. And I thought you were doing it on purpose – I didn’t know that you were just having fun. I thought you were being mean to Gandhi... So I told on you... And I’m sorry I did.”

The boy wasn’t looking at Mitra, but instead watching his feet as they shuffled back and forth on the blacktop. “Why are you telling me this?” Mitra asked, trying to find the boy’s eyes. The boy didn’t answer, looking around the schoolyard as if he didn’t want to be overheard.

“Because,” he said finally, “because I feel guilty. Your hands are hurt because of me. And I’m sorry about it. And I wanted to tell you. It was my fault.”

Mitra, seeing the tears ready to pour down the boy’s face, spoke quickly: “No, it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have been writing that – you were only trying to stop me; you were right to tell Teacher. I deserved to be punished.”

The boy didn’t seem to be listening to Mitra, lost in his own guilt. Mitra, trying to find a common ground in the awkwardness that lay between them, remembered that the boy had known his name – that’s how he had told Teacher on him. And so, curiously, he said: “What’s your name?”

The boy turned back to Mitra, and his eyes cleared a bit. “My name is Shree.”

Perhaps it was Shree’s guilty conscious, or Mitra’s intense need to find someone that he could communicate with, but after their first interaction the two became friends quickly. They had no criteria for who they wanted in their lives, except that they knew they wanted someone. And each boy was someone, however insignificant they might have felt in the greater world. So they began a friendship, almost instantly forgetting that it was built upon one boy’s betrayal of the other.

Shree lived near the pharmacy, and so the two would walk together after school, discussing that day’s class and how sweaty Teacher’s mustache had been. After Teacher’s beating of Mitra, Shree had decided that the man was certainly no good, and this brought the two even closer, as only a shared disdain can. They also were both growing, slowly but surely, and moving through Pune together was a way to share that growth. They would walk with the dogs, who would follow them from one block to the next, where their territory ended and another dog’s began, and they would name them: Amitabh, Kishore, Prahlad – whatever name came to their mind first; and eventually Shree began to grab Mitra’s hand as they walked, pressing their palms together as Mitra had seen other men do, but had never done himself. He began to feel a certain warmth, knowing that at the end of the day Shree’s hand would be there, a hand that held his in budding friendship. This warmth, however, left him when they parted ways, and Mitra found himself back at the pharmacy next to Kaka’s empty pillow, until one day even the pillow was gone and there was nothing by which to remember his friend. Mitra had trouble conceiving of Kaka’s departure, and whether it had been willing or forced. He had no proof of Kaka’s existence, and it was difficult for him to be completely sure that Kaka had been real. To

disappear into nothingness, along with the stale wind: how could Mitra define an absence as a human, even if he'd known the human so well?

Mitra repeated Kaka's stories as best he could, and Shree loved them. Shree told him that he had a book with most of the stories in it, and after a while he began bringing it in his backpack, and the two would sit outside of the pharmacy reading it together, marveling at the colorful pictures. Other times they would go to Shree's house, a small apartment with a balcony that overlooked a large park. Shree's father worked at the police station behind the foreign visa desk, and Mitra would occasionally go with Shree to visit his father, where the two would watch as visitors of all shapes and sizes fought towards Shree's father with their papers. Shree's father would slowly sip on his tea and take the papers, reading through them, marking them, and then sending the patron on his or her way. It was a thankless, taxing job, but Shree's father did it with a smile, and Mitra liked him very much – the way his eyes still seemed full of love after a long day. In the evening Shree's father would take the boys out for Cad-B, and they would laugh when Shree's father got cream stuck in his mustache.

Maha also took a liking to Shree and didn't mind having the boy over at her home, fixing him meals, and even letting him stay late into the night. It seemed to Mitra that they were both grateful to have someone other than the two of them in the home. As the boys played, Maha would hum to herself in the kitchen, and Mitra could almost hear the faint whisper of happiness in her voice, a sound he seldom heard.

Time passed, and the boys grew up. This was something that happened against their wills, for they were extremely happy where they were. Mitra and Shree lived their lives, and time only added complexity – complexity that they didn't need. The simplicity of life had been so

brilliant to the two of them: the dogs and the stories and the Cad-B, and their own minds and hearts.

Nikky, on the other hand, relished in the growth. He had taken to cricket, and was exceeding at it, despite his displeasure with practice. Mitra would go and watch his cousin's games, and see the intensity in Nikky's eyes, channeled into the sport. Nikky was growing, and as he grew he realized the power behind growth, and he particularly enjoyed this. He didn't jump on his couch much anymore, and instead spent his time with friends, out in the city, reveling in his future. And as much as Mitra felt comfort with Shree, he could also see Nikky maturing, and found himself wanting this as well. His identity pulled in two directions: deep into the future and deep into the past.

Nikky took Mitra with him when he went out into the world, and yet Mitra felt like it wasn't because he enjoyed his company. As they moved he could see his cousin's eyes darting around wildly, but he rarely ever looked at Mitra. "What are you looking at?" Mitra would ask, but Nikky would only shrug and walk a bit quicker, as if Mitra had discovered a hidden desire within him – even if Mitra couldn't necessarily place it. He tried following his cousin's eyes, but all he saw were the windows of luxury shops, sporting ripped jeans and tight shirts – and then his own image thrown back at him from the glass: small, insignificant, wide-eyed, gliding past in a mirage of youth.

One night, after walking the street for hours, Nikky stopped Mitra and sat him down on the curb. "Wait here," he said, "I'll be right back." Mitra watched as his cousin walked into the street, dodging a few motorbikes, and then ran to the other side, where he moved down an alley and disappeared from sight.

It was growing late, and Mitra was expected home in a half hour. It would take him at least ten minutes, if he ran. He looked out at the street, the cool night air making the leaves shake feverishly in the wind. Across from him a man was standing by his fruit stand while his customer felt the oranges for ripeness.

Nikky appeared from the alley, his hands in his pockets, looking back and forth down the street. He jogged across, and sat down next to Mitra. “All right,” he said, “I got them.”

From his pocket he produced a package of cigarettes, and turned them over in his hands. They were in a black box with *Marlboro* sprawled in white on the front; there was a large sticker on it that read *Warning: Smoking Kills*. Underneath was a picture of a person with protruding lungs, horribly mangled from years of smoking; it looked as though the model had placed two dead fish on his chest. Nikky opened the package, and pulled out a book of matches. “Okay,” he said, “you’ve never smoked before, right?”

“No,” Mitra said. “Where did you get those?”

“From the pan shop – where do you think?” he said, lighting a match and illuminating the night with a shade of orange. He brought the match up to the cigarette, until it was aglow and burning slightly. Nikky took a deep inhale and paused for a moment, his mouth closed as the cigarette danced between his two fingers. Then, in one breath, he blew the mist out of his nose as it grew and distorted in the air before them. The smoke curled and changed, a metamorphosis that Mitra couldn’t capture. Mitra watched the smoke until it disappeared in the night.

“Okay,” Nikky said. “Your turn.” Mitra hesitated. “Come on.” Nikky sounded angry. “You come out with me, and pretend like you’re one of us, but then you pull back whenever I invite you to do something.” Nikky was taking another drag. “It’s rude,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re family, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Mitra said.

“So then do it,” Nikky said, brandishing the cigarette before him. Mitra paused for a moment before taking it from his cousin’s hand. It was hot in his fingers. “Good,” Nikky said, “now what you want to do is inhale, hold in the smoke, and then blow it out through your nose.”

Mitra looked at the cigarette and its orange glow. It felt as if it was crumbling in his hand and he was afraid he might drop it. Ash was collecting on the end, and it looked like an old beehive that had fallen to the ground and decomposed. “Do it,” Nikky said, and Mitra jumped a bit at his words, lost in his thoughts, before putting the cigarette to his mouth and inhaling.

A rush of heat swam down his throat, where the smoke lit his esophagus; he coughed loudly and it shot back out of him in bursts as he wheezed. Nikky was roaring with laughter. “There we go! Go on, do it again, you didn’t get any in there,” Nikky said, but Mitra shook his head, still coughing.

Nikky took back the cigarette as Mitra coughed, but after he’d taken a few drags he passed it back to Mitra, who took another inhale, coughing horribly again, but successfully getting the smoke to come out of his nose. The back of his throat was reeking, and he desperately wanted water. The boys finished the cigarette, smoked another one, and then Mitra insisted on leaving, already ten minutes late for his curfew.

As he ran home, his throat burned and his eyes watered; he tore down the cobblestone sidewalk, alit by the headlights whizzing past him. His feet moved below him; he ripped into the city with no mercy. He was an animal running through its forest, leaping over carcasses, in search of its home; and he could almost feel a presence beside him, something running with him, a fluttering near his ear – and yet when he looked there was only the night air. When he finally

made it he was sweating and his throat was still hurting. He walked up the steps, trying to return his breathing to normal. He was now twenty minutes late.

When he entered the house the hall was already dark, but the kitchen was lit and Mitra sped toward it, finding his mother washing dishes in the sink. She kept her back to him as she spoke: “When I give you a time to be home by, I mean that time – not half an hour after.” She turned to him, rotating a dish in her hands. “If I wanted you here at nine, I would have said nine.”

She rinsed the plate and laid it out to dry, moving onto another dish. “I ate without you; I was hungry. I’ll make you some Maggi, though, if you dry these dishes.”

Mitra silently moved towards her, grabbing a rag and beginning to dry. After a few moments in silence, Maha lifted her head, sighed a deep breath, and dropped her dish into the sink, making suds fly up in its wake. “All right,” she said to him, her eyes clasped shut. “So you’re smoking now?”

Mitra didn’t look up at her. He continued drying the dishes, until she opened her eyes. “Look at me, Mitra! I can smell it on you!”

Mitra lowered the dish and turned to her, trying not to meet her gaze. “You know, Mitra, I’m tired. I work all day, and I prepare dinner for you, and you choose not to be here. Now I’m going to bed. You can make yourself dinner.” She wiped her hands on a cloth and headed towards the doorframe, stopping one last time. “I tried, Mitra. Dev baghto, I tried. But you don’t seem to care much about that. You don’t seem to care much about anything.”

And with that, she left him alone in the kitchen, as he heard her enter the bedroom and shut the door. Mitra stood in the silence of the room, his face red and his throat burning.

He finished washing the dishes, dried them and put them away, and then bathed himself, still not eating. Then, slowly entering the bedroom, he lay beside his mother. He could hear her

breath as he looked up at the ceiling, where a cobweb was dangling in the breeze. And as he wallowed in his shame, his mother spoke: “Sleep on the floor. You smell like smoke.”

Mitra, sinking deeper into sadness, slowly moved off of the bed and onto the floor, but as he reached for his pillow, his mother spoke again: “No. You’ll stink that up, and I’m not washing it. You sleep alone tonight.” Mitra moved silently back to the floor and let his head fall on the broken marble, the cool surface igniting his skin. His bones felt immensely heavy: he could feel all of them moving and interacting, attempting to adjust but finding no solace. And as they shifted and worked their way against the earth, Mitra stared off into the space before him, wondering what lay there waiting.

And yet the next day when Nikky called, Mitra did not hesitate to follow. He left the apartment, stopped off to get Shree, and then the two walked to meet Nikky at Kothrud Depot. Soon, they were scaling the hills behind the city: the three of them and another boy named Ajit. Ajit was large, with a firm face that made it seem as though he was constantly clenching his jaw shut. Mitra feared him, for he was often mean-spirited and cruel, much to Nikky’s delight.

“Look at these chappals, Nikky. Did they belong to your older sister, salya?” Ajit said to Shree as they climbed. Shree looked down at his chappals and shook his head, grabbing onto a rock and pulling himself up. It was late, but the sun didn’t know it, thinking there were hours left to burn. “Tell your sister she’s got good style. I think I saw her walking the streets the other night – she’s worth five rupee, eh, Nikky?”

Nikky laughed, but he didn’t say anything; he was focused on the mountain. This was how Nikky responded when a challenge presented itself: he dropped his malice for a moment and plunged through, knowing every possible outcome and caring only about the one that would occur. Only afterwards would he boast, and revel in his self-indulgence.

Mitra looked back down the mountain as they climbed, his own chappals slipping beneath his feet; his pants were dirty, and his hands dirtier – he knew Ai would surely punish him when she came across the stains. He looked out farther, into the city below him. When he gazed upon Pune, it almost did seem unified – a point on a map that could be easily explained. But when inside it, he knew it had no identity, and he had no identity within its confines. It was a puzzle put together haphazardly, the pieces pushed into slots unwillingly until it made something, but not exactly something you could decipher or recognize: a world held together by its proximity to itself, and nothing else. Up here, however, it was something: it was a living, breathing organism. It was supernatural and spacious and everything that love and earth had called for upon its birth; although once it had acquired this, it called back into space and time and wanted it banished. That was Pune to him – and yet, once back inside it he would lose this feeling, perhaps forever.

Nikky and Ajit were racing, even though they'd never admit to it; each boy's breath was jagged, each boy's pulse was pounding – almost as one as they charged up the mountain. The sweat and the earth made a new mountain, and they climbed that as well. It was competition that transcended age and would continue after all had gone and the mountain was the only thing left to remind them of this.

The two boys reached a plateau, and stopped to look behind, surveying their work. But they didn't see the same city that Mitra saw: they saw an enemy that needed conquering. And they would gleefully conquer it – if it hadn't been there, they would have been aimless.

Ajit wiped the sweat from his brow and spit into the earth as Shree trudged onto the plateau and Mitra followed. The four boys had gained similar standing, but instead of letting it stay this way, Nikky turned and began plotting the land. He looked up the mountain, trying to

decide whether to go further; there were thorns ahead, which he didn't feel like facing, but he also longed to see the other side of the mountain. Deep down, however, he knew that he didn't want the finality of it all; he wanted something left behind, left to be desired. So instead he moved along the plateau, scooping up a rock and tossing it down the mountain, where it sprawled on a bush and swept across the landscape. He walked further, until something caught his eye – blackness in the daylight. He moved towards it, and realized it was a circular patch of grass that stood above the rest of the earth, cemented in the ground, clearly manmade. In the center was a hole – maybe a square meter wide – that led into darkness below. Nikky could make out a pale, dirty bottom, but how deep exactly it was, he couldn't tell. Perhaps three meters, maybe four. He studied it for a moment, before he heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Ajit standing with him.

“What'd you find there, Nikky?” he said, resting his arm on Nikky's shoulder and leaning against him.

“Don't know, some hole or something.” Nikky was still studying it.

“Cement, looks like. Wonder what it's for.”

Shree and Mitra were coming along and Shree was calling, “It's a water tank, for when there's been a drought. They used to store water in it, back a while ago.”

“Wow, we've got a regular Nana over here. You've got an answer for everything, don't you, salya?” Ajit said, picking up a stone and tossing it at Shree. Shree held up a hand to block it, and the rock fell on his forearm. Mitra moved forward towards the hole, situating himself beside Nikky and staring into its depths. “This thing must be years old,” Nikky was saying, but voices were beginning to fade away as Mitra made the hole his home. He could see the bottom, like Nikky had, but he also could see beyond that, into the parts of the hole that the hole did not want

him to see. He could see its fears, its dreams, its lives, its incarnations; and suddenly, he found himself pitying the hole and the life it had lived here alone. What was alone, anyway? It had the sun and the bugs and the animals and the foliage and the wind – but was it alone? Did it have a place in the small point that this city was on a map, any more of a place than Mitra himself had?

From behind him he felt a force, and his body was a stone sprawling; it caught on concrete and everything was black and white and color and was shooting everywhere into the small hole. He fell with a thud on his feet, before the rest of his body fell too, collapsing to the floor as a hot pain shot through him. He still couldn't see, and he could only hear what wasn't making sound, until his world came spinning back and he was gasping for his world. He put a hand to his nose, and a warm liquid became him. He looked down at it, and saw the dark red blood upon his fingers, an iron he could not penetrate. Up to the heavens he looked for the light that gave him function, and he heard the guttural cackle that had encompassed everything. Above him, Shree was staring down into the pit, calling his name until sound was beginning, and Mitra was able to return to this earth.

“Mitra! Mitra! Are you all right?” Mitra groped for the earth, but found the concrete instead and pulled himself up until he was standing in the cavern. The laugh resonated in the darkness, and Mitra wished it would stop, not because it was at his expense, but because it was becoming the earth. Shree was letting a hand fall down, scraping the darkness, and Mitra stood staring at him. He must have been a quarter of a meter from Shree – he could perhaps jump and catch it.

But just as he lifted his hand and measured the distance between him and his friend, there was a loud yell that came into its own: “No! You drop that hand!” And then an endless echo.

Shree turned to Ajit. “What do you mean?” he said. “You can't just leave him in there!”

“Are you telling me what to do?” Ajit was pushing a finger into Shree’s chest that made him fall back a pace.

“Come on, Ajit, stop playing – pull him out of there.” Shree’s voice was quivering a bit, and it was higher than usual.

“You’re still telling me what to do,” Ajit was saying, taking a step towards Shree.

“I’m not telling you what to do, but just pull him out already, will you? I mean, he’s bleeding down there.”

“No one is pulling him out of there. He’s got to learn that when you fall, you pull yourself back up. The number one rule of life.” Ajit’s eyes were boring into Shree. “No one is pulling him out of there. Isn’t that right, Nikky?”

Nikky had stayed silent during this event, but now he looked up from the ground, startled at his own name. He paused for a moment, as if transcribing Ajit’s words and reading them back to himself.

“Sure,” he said slowly, “whatever, Ajit. Let’s just get out of here – I’m getting hungry.”

Mitra heard all of this inside his home, and it took him a few moments before he began to understand. Shree was talking: “Listen, this isn’t – ”

“No, you listen, salya. If I hear one more word from you, you’re going in there with him. How would you like that?” A long echo reverberated through Mitra’s skull. “Would you like that?” There was still no answer and after Ajit had felt his weight, he turned. “All right, let’s go.” And then Mitra heard the loud lumber of steps moving through the earth.

Nikky stayed, his shadow falling into the cavern, and Mitra found his words. “Nikky,” he called, “Nikky!”

Nikky looked down into the hole, and met Mitra's eyes. There was a pause, where both of them were living and dying and the earth was finding its way back together again. "Nikky, don't leave me here! Help me! Nikky!"

But Nikky, with one final look, turned. And with that final look his eyes lost all meaning, all life, all agency. He was simply a cog in a machine that made things happen the way they happened, without ever signing his name. Then he was gone.

Mitra heard the steps of his friends moving away from him, growing fainter and fainter until he wasn't sure that they had even existed – until they were part of the breeze. He was alone.

Mitra could feel the fear rising in his stomach and his throat, crawling out of him as his heart pounded and his breath quickened and his soul raced. He was alone, he was alone – there was no one. There was only him and the mountain and the gods and the damned. And all of these things – he didn't know if he could trust them. He didn't know if he was real – he had nothing to tell him that he was. He could feel the sun setting, and the heat decaying, and the life dying. He was alone.

The cavern wasn't large: perhaps a diameter of six meters, and yet in its corners he couldn't see anything more than darkness. He wanted to walk to the walls so that he could find something tangible, but doing so would add him to the darkness, and he didn't want to be the darkness – not yet. The panic was taking him over, slowly, like drops of water falling upon his head until he was drenched. He was drowning, and he knew it. There was silence around him; silence he had never felt before. Silence that had a name and a face. You could call out to this silence and it would hear you. He would marry this silence, he would love this silence. The silence would let him in and sweep him up. He knew it would marry him. And so he screamed.

He screamed, his lungs bursting from within his cell, and then again and again and again until the silence put a hand to his mouth and he knew it had won. The sun was setting. Darkness and silence were mating; the sky was bleeding as he bled, and their blood became one – blood brothers with the sky. The shadows were beginning to defend their home, and he was their intruder. He was alone, and he began to cry, the tank filling with his tears.

And then, Mitra heard something. It was a rustling, an echo. And it was coming from within the cavern. His tears ceased, paralyzed by fear. There was something in here with him. He could feel its presence – something other, something else. Out of the shadows he saw it: the sleek brown fur, the wet shining nose, the large innocuous eyes – and then suddenly he was realizing what it was, as it took its shape in the cavern: it was a deer. The creature moved forward out of the darkness and stood before Mitra, its head bowed – and now Mitra was feeling the panic turning; everything seemed to be turning towards him. And then he was reaching out an arm, his shaking hand rising to the deer, so close that he could feel its life shivering near his own – but then the deer was stepping backwards, swallowing itself back up into the darkness. And in the silence that he'd forgotten, Mitra knew it had him – he knew it held whatever was inside of him that needed to be set free. And so, with his own free will, he stepped into the darkness, slowly, cautiously, where he met his fate.

Hours passed, and Mitra lay in silence. The orange glow of dusk was painting the sky, and Mitra felt the walls as he kissed the darkness sweetly: it wasn't fur, but instead a soft skin that seemed to tremble with anxiety as he ran his fingers over it, again and again, as whatever he'd known slowly slipped from his memory and he prepared for what came next.

Another rustling came. This wasn't near him, however; this was outside of the cavern, and it made Mitra's head come back, until he was able to scurry up and find the hole again,

where the last light of day was falling through. He closed his eyes and saw another world, one that he didn't know how to reach, but he knew was there. He could touch it if he wanted to. But he knew that he mustn't dare. He opened his eyes.

There was a man where the sky had once been. The light made him only a silhouette that simultaneously enamored and repulsed Mitra. The man stared down at Mitra for a moment, and the two tried to find happiness in this small place. And then the man was lowering his cane and Mitra was grabbing hold. The man pulled and Mitra heard a moan as he felt himself being lifted from the earth and into the heavens, until he was able to grab onto the side of the cavern and pull himself out.

Mitra grasped the land and breathed. He wanted to eat the earth; he wanted to let it encompass him, to grow over him until he was no longer himself. But then he remembered the man who had freed him, and rose from the ground.

The man was old – older than Mitra had thought; he wore a white kudta and a Gandhi topi, and had a red mark between his brows. His mouth was open and it held four teeth, three of which were particularly blackened. His eyes were yellowed and his skin appeared cracked like clay that had dried and broken. He was holding out a hand with yellowed nails and darkened skin. Mitra looked at the hand, and then back at the man.

“I'm... Thank you,” Mitra said cautiously. “I haven't got any money, or, um...”

The man didn't move, still holding his hand between them, his eyes locked with Mitra's.

“I'm sorry. I've got no money with me. I'm sorry.” But before Mitra could finish, the man was turning away from him, lowering his hand, and limping away, across the plateau and off into the distance until Mitra was alone again.

The darkness had overtaken the earth, the sun banished. Mitra knew it was late, and he knew that he was still alive.

He stumbled down the hill, falling over himself, tripping on the night, as he picked up the earth and the decaying world. He fell and scraped, he stood and panted, until he was rolling, tumbling down the mountain and back onto the street, where he could find himself once again amongst the living. Dogs were around him, milling about. They were the owners of the night, and yet they let him be, as they sniffed the trash and ruled what they could. They watched him, plaintively, but went on their way. He was only the last one.

Mitra found his home and climbed the stairwell, silently opening the door. The lights were off, and yet there was a glow to the apartment. It told him that there was more to be afraid of than holes and darkness and death. There was something in the darkness again, this time a human. His mother switched on the light.

She was sitting, alone, on the divan. Mitra had no idea what time it was, and neither did she. The two stared at each other, and Mitra could feel the blood under his nose cracking, dried and cemented to his face.

“Come here,” she said quietly, and after a pause Mitra moved toward his mother, who was letting the fire grow in her eyes with each passing moment. He came to her and stopped, where there was only air between the two of them. He felt this air, and the silence. It grew and receded.

And then Maha was raising her hand and it was above him, glimmering in the room’s newfound light, and they were here as they’d always been – but then something changed. Something in Maha’s eyes was shifting, as if the heat was melting away into cool, cool water, and then her hand was coming down and touching her son’s broken face softly, feeling her way

across his skin with her warm fingertips. Her eyes searched his pain and her finger fell upon his upper lip, tracing the dried blood. And then she was removing her finger and taking some of him with her, and she looked at it, flakes of red. And then her eyes were meeting her son's again, and what had once been was either ending or returning and she took him in her arms, embracing him as dawn hurtled towards them, far off, but coming – definitely coming.

“Here,” she said, letting her arms fall to his shoulders. “Let’s go in the bathroom. I’ll clean you up.” And then she stood, letting her arms fall to her sides and making them into two humans as she had twelve years before. She headed somewhere and he followed – where she led, it didn’t matter. He would follow.

Mitra was wise enough not to seek out any revenge on Ajit for his crimes. He had learned that a desire for retribution would only leave him dwelling on an incident he’d rather forget; it would leave him trapped within that cavern. Instead, he thought it best to lick his wounds in private and retreat to the sanctity of his mind. Thankfully, nothing was broken; however, the collision between his chin and the concrete would leave a permanent scar, and a constant reminder of the event that he tried to hide from his memory. The following day, Mitra went to school and did not speak of what had happened.

“Listen, I’m sorry,” Shree said as they walked home together. “It was wrong of me to leave you there. I wasn’t a good friend to you.”

“You had no choice,” Mitra replied. “It was either you left or you ended up down there with me.”

“Then I should’ve ended up down there with you!” Shree exclaimed. “I was a coward, I was scared. And I’m sorry.”

“Don’t let it bother you,” Mitra said, “I would have done the same thing.”

“No you wouldn’t have,” Shree insisted. “You would have stood up to them. I know you.” But Mitra wouldn’t hear any more about it. He told Shree that he forgave him, and to let it go. Still, there was an air between them for some time following the incident, as though Shree was still ashamed of his actions. He didn’t treat Mitra any differently, but there was a difference. He spoke a little softer, and he moved a little quicker, as if his eyes had seen something they could not forget, and would not forget.

Nikky, for his part, never mentioned what had happened to anyone. When he saw Mitra the following day with his bandages, he kept his head down and disregarded any injury. It wasn’t until Mitra had healed that he began speaking to his cousin again, slowly and cautiously. And when Mitra would visit Nikky’s house, there was something between them as well. For this, the boys grew apart, and as the years drifted before them they would learn to acknowledge each other, but to do little more than that.

When Mitra turned sixteen, his mother bought him a scooter. Maha herself did not own a scooter – she thought them unsafe – but she was aware that boys who were Mitra’s age had an affinity for them, and she had saved up some money for this very purpose. In addition, Mitra had recently moved up to high school, and the distance was too great for him to walk there and back every day. The rickshaws were becoming particularly expensive to justify, and thus the scooter was purchased.

Mitra passed the driving test, but only after Shree had taught him how to maneuver effectively. Mitra had never ridden so much as a bicycle, and so his sessions with Shree proved dangerous and laughable to the both of them, as Mitra didn’t understand the accelerator or the

clutch, and also didn't know how to ease into the brake. "Don't laugh at me!" Mitra would say, laughing himself. "I've never driven one of these before!"

But Shree was patient and willing to teach, and eventually Mitra learned to drive. Driving was, he realized, about trust: trust that he could balance on the bike properly; trust that the direction and the flow of traffic knew what to do and when to do it; trust in the machine beneath him, that it would not fail him; and trust that the vehicles around him were trusting too. And once Mitra realized this trust, driving became much easier. He felt as if he'd been doing it all his life.

Maha took him to the bike shop and let him pick out the scooter that he wanted. He chose carefully, looking at each price tag and trying to gauge what his mother was willing to spend. In the end, he chose a small grey *Pleasure* model, with a hook for his backpack and a compartment beneath the seat where he could store his things. And as Maha paid, she made sure that Mitra watched her hand the money over – that he saw the sacrifice leaving her possession, all for him. Mitra thanked her profusely, but it was awkward and both of them felt it.

Mitra offered his mother a ride home on the scooter. "No, no, I'm not getting on one of those things," she said, slinging her purse over her shoulder and turning from him, heading back down the street towards their apartment. "Now go – I don't want to see you riding it; it makes me too nervous." She held up a hand, shielding her eyes as her son straddled the scooter and felt the grip in each of his palms. It was like meeting a new friend, or perhaps an old one that he hadn't seen in a while. He already knew the machine – it was only the machine that needed to know him. He turned the key and plunged off into the street.

That first drive was unlike anything Mitra had previously experienced. He felt everything in that moment, as he cruised and glided, weaving in and out of motors. He had joined their orchestra, the beautiful music that the vehicles performed as they whisked through the city – he

was a part of their dance now. He wanted to ride for forever, but he knew that gas was expensive, and so he took it home before long, knowing that he would have his whole life to ride. He parked it outside of their building and climbed the stairs to the apartment. His mother was in the kitchen when he arrived, preparing lunch. “Well?” she said. “Do you like it?”

She turned toward him, but as she did, he caught her eyes and could tell that something was different. In her face was an entity that Mitra felt dwelling inside of him: she looked afraid. Where there had once been a powerful animal there was now simply a woman, and as the fire erupted in his heart, she was blinking furiously, lost in the moment, and then hurriedly turning back to the sink.

Before he could answer her she spoke: “Where did you go?”

Mitra felt his words stumbling out of his mouth: “Down by Koreagon Park.”

Maha was working furiously at the sink, and Mitra watched his mother’s form – the way her muscles tensed against her soft middle, curving down to her hips that swayed slightly as she worked. Mitra looked away. “That’s over a half-hour away,” she said. “I didn’t know you’d be going that far.” Mitra didn’t say anything, looking out the window at the slow sun descending. “I wouldn’t have bought you that stupid thing if I’d known you’d be going down there.” She sighed, and dropped her knife into the sink as it clattered against the metal. “Lunch is ready.”

That night, as they lay in bed, Maha found herself unable to sleep. She could feel her son’s presence next to her, looking up at the ceiling with his eyes open, his body contracting and expanding with each breath – and she tried her best to fall away from the earth; she tucked her arms underneath her breasts and shut her eyes, but it was all futile. Finally, she sat up and got out of bed. As she did, Mitra turned to her. “What is it, Ai?”

Mitra could see her thin outline in the moonlight, hugging herself closely. “Mitra, you’re too old,” she said. “I’m too old. We can’t share this bed anymore.”

“I don’t mind, Ai.”

“Oh, you don’t mind, do you?” There was an irritation in her voice.

Mitra didn’t answer.

“Look, you’re not a child anymore, and you can’t sleep in here with me. You’ve got to go sleep out in the hall. Besides, I need my space anyway. I’ve spent far too long cooped up in here with you.” Mitra paused for a moment, and then rose. “Sleep out there tonight, and I’ll buy a blanket for you tomorrow,” she said as he took his pillow. “I’ve spent this much on you already, what’s a few hundred more rupees?”

Mitra left the room, closing the door behind him. He placed the pillow on the divan and lay down, staring up at the ceiling. It felt different, but everything felt different now. He felt the urge to go back – go back to bed with his mother, give back the scooter, and give back the years so that he was young again. But the slow remedial pull of time was moving and he could not halt it, no matter how hard he tried. He was himself now, and he wasn’t who he had been.

The world changed for Mitra with the scooter, and this was something he had suspected, but was only now realizing. He would coast down the streets, bobbing in and out of rickshaws, cars, bikes, trucks. The city became a person he could talk to. He knew its bumps, its creases, its beauty marks. He came to know a vision he’d only seen in a dream – he came to know the person he’d been living inside. If he was a bird he had learned to use his wings, and flying was beautiful. But at the same time, he could look down and see the pavement rolling away from him, as his speed made the ground a whirling machine – and he knew how close he was to death in these moments, standing at its edge and looking down. He could, with a slight movement, hurl

himself into the abyss of the road: he could destroy himself as easily as he'd been created. And it wasn't a desire to do it that enthralled him – it was his ability to. He could pull away from it all at any moment by pushing himself forward and throwing his body out into the darkness.

Shree shared all of this with him. The two would ride alongside each other, laughing, joking, pointing, following, racing. Each drive was a conversation that lasted until they stopped their bikes: *speaking, riding, speaking, riding, questioning, riding, laughing, riding, laughing, speaking, riding* – it was so organic. For the two boys, who had been friends for so long, it was as if they had discovered something new, together, and now they had no choice but to explore it together. Oftentimes, they would ride to nowhere. They would see everything. They would go to the nicer neighborhoods and marvel at the houses. They would go to the slums and marvel at these too. They would go to the outskirts of the city and feel Pune expanding away from itself – they were pushing its bubble until they felt the bubble burst and they could suddenly breathe – air they had never felt before. India was all around them, and it was loving them wholly. And in the end, they would return, under the cloak of darkness, their headlights looking like diamonds, mapping out their journey. They never spoke of this love, but it had awoken something in both of them: pure pleasure. If they could point it out to each other, they would – but they didn't need to. They both saw it with their own eyes.

“I've decided what I want to do,” Shree said one Friday evening as they sat eating ice cream, their scooter keys dangling from their fingers.

“What do you mean, what you want to do?” Mitra said. He was looking out at the crowd, forcing its way into the ice cream shop. Tons of teenagers stood together, laughing and smiling. He recognized some of them from school.

“I mean, what I want to do. For a career,” Shree said. Mitra turned to face his friend.

“A career,” he said.

“Yeah, you know, an occupation. We’ve got to start thinking about that at some point.”

“Well, yeah, but now?”

“Mitra, it’s only another year until junior college, and then college after that.”

“You’re going to college?”

“I’d like to. With the reservation program, it’s possible. Why, aren’t you?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. It’s not compulsory, is it?” Mitra was noticing a large dragonfly at his foot. It had one of its wings torn, and was trying to fly, continuously knocking into the ground.

“Well, anyway, I think I’ve decided,” Shree said, taking a dip into his sitafal ice cream. “I think I’m going to go into geology.”

“You mean rocks?” Mitra asked.

“No, not rocks – that’s not what geology is in college. I want to be an engineer for an oil company. You need a geology degree for that.”

“Like gasoline?”

“Yeah, like gasoline, you numbskull – what’s wrong with you today? You’re all loopy,” Shree said.

“No, no, I’m fine,” Mitra said, kicking the dragonfly away from him. “So why an oil company?”

“There’s money in it,” Shree said, “according to my father. Besides, I’m sure if you work for an oil company, you get all the free gas you want. I can bike around all day.”

“No way you get free gas,” Mitra laughed. “If you did, everybody would work for an oil company.”

“Well, maybe I won’t get free gas, but I’ll be making enough money to buy all the gas I need,” Shree said. “And enough to buy a sweet motorcycle – 1400 ccs, too. I’ll be coasting down the road. You’ll be eating my dust.”

“Oh yeah?” Mitra said. “Well, I’ll work for a motorcycle company, and I’ll get to try out all the new, fastest models, and then you’ll be the one eating my dust!”

Mitra pushed Shree lightly and the two laughed. “So what do you want to do?” Shree said, as the laughter subsided. He had a hand resting on Mitra’s knee, and was looking into his eyes. Mitra looked down at the hand, and then out at the teenagers eating their ice cream. He could see the flashes of teeth as the teens opened and closed their mouth, their sounds erased by the roar of the street. He looked back down and brushed Shree’s hand off his knee, before meeting his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Shree said, his hand suspended in the air. Mitra watched the hand: a palm that he’d held all those years before, now grown with creases and peculiarities. But then he saw Shree’s face, his eyebrows arched as if hovering before him.

Mitra looked back down at his key. “Nothing,” Mitra said, “I just don’t want you getting your sticky hands all over my nice jeans.” And then he let a smile curl from his lips, and Shree was doing the same, until they were laughing once again and Shree was pushing Mitra, scowling.

They mounted their bikes and sped off into the night. Passing by worlds, all within their own separate spheres, as if moving through a slideshow of their lives. Their old school, with its iron bars lining the windows, the stale air collecting around them; the police station where Shree’s father toiled away, with its high walls draped in barbed wire; the pharmacy with its gate down, silent for the night; the spot where Kaka had once sat, that time had forgotten – that it didn’t know the significance of. That at one point it had meant something to someone – that it

had meant something to two people. And then they were beyond the city, as the roads narrowed and dirtied and wound across the mountains surrounding Pune; the gas stations and the little eateries with tarps pulled overhead. They passed a pack of dogs, who looked up in fear, and the headlights hit their eyes, turning them a pale white in the darkness. They passed two children – a boy and a girl – standing with shirts and no pants. The children’s eyes followed the motorbikes, their heads snapping by as Mitra and Shree passed. Mitra turned to watch them disappearing behind him, illuminated by the red from his brake light. The wind howled in his ears and he pulled his head back forward, and now the air was whipping against his face, roaring into his pores. He closed his eyes and felt all of this – felt this wave, and wished he could borrow it from the ether for more than just these moments. And then he opened his eyes and saw Shree before him, weaving down the road, visible in Mitra’s headlight, an expanding ray that went on into infinity, dimming as it pulled away.

The boys parked their bikes once they reached a height above the city and were able to look down over Pune. “Let’s get up on that hill back there,” Shree said, pointing behind him. “We can get a better view of the city.” He skipped across the street and began moving up the slope in the darkness, and Mitra followed the sound of his friend’s chappals.

They reached the top of the hill and looked down. The city was alive with light: little orbs in the impending darkness. “It’s beautiful,” Shree said, and Mitra nodded in agreement. Or perhaps Shree didn’t say it, and Mitra only heard his friend’s voice in his head, telling him what he knew to be true.

“Look at that,” Shree said, turning behind them, and Mitra followed his gaze. There, nestled against the mountain, was a small lake, shining in the moonlight, its waves rippling in surrender. Mitra’s eyes fell upon the water, and he could feel the chill of its touch even from his

vantage point on the hill. There was a silence to the water, and a peacefulness that seemed more dangerous than anything. “Come on,” Shree said, and then he was moving down toward the lake, and Mitra was following.

They came upon the lake and Shree removed his chappals, dipping his toes into the water. “It’s not too cold,” Shree said, and then he lowered his hands, and felt the clear liquid. Mitra could hear the slow lapping of the water, and removed his own chappals, pushing himself into the brisk future. It chilled him, but not as he expected: it welcomed him more than he’d thought it would. He looked out at the water beckoning him, and felt its questions before he could even ask his own. He turned to Shree: “Should we get in?”

Shree looked at him and smiled. “Sure,” Shree said, and then he was removing his shirt and pants, until he was standing in his underwear – and then these were being flung into the earth as well, and Shree was standing naked next to Mitra. He stepped into the water, until it was up to his shins. “You coming?”

Mitra followed, pulling his shirt over his head and then removing his pants and underwear as well. It was a warm night, but Mitra could feel the hairs on his arms and legs sticking up in favor of this exposure, and he followed Shree into the water. Shree stepped forward, and then he was diving in, with sound exploding onto the scene, disappearing under the water. The waves churned in response, and then Shree reemerged in the distance, his head shaking as the drops scattered off of him. He let out a large shriek and the two boys laughed. “All right, it’s a little cold,” Shree shouted, but then Mitra was running and diving into the water himself, until he was under the silence, the coolness all around him, and then he was popping up next to Shree. “Be careful,” Shree laughed, “I know you can’t swim.”

Mitra splashed him. “I can too!”

“Fine,” Shree said, “Let’s race back to the shore.”

And then the boys were assaulting the water, moving, panting in their energy. Shree was clearly the better swimmer, and left Mitra sputtering in the water, laughing. Shree made it to the shore and stood, hands on his hips, triumphant. “I told you,” he said. “I knew you couldn’t swim.”

“I can still ride better than you!” Mitra called, treading in the water. He could feel the ground below him, the cool sand, on the tips of his toes as he kicked his feet. He was growing tired.

Mitra looked up at the sky, and could see the stars before him, and the moon directing them. The sky was brighter than he remembered: there were so many stars that shattered whatever darkness was there – it was like the city, if the city was perfect. To feel so far away from that world, and yet closer than he knew – to feel the earth rotating as Mitra flowed in the current of the water – to know that he was so small – smaller than a star, a dot out in the distance.

And then his eyes were falling downward until he was back upon the earth, and he could see Shree standing before him. He was on the shore, his feet colliding with the water every now and then – and the moon and the stars shone down on him, illuminating his body. Mitra could see the chiseled form of his friend; Shree had grown along with his hands. His collar bones peeked out of his chest, and his body glistened with the wetness of the water. His breast was heaving from the race, and Mitra saw his body moving up and down, pulsating with the breath that moved in and out of him – the lovely form of his friend, his companion – the form of all men, and yet singularly this man. This man and no one else.

And then light was being thrown upon them, like a gunshot in the night, and Mitra's eyes snapped shut from the change. The gunshot echoed across the mountain, and Mitra squinted out ahead of him, shielding himself from the burn. His feet were sweeping the bottom of the lake.

A voice rang out across the night. "Come out of the water!"

Mitra tried to identify the sound – it wasn't Shree, but a deeper, guttural voice that he didn't know. It repeated itself and Mitra came to his senses, paddling his way back towards the shore, until he could stand. He could feel the light hitting him as well, and he felt uncomfortable. As he moved forward, he saw a figure materialize out of the light and come towards Shree, who was covering himself with his discarded underwear. Mitra reached the shore as the figure came upon them; he snatched his underwear and covered himself as well.

More figures came out of the light, and the one in front finally took on a form: he was wearing a pair of khaki slacks and button-down shirt, and a darker colored beret on his head. He had dark skin, surrounded by the light surging out from behind him, and small eyes that seemed red where the white was supposed to be. He was carrying a large gun that was slung over his shoulder, dangling from its strap. Behind him, three more soldiers came into focus and stood, staring at Mitra and Shree. Mitra shivered from the cold, even though there was no wind fighting against him.

The soldier had one hand on his hip and the other on his gun. He turned to his right and spit a wad of tobacco out into the ground. "What's going on here?" he said, switching his gaze from Shree to Mitra. Neither boy answered.

"Well?" the soldier said. He was running a finger along his gun.

"We," Shree began, "we were just going for a swim."

The soldier didn't move for a moment, and Mitra held his breath. He could feel the hairs on his arms sticking up. "Going for a swim," the soldier repeated. He tapped one foot into the dirt below him and nodded his head. "Going for a swim..." He chuckled a little bit to himself, and Mitra could see the others behind him smiling. The soldier turned to them and they let out a laugh, their teeth shining in their darkened skulls.

"Going for a swim," he said again. He looked down into the ground, and then surveyed the boys. "Drop those clothes," he said.

Neither boy moved. The soldier's smile was disappearing from his face, and his eyes were growing redder: "Drop those clothes." The boys did as they were told, covering themselves with their hands. Mitra could feel Shree shaking next to him, and could hear the panting of his shallow breath. Mitra closed his eyes.

"You," the soldier said, addressing Shree, "come here." Shree stepped forward, and Mitra felt himself fall into Shree's long shadow that spilled over him and onto the lake. Shree moved before the soldier, looking into the ground and shaking slightly. The soldier kept one hand on his gun, and slowly took Shree's wrist in the other, moving it away from his genitals. "No need to be scared," the soldier said, as Shree let out a small gasp. Then he carefully placed his hand between Shree's legs and grabbed, his face rising to Mitra's. Their eyes met, and Mitra could feel himself darkening as the red of the soldier's eyes fell into his vision and everything else faded away.

The soldier was biting his bottom lip and smiling slightly, not removing his hand. He cocked his head slightly to the side and called out to Mitra. "Is this what you like?"

Mitra's arms were at his sides, but he wasn't shaking anymore. He didn't answer. Their eyes held for a moment before the soldier broke away. Then, grasping his gun with both hands, he moved, breaking the butt of the weapon against Shree's stomach. Shree let out a deep moan as

his hands flew to his abdomen and he fell to his knees, coughing loudly. The soldier watched Shree as he fell, then looked back up and found Mitra's eyes. The two men met in the darkness, and then, after a moment, the soldier turned, stepping back into the light. "Go home," he said, and then he was disappearing again, and the other soldiers were leaving as well, and Mitra could hear the jeep start up, the engine bursting into action and the light cutting out, throwing them back into night. Only the noise moved him now: the sound of the jeep rolling away, and chugging off into the distance, and then the coughing of Shree, who was still on his hands and knees. Mitra stood, and these sounds became what told him he was there. He turned back to the lake and watched the waves still moving from his interaction. Behind him he could hear Shree sniffing, and then the shifting of his body as he put his clothes back on. Mitra turned back and dressed himself. When he was through, they began to walk back up the hill and down to the other side, where their bikes were waiting for them. The city was waiting for them too.

"Are you all right to drive?" Mitra asked Shree, and Shree nodded slowly. The two boys looked at each other briefly. Then they got on their bikes and rode home.

When Mitra was seventeen, he met the woman he was going to marry.

It was the final day of the Ganpati Festival, and Shree and Mitra had made their way down to Laxshmi Road, parking their scooters near the river and then sweeping the streets for a procession. Mitra had been able to convince Shree to join him, despite Shree's disdain for dancing. "It seems weird, Mitra," Shree had said. "A bunch of guys jumping around – that doesn't seem like a fun night to me."

But Mitra was allured by the idea of the city alive; he had heard tales of the crowds surging forward in ecstasy, and he wanted to be a part of this frenzy. In the end, Shree had

agreed, but on the condition that Mitra buy him a mango lassi, and let him stand aside and laugh at the fray instead of entering it. But to Shree's disdain, there was no staying out of the crowd: Laxshmi was packed with bodies, weaving together in a mass of movement, and Shree held onto Mitra's shoulders as they made their way through the sea of people, the loud drums beating around them, ringing in their ears. The sun was setting, and it was beginning to rain lightly, causing the red dust that covered the celebrators' bodies to wash onto the street and collect in a stream towards the gutters. Shree cut his toe, and they had to stop at a pharmacy so that Mitra could cleanse the wound and wrap it for him, with Shree glowering all the way. They went on, and eventually found a wall of speakers that was blasting music, with mounds of people dancing feverishly in the quickening rain. Shree and Mitra took shelter under an awning and watched the crowd as it thrashed back and forth – boys hollering and jumping over the blasting techno drones, knocking into each other in the neon lights. The air was hot, and Mitra couldn't tell what was rain and what was sweat.

“I told you this would be dumb,” Shree shouted over the noise. “I don't understand how anyone could think this is fun.” Mitra rolled his eyes, and tried to build up the courage to enter the crowd, but it was either a lack of bravery or the truth in Shree's comment that kept him standing under the awning. He had a feeling it was the latter. The rain began to beat down harder and Shree moaned, looking around for a place to purchase his lassi. He settled on cotton candy, and Mitra gave him ten rupees. Shree gladly took the note, hurrying after the man who carried the floating pink balls on a large stick, plunging it up and down in the darkening sky.

Mitra was turning back to the procession, but as he did he saw a figure to his right, dancing alone in the rain. It was a girl. Her shadow pranced and scurried in the neon, moving gracefully as the light fell upon her silhouette; her hair was in tendrils – the only woman Mitra

had ever seen with wet hair was his mother when she exited the bath, and even then it felt like an intrusion. The girl was wearing a shirt and jeans, both soaking, and her feet were bare, splashing in the newly created puddles. Mitra felt his heartbeat rising: he had never seen a girl dance like that, especially alone. Generally, if a girl was dancing it was with a boy she trusted, or in a group far enough removed from the action so that it didn't cause any trouble. But this girl was dancing gleefully, without a care in the world, and Mitra could see the thin outline of her face: her wide eyes and her slim figure, and he could feel his soul soaring out of him – forward into the crowd, leaving his passions in the wake of its fury.

Mitra looked around, desperately grabbing for Shree who was now returning with his cotton candy, and pointed at the girl: “Shree, look at that girl!”

Shree looked into the crowd, following Mitra's finger. “Yeah, I know her,” Shree said, taking a bite out of his cotton candy.

“Who is she?” Mitra said excitedly, still clasping his friend's arm.

“Her name is Aditi. She goes to our school.”

“How can she – how can she dance like that out there? How is she doing that?”

“Her dad is some commissioner or something, political guy. Those boys know better than to mess with her, and she knows that they know better. She's just trying to make a scene, I bet. Look, there are her friends.” Shree pointed to a pack of girls, giggling underneath an umbrella as they watched her. Now the girl was running back to her friends, laughing, and they all clasped hands and skipped down the street, leaving an awestruck Mitra behind them. His mouth was still agape as Shree patted him on the shoulder: “All right, lover boy, take it easy. We get it – you've got a crush. Now have you seen enough here? Can we get going?”

But even after Mitra and Shree had worked through the crowd, gotten on their bikes, and parted ways, Mitra couldn't remove the girl from his mind: Aditi. There was something about her figure in the rain – the way she'd moved before him – that left him shattered: she was, he realized, the first person he'd ever laid eyes on. And his eyes never wanted to leave her. He lay awake that night, watching the light from the street cross over the ceiling, and he rolled the word over his tongue, like a candy he did not want to melt: Aditi.

“There's no way you could ever get her – she's a rich girl,” Shree said as they sat at lunch the next day. Mitra had cautiously brought up Aditi again, and Shree had seen right through his casual speech. “You would be lucky if she even looked at you.”

“I don't need to ‘get’ her,” Mitra said, disgusted by Shree's terminology, “I just want to talk to her. And it doesn't matter where she's from – she's not like that. She doesn't care about Brahmins or Kshatriyas. That stuff doesn't matter to her.”

“How do you know?” Shree said, raising his eyebrows.

“I just know,” Mitra said simply.

“Oh, you just know.” Shree scowled as he dipped his roti in dal and took a large bite, slipping four fingers into his mouth. “So now you just know. Look, this was bound to happen at some point – you see a good-looking girl, and you go a little crazy for her. But you don't even know her and you're already acting like she's Gandhi. I'm just saying I don't think you should be fixating like this. It's weird.”

In a way, Mitra knew Shree was right: it was weird. He had spent the morning searching the halls for a glimmer of her hair, or perhaps a whisper of her frame, and each time he caught a glimpse of what he thought might be her, his stomach turned over – it never was her, however, and it left Mitra feeling dirty. And yet he knew in his heart that if he met her, she would open

him in a way he'd never been opened. He also knew that if there was a possible social connection between them, it was going to be Nikky. He was hesitant to contact his cousin, but he knew he had no choice.

“Yeah, I know her,” Nikky said when Mitra brought her up. They were walking to lunch, after Mitra had innocuously asked him to get a meal. “Why?”

“No reason,” Mitra said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Nikky gave his cousin a curious look. “Wait a minute. Does someone have a crush?”

“Stop it, Nikky,” Mitra said as Nikky slapped a hand around his shoulder.

“Well, it's about damn time!” Nikky exclaimed, squeezing Mitra. “I was wondering when your balls were ever going to drop! She's cute, I'll give you that – very cute.”

“Look, do you know her or not?” Mitra said, getting upset.

“Yeah, yeah, I know her – no need to get all worked up. So, you want me to introduce you?” Mitra didn't say anything. “Okay, okay, all you had to do was ask. I know her well enough. I think her friend might have a thing for me. I could probably set something up.”

“I don't know, Nikky, maybe this is a bad idea. I mean, she's just going to think the whole thing is weird.” Mitra was wishing that Nikky would remove his arm, which was hanging around his neck.

“No, no – she won't, as long as you play it cool. We can do something this weekend – get a kuka or something. But you'll owe me one, Mitra.”

“I don't want to owe you one,” Mitra said, shaking off his cousin and walking faster.

Nikky ran to catch up. “Okay, okay, sorry! You won't owe me one – I'm just teasing.”

Mitra told Shree about it on the phone that evening. Shree was silent for a few moments before responding. “That’s – that’s great, I guess. But come on, you know Nikky is going to do something to embarrass you.”

“No he won’t,” Mitra replied, “Nikky is trying to help me.”

“When is Nikky ever trying to help you?”

“Look, it’s all I’ve got. I’ve got to do it, or else I’ll never get to talk to her.”

“Well, good luck. I’ll be there to say I told you so when Nikky does something dumb.”

Mitra smiled. “Yeah, I know you will be.”

Nikky and Mitra had decided to meet at Café Durga that Friday: Nikky would pick Aditi and her friend up in his car, and Mitra would meet them there. Mitra arrived ten minutes early, parked his scooter outside, and sat waiting, checking his watch repeatedly. He could feel his palms sweating and his pulse was quickening; something was growing in his stomach, somewhere between hunger and motion sickness. He had half a mind to leave, if only to make the feeling go away, but he knew the sharp world of regret that would replace the growth, and so he stayed, looking at his watch and letting his eyes dart towards the entrance every few moments.

Twenty minutes later, Mitra was still waiting. He had wiped his hands on his pants so many times that they were now wet, and yet his palms were still sweating. He should have never agreed to this: he was setting himself up to be hurt, and the pain of embarrassment would certainly be too much for him. He was on the verge of leaving when he saw Nikky emerge with two girls through the entrance of the café. And there, across the room from him, was Aditi.

In a flash, Mitra realized the fragility of this plan: he was only now seeing her for the first time, and he could feel everything inside him shifting as he drank her in. She had dark hair that fell to her shoulders and curved around her pronounced neck; her eyes were wide and piercing,

yet with a softness to them that Mitra associated with innocence. Her cheekbones rose in a fervor and held everything within her, and Mitra nearly had to grip the chair from falling over. The idea of her – the concept that he'd had inside of him since he'd seen her – was now being replaced by something much larger, something that he couldn't hold within himself, and so now he was moving outward as she became what only she could be, and no one else. She was floating with a grace that startled him. And then she was there.

Mitra stood up; he was probably supposed to stand up, but now he was standing and he didn't know why he was standing. Nikky approached the table and gave him a large hug, then stepped back. "Mitra, this is Manjiri, and this is Aditi."

Mitra was trying to look everywhere except at Aditi, and he also knew that if he shook her hand, she would feel the sweat from his palms and certainly hate him. There were so many implications for everything, he was thinking; it was far too much. He settled on a little wave, then immediately began chastising himself for how dumb it had looked.

Nikky motioned to the table, and they all sat down. Nikky settled in next to Mitra, across from the girls. He let out a large sigh, as if his job had been accomplished, and then leaned back, waiting. Aditi spoke first.

"So is this supposed to be a double date or something?"

There was a pause, as Nikky clasped his hands behind his head and sighed again. "Yeah, pretty much."

Mitra's head was reeling. "I'll get the drinks. What does everyone want?"

They agreed on four kukas, and Mitra rose to get them, moving under his numb legs and ruminating in his hatred of the moment. He ordered from the counter and paid, realizing the nightmare of shelling out the very little money he had on such a disaster.

The cashier said he'd bring them to the table and Mitra considered waiting at the counter, just so he could buy himself more time away from the group. But instead, he skulked back over to the table and took his seat. "They'll bring them over," he said, and then fell silent.

For the majority of the evening Nikky was the only one talking, which Mitra was actually grateful for – it kept him from saying anything stupid. He spoke of the recent cricket matches he'd been playing – he was doing well, very well – and then talked of the matches he'd been watching on television, even though no one seemed to have seen them or have any interest in them. He talked about his plans for after school, to get his CA and work for an American firm – he stressed the amount of money he'd be making several times. Manjiri hung on his words, nodding vigorously during the moments that called for it, and then frowning when Nikky talked of the obstacles: tests, applications, job interviews. But she nodded vigorously again when he said that he thought none of that would be a problem.

Mitra didn't speak during the discussion, and neither did Aditi. He snuck looks at her occasionally, and every time she was looking down at her kuka even though it was all gone. It was only afterwards that Mitra realized the polite thing to do would have been to offer her another, but he never thought of that.

Eventually, Nikky looked at his watch and realized he'd been speaking for an hour, and that it was certainly time they left. As they made their way outside, he stopped. "Hey, you know, Mitra, why don't you give Aditi a ride home? My car is a little cramped." He gave a deep chuckle and Manjiri giggled as well, leaving Mitra hot with embarrassment. Aditi shrugged her shoulders and spoke for the second time that evening. "Fine." She turned to Mitra. "Ready?"

And then it was happening: his key was clutched in the palm of his hand and he was walking to his bike. She was behind him, and then they were climbing on and he could feel the

heat of her thighs against his own, and the softness of her breath upon his neck. He turned the key and the bike roared to life – and then they were speeding away into the chaos of the street.

He whisked forward, overcome with emotion; he wasn't sure if this was reality, or a fantasy he had concocted late at night in his sleepless wanderings – but he didn't really care. She directed him to her home, which sat twenty minutes from Mitra's in a colony of bungalows; and as they rode, Mitra was watching himself with her, and seeing his body as something else – something capable. From the outside, the world looked beautiful. Pune looked beautiful. The streets were alit with life and love, and the dogs pranced back and forth, sheltering the city from its own shortcomings; Pune was majestic at night. The cars glistened with the temperament of angels, coasting towards their destinations; the motorbikes hovered, not touching the earth as they showed the way. And Mitra was one of them, if only for a moment. It was surreal, really: a moment outside of his knowledge and his contentment. And if it was because of her, he was forever grateful. He was grateful for this new world that she was showing him, a world that had gone unseen.

When they finally reached her home, Mitra was prepared to say goodbye forever – this was all he needed. He could be without her now, for he had felt a life with her, and it was enough to sustain him until he died. But as she got off the scooter, and he prepared to bid her goodnight, she stopped.

“Hi,” she said, pausing before the bike.

“Hi,” he said back, trying not to look at her.

“You're nervous, aren't you?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

There were many things he wanted to say to her. That she was beautiful, that she was different, that she had danced in the rain, that she didn't seem to care about any of those things – and yet he said nothing. After some time, she spoke again.

“If it's because of my father...”

“No, no, it's not that,” he said, and he wanted to add that he didn't even know what her father did, but he didn't want to sound foolish. She waited as if he was going to supply another reason, but he didn't.

“Well, you don't have to be nervous. I mean, I'm not – I'm not anything to be nervous about. It's a weird situation – I get it,” she said, and then she was retrieving a pen and the back of an envelope from her purse. “But if you do figure out why I make you nervous, and you want to tell me” – she was scribbling something down and then tearing it off to give to him – “then you can call me.”

He took the paper, dumbfounded. She smiled one more time, and then turned to leave him, opening her gate and closing it behind her, as he stood with his bike in the road.

Maha was sleeping when he returned. Mitra sat on the divan in the dark for a long time. He pulled out her number and stared at it blankly. It looked foreign to him, smudged in her penmanship. He didn't sleep that night. He wasn't sure if he would ever sleep again.

When Mitra called Shree the next day to tell him, Shree didn't believe him. “No way,” he said. “There's absolutely no way.”

“Honest,” Mitra said, “I'm holding her number right now.”

“Whatever,” Shree said, “but there's no way you'll call her. I guarantee you that.”

Mitra didn't need to call her. Aditi approached him at school and they spoke, and then they began speaking more. Then Mitra began giving her a ride home on his scooter – she didn't have a bike – and then they began getting coffee after school.

But Mitra had been wrong about Aditi: she wasn't who he had thought. She defied whatever vision he'd created, and moved beyond it – she wasn't of the world he knew. She had been making a statement when she danced in the rain: a proclamation that she was she, and no one would tell her otherwise. If Mitra drove her home, she would pay for the coffee, and even if he fought her, she wouldn't budge. If her books looked heavy and Mitra offered to carry them, she would act almost offended. She did everything the way she wanted to, and if she had to do it a different way, she wouldn't do it.

She told Mitra that she wanted to be a doctor, and would move to Europe or the United States if she couldn't find employment in India. When Mitra asked about her family, and what they might say about her plan, she laughed and said she didn't give a damn what they said. She said she would never marry anyone unless she was in love with them, and even then she still probably wouldn't marry them. She said a lot of things, things that Mitra hadn't even thought of for himself, let alone for a woman. If she asked him what he wanted to be, he said he didn't know. If she asked if he wanted to get married, he said that he wasn't sure about that either, but that he probably would. It infuriated her: “You've been given the privileges that come with being a man! You get to choose what you want to do, and who you want to marry, at least more than I get to. And you're wasting it!” Mitra asked her if she wished she were a boy, and she said of course not. “Because then I wouldn't be me.” And she winked when she said this.

It was only then that Mitra truly knew that he loved her. It wasn't because of her beauty or her grace, or even her mind: it was because she was she. And he loved her because of this,

because he wasn't he and he knew this. She was power, she was drive, she was a travesty and an anomaly, and he loved her because in his heart, he wanted to be taken by her. He wanted to be conquered. He wanted to be debased, degraded, defiled; he wanted her to beat him until he was a bloody pulp and then he wanted her to kiss him, to watch him while he healed, and then do it again. He wanted all of this from her, and he wanted more. And she could give it to him.

One day, as they were sitting with a coffee after school, Aditi asked him: "Are you going to Nikky's party this weekend?"

Mitra, who hadn't heard of such a party, felt a pang of hot anger towards Nikky for not inviting him. He chose to be honest with Aditi, perhaps to gain some sympathy: "He hadn't told me anything about it."

"His Ai is going to Mumbai, so he's having people over. You should go – it'll be fun."

"But he hasn't invited me," Mitra replied.

"I'm sure you're invited; you're his cousin," she said, taking a sip of her coffee.

After dropping Aditi off, Mitra called Nikky and confronted him about his lack of an invitation. "I hadn't told you about it because you know Mami would kill me if I let you come to my house and drink," Nikky answered. "She would have my head – and that's not something I'm interested in."

"She won't find out," Mitra said, "I can just say I'm sleeping over at your house."

"No, absolutely not – then she'll call my Ai, and it'll start a whole thing. No way."

"Come on, Nikky – Aditi told me about it and said to go. How will it look if I tell her you said I couldn't come?"

"You're still chasing after her? I introduced you months ago. What are you waiting for?"

"She's not like that," Mitra said. "And besides, that's none of your business."

“It’s my business if it’s my party.”

“Can you knock it off, Nikky? Ai won’t find out, and I’ll stay out of your way.”

“All right, fine, but if Mami finds out, I’m going to kill you.”

“She won’t, she won’t – I promise. Thanks, Nikky.”

“And please, can you hook up with this girl already? I’ve gone through a lot of trouble for you not to be getting any.” Nikky let out a gulping laugh at this, and Mitra hated him silently; he knew, however, that he was at Nikky’s mercy and could do nothing to retaliate, for fear of getting his invitation revoked. “And another thing,” Nikky said. “Don’t invite that salya friend of yours. I don’t want him showing up, drinking my stuff, and ruining everything. I know you bring him along everywhere, but he’s not invited.”

Mitra hadn’t thought of Shree, but now that Nikky mentioned him a shot of guilt ran through Mitra. Shree would undoubtedly ask him what he was doing on Friday night, and he would have to think of something to say. Relations between the two boys had been strained ever since Aditi had entered Mitra’s life: she was taking up most of his free time after school – and moreover, most of his mind. And although Mitra made a conscious effort not to mention her around Shree, there was a silent, gaping gulf between the two that grew as one fell in love and the other fell out of love.

On the one hand, he could tell Shree about the party, but this would only make the gulf between them larger, and Shree would be upset at the prospect of Mitra ditching him for Aditi, let alone Nikky. On the other hand, he could lie to Shree, but that would involve betraying his best friend, and the guilt of this might prove far greater than the guilt he was already feeling.

“All right,” Mitra said, “I won’t invite him. Don’t worry about it.”

“See you Friday. And wear something nice. No one wants to see you in an old T-shirt.”

As Mitra hung up the phone, he felt the excitement growing in him: he knew that this party – an opportunity to spend time with Aditi outside of their excursions for coffee – would certainly change things, perhaps in a romantic way. As time had passed, he had felt his heart continually expanding and contracting, and he knew he would have to do something. He wanted something more; he wanted to be conditioned. Their intimate moments on the motorbike were now not enough for him, and in the night when he dreamt of her soft breath on his neck, there was always an ache that came along with it.

Upon Nikky's advice, Mitra went to a clothing store he had passed multiple times on his way home: a two-story building with mannequins sporting colorful outfits in the windows, and a security guard at the door. Inside, the store was air-conditioned, and Mitra felt immediately out of place marveling at the luxury items he had only ever seen on television. After a few minutes, a sales clerk was upon him, pulling out lavishly threaded button-downs so quickly that Mitra couldn't get a good look at any of them. Eventually, Mitra told the man his price range, and the employee hesitantly pulled down a few lesser-quality shirts, from which Mitra bought a blue striped one. He also bought a pair of jeans and nice cotton underwear, and he left the store feeling very foolish with the package they'd given him. When he got home, he placed the bags underneath the divan and waited anxiously for the day when he could put them on.

Friday finally came, and Mitra was heading into the school when Shree caught up with him. A sinking feeling began to grow in his stomach as his friend spoke: "What are you doing tonight? Wanna watch a movie at my place?"

Despite having seen Shree multiple times since his conversation with Nikky, Mitra had avoided this moment for as long as possible – however, now it was here and he needed to do

something. As Shree looked at him, waiting, Mitra moved instinctively: “Sorry, I can’t tonight. I told my Ai that I would help her with something. Maybe another night?”

“Okay, sure, talk to you later,” Shree said, and then he was walking away, leaving Mitra standing alone as the lie washed over his body. Why he hadn’t told Shree about the party, he wasn’t sure. Perhaps it was to save himself the look that would replace Shree’s pleasant smile: a look of jealousy that always made Mitra feel guilty and a bit repulsed. But now, as Mitra watched his friend leave, he felt a new kind of shame. Shree hadn’t even questioned him. His friend, so trusting when he ought not to be, so naïve when Mitra would lie to him – an unprecedented lie. Mitra nearly cried over this refusal, a revival of their years together, but instead he continued down the hallway and found his class.

Mitra drove Aditi home that day, and he could feel the anticipation in his bones. When he reached her house, she hopped off the scooter, smiling. “So, I’ll see you tonight?” she asked.

“Definitely, see you there,” he said to her, smiling back, and then he was speeding away as the sun set, a shadow trailing him in the dying light of the evening.

It was nearly dark when he returned to the apartment, and when he did his mother was sitting in the darkness of their living room, waiting for him as the orange glow from the window slowly overtook her. Mitra quietly placed his keys on the table and stood, watching her. “Ai? What’s wrong?”

Maha didn’t speak, but instead lifted the bag that sat at her side, and drew out the contents from within: the button-down shirt and the jeans and the underwear, perfectly folded. She placed them on her lap and waited, looking at him. “What are these?” she said, after the silence had gone on long enough.

“They’re clothes,” he said to her. “Clothes I bought for myself.”

“Expensive clothes, Mitra. Where did you get the money for something like this? Certainly you didn’t work for it. So where?” Mitra didn’t move. “Where did you get the money for these?”

Mitra didn’t speak.

Suddenly, his mother was flinging the clothes at him, and they hit Mitra in the face, falling into his arms. “You coward!” she yelled. “At least have the decency to speak, to say something! Make up a lie, anything! No, instead you say nothing! Unwilling to admit you’ve been stealing from me – after all I’ve done for you! Slaving away all day long, while you parade around with that girl!”

Mitra felt his stomach turn as she said this, fear rising in his chest.

“Oh, does that surprise you? Yes, I know about her – I know all about your little girlfriend. Is this who this is for? Is this why you take money from me?” Mitra still hadn’t moved, and could feel the thunder roaring in his ears. “What do you think will happen, Mitra? Do you think you will marry this girl? Do you think she’ll wed you, and have your children, and that you will be rich and successful because of her? You’re a fool – you’ll never be with her! Girls like that, they’re loose! They’re common whores! And she’ll leave you dying by the side of the road before she ever marries you!”

“That’s not true!” Mitra heard himself screaming, breaking his own silence. “You don’t know a thing about her! And you don’t know a thing about me! You’re the fool!”

Maha had risen from her seat. “You brat!” she spit at her son. “How dare you speak to your mother that way! All I’ve ever done is loved you and provided everything for you, and you’re too stupid to see that! This girl will be your undoing, and I would rather you die than have you with someone like that!”

Mitra was seething; his mother continued: “Do you think this is a game? Do you think that you get to choose your life? You don’t, Mitra, you don’t! If you did, do you think I would be here, like this? Struggling as I do, every day – fighting, crawling, screaming, dragging you along with me? You ungrateful little brat! Go to your whore!” But Mitra was reeling now, moving forward, his fist raised, feeling his fingers clenched in his rage. Maha was taking a step back and raising her arms, trembling, and the dusk lit her skin, setting it aflame. And, as Mitra saw his mother cowering before him, he felt himself stop. He slowly took a step back, his fist still raised – but he was shaking now, the emotion overpowering him. Tears began to well up in his eyes and he could feel his breath growing quicker, until he was letting out a wail and falling backwards to the floor. He looked down at his hands, shaking – he was no longer himself. He was someone else, someone far away, someone who never, never could look back. And he wept for his humanity, for all of humanity, for the loss of innocence that he only now confronted.

There was a voice speaking. “You’re a coward. You can’t even hit me.”

Mitra looked up into his mother’s cold eyes, his head shivering with fury and anguish.

“Now, put those clothes on and go to her. I know it’s what you want. Go, and get out of my sight.” Mitra, still quivering, rose from the ground. He pulled off his school polo, and then his white undershirt; then he was unbuckling his pants, pulling them off along with his underwear until he was standing naked in the darkness. And only after the room had felt him did he slip on the underwear and the jeans and button up the shirt. When he was finished, he looked at his mother. He never wanted to see her again. “I hate you,” he said, his voice shaking.

“And I love you,” she said, her voice firm and hard. “Now get out.”

Mitra snatched the keys from the table and tore out of the apartment, wiping the tears from his eyes and the snot from his nose. His jaw was tightened, and he moved with a possession

he hadn't known before – one that he hadn't wanted to know. Everything in his body was turning away from him, and there was nothing he could do but watch and run, run as fast as he could.

He rode, and the sun was down. The hot night air whipped against him, but it never touched his soul. It would never touch him again; he would never feel it.

When he arrived at Nikky's house, there was already music coming through the windows and there was numbness all around him – a transient state that provided his mind with a broader sense of fiction. Everything was moving like how it might move, but it was different – reality was slipping away, and everything was happening all the time now. He went to the door and let himself in, straightening his shirt as he did, and heard the music louder. He heard Nikky yell and then Nikky was upon him, clapping him on the back. “Everybody! This is my cousin Mitra! Say hello!” There were a few muffled hellos and waves from the small crowd that was standing around the hall. Most of them Mitra recognized from school but hadn't actually spoken to. Mitra waved quietly, and Nikky pulled him in closer. “She's not here yet, so you've got some time to kill.” There was liquor on Nikky's breath, and Mitra could smell it with his ear. “Let's get you a drink.” He pulled Mitra into the kitchen, where there was a bucket of ice with several beers inside; Nikky grabbed a Kingfisher, popped the tab, and handed it to Mitra. “My cousin's first beer!” he yelled to the crowd. They giggled a bit, but weren't nearly as drunk or interested as Nikky. “I'm glad I can be here to witness it. And supply it!” And with that, he was tipping the drink to Mitra's lips and Mitra felt the liquid pour into his mouth. It tasted like cold sweat.

Mitra sat on the couch with his beer for some time, while Nikky talked loudly about cricket and a few others yelled loudly at him. There seemed to be some sort of debate, which Mitra attempted to follow, but eventually gave up on. Mitra noticed that Nikky's drunken self was very much like his regular self, except perhaps more accentuated: he was louder, more bold,

more audacious. The inhibitors that kept him from reveling in his self-importance seemed to be down, and he was enjoying himself rather well. At some point, Nikky rose to get himself another beer and tossed one across the room to Mitra, who narrowly caught it. “Now tap it down,” Nikky yelled. “So it doesn’t fizz up.”

Mitra didn’t know how long he sat at the party. Between his rage and the alcohol, time became something he couldn’t get a handle on. More people arrived – none of them Aditi – and soon the party was being compartmentalized: some people went upstairs, some stayed down – they were splitting off into sections like a worm that was continuously being chopped in half and growing back, back into more worms, until worms were taking over the entire house. Mitra wasn’t a worm, not yet. He was a million other things, but never a worm. And so he waited on the couch, drank more beer, and slowly let himself forget the world that had encompassed him.

He was angry, but he was also deeply sad, and these feelings came from the acknowledgment that his mother was right. He had taken the money from her, had lied about it, and then not been brave enough to admit what he had done. And perhaps deep down inside of him he knew that Aditi and he would never be, and this made him deathly afraid. He knew that he would always be alone, just as he had once been, was now, and forever would be. And this struggle was what had brought him here: it was what had made him take the money, buy the clothes, and nearly hit his mother. It was the struggle to not have to be by himself. In the city, in Pune, the place that had birthed him, he was alone. And he never wanted it to be like this.

From his pocket, he felt his phone buzzing. Mitra had had a few beers, and had been at the party for much longer than he’d wanted to be. He knew Aditi wasn’t coming, and he knew this because the buzzing of his phone was a call from her telling him that she wasn’t coming. He was going to answer it and she was going to say that something had come up – that she had

grown busy, that she had grown up, that she had grown tired of him. And at this point, it was only a courtesy that he answered, because he knew what she was going to say. Regardless, he rose from the couch and went upstairs to find some quiet. He moved into the spare bedroom, sat down on the bed, and prepared for the phone call.

“Mitra,” the voice said, and Mitra froze. “I – I stopped by your house – I thought you were with your Ai.” Shree’s voice was shaking through the phone, and it made the room shake and the house shake and the world shake.

Mitra tried to find words in his throat, but they were caught somewhere deep down, and he could not gather them. “She told me that you were with Aditi; she said you had lied to me. Did you lie to me?”

There was a voice calling from inside Mitra’s body, but it could not reach his mouth. “Mitra, you’re my best friend. But this... you’ve changed. The Mitra I know wouldn’t lie to me.”

The betrayal flamed in Mitra’s body, and a hotness ran through him. But he could not speak. “And this new Mitra... I don’t think I can be around him. Because he’s not good. He’s not fair. And I don’t want to know him. Goodbye, Mitra.” Then there was the dial tone.

Mitra held the phone to his ear as he heard the conversation reverberating through his mind, and then he was letting the phone fall to the bed, and then he was falling too. He had done what he had set out to do. The betrayal was climbing the walls and crashing to the floor, and dying and writhing and calling him from beyond the grave, but he could not answer. He simply stood, his body decomposing in anguish, and left the room. He was alone.

There was a sound emitting from the hallway that carried him to the stairs, until he was following it: a guitar. The guitar that had collected dust in Nikky’s house was softly strumming, and there was a voice making its way through the strings, calling to him. A song from beyond,

from beyond the beyond; he moved down the stairs as the voice pulled him forward – and then he was back in the main hall.

Then she was there. Almost out of a dream, she sat at the table with the guitar, as people crowded around her. The guitar was small, and it made her look like a giant cradling the instrument. She was more beautiful than he ever could have imagined – and her beauty took hold of everything. Everything was slipping away from him as he watched her with the guitar; her voice carried through the house, exploding out of the windows and into the night air. She was a phoenix and he was a fire. She glittered and flamed and his flesh burnt off. She caught his eyes and smiled. He was no longer alone – the free fall of loneliness had stopped as she caught him and held him with her voice. She had caught him.

The song she was singing, he didn't know. *“Now I have children of my own. They ask their mother, ‘What will I be? Will I be handsome, will I be rich?’ I tell them tenderly...”* Her voice was entering into his body and he could not turn away from it, even if he had wanted to. *“Que Sera, Sera. Whatever will be, will be. The future's not ours to see. Que Sera, Sera.”* She finished her song and the group clapped. She locked eyes with Mitra, and smiled sweetly.

What had happened, what was going to happen – it all no longer mattered. She was before him – she was standing and placing the guitar on the chair; she was crossing the room, she was coming to him, she was coming for him, and she would continue to come for him into infinity. His mind was a swimming pool and she was doing laps. They sat on the couch, they spoke – and Mitra knew nothing. He knew that she was very beautiful. He knew that around him people were placing bottles to their lips and letting liquid slide into them; he knew that there was smoke that seemed to waft like a spirit moving in a spiral; he knew that women and men were holding hands and climbing stairs and climbing each other; they were all mountains and they

were all caverns. Music became a part of him, and he was aware of this. At the time, the world was turning and people were dying, but he was not aware of this.

“You’re a very beautiful singer,” he said to her.

“No, I’m not. I only promised Nikky that I would play something on guitar – that’s really the only tune I know.” She sat with her legs crossed next to him, and he could feel her warmth of her legs near him; it made a tingle run through his thighs.

“I remember when Nikky got that guitar,” Mitra said. “We were only children. He said he would learn to play it, and become a famous musician. I think that’s the first time it’s been played in ten years.” They both laughed. Mitra watched as a couple descended the stairwell: the boy was smiling slightly, his eyes on the floor. The girl was pulling her hair back into a ponytail, and looking from side to side. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said next, turning back to her. “I wouldn’t have known anyone otherwise.”

She frowned at him. She smelled a bit like flowers, but there was a creaminess to her smell. “That’s your own doing. You’ve got plenty of things to say, you just don’t say them.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “I’ve got nothing to say. Nothing to do. Not like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you – you’ve got all kinds of things to say. All kinds of things you’re doing. You’ve got dreams and hopes and aspirations, and I don’t have those things.”

“Sure you do,” she said. She couldn’t understand why he was getting so down on himself. “I don’t understand why you’re getting so down on yourself.”

He had half a mind to tell her about his mother and about Shree but that involved sharing about the clothing and the lying, and the rest of it. Instead, he said something else that he wanted to say: “You know, Nikky doesn’t like me much.”

“Oh, that’s not true,” she said. She still didn’t understand why he was getting down on himself.

“No, it is. He never particularly liked me. He liked me all right as family, but beyond that he never much cared for me.” Now he wanted to tell her about the phone conversation a few days prior, but something was holding him back. He didn’t want to share too much of himself. You never shared too much of yourself. Your whole self, your real self, was just for you. Or perhaps not even for you. Perhaps for no one.

“Well, don’t worry about that,” she said, smoothing his hair. Her touch changed him. “You get sad when you’re drunk.”

Mitra laughed and moved her hand away, holding it in his own. “I’m not drunk.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m not drunk.”

Somewhere in the house a bottle smashed and Mitra could feel Aditi squeezing his hand tighter. He looked around for the source of the noise, but only saw the glistening bodies in the darkness of the hall. He turned back to her: he could see himself in her eyes. He wanted her to take him. He was giving himself over to her; he was surrendering.

“Would you like to go upstairs?” Aditi said. Mitra saw the words forming in her mouth and dancing their way into his ear, and he was still in her eyes. He said that he did.

She stood and pulled him from the couch – he was standing, and she was leading him out of this world and into another. They were moving through the crowd and between the crevasses of the party; and then she was pulling him up the stairs and he was following her. He watched the sway of her hips and the tightness of her thighs: they moved, and everything was stopping and starting and becoming one and breaking up again. They were nearing the top of the stairwell and

there was a bathroom, where Nikky and a few others stood, the firm light coming down on them. Nikky was bent over the sink, his nose pressed below, and a fine white powder was finding its way into his nostril as he shot up, leaning back in angst as his back was contorted and shifted, morphing him into another animal. His head rolled, and then he saw Mitra; their eyes locked. Maybe they were children again; maybe they were old and dying again. There was a dark glow to his eyes that pushed against everything around them. And then the bathroom door was slamming shut and the world was being closed.

Aditi was pulling him into the darkened hallway, and he was drifting – the hallway was turning and they were walking up the walls, crawling out of their bodies, spinning in and out of each other’s orbit – he was falling, falling, until she was catching him, placing him gently into a room – the spare bedroom. She let go of his hand as he fell into the ocean. And then she’s closing the door and turning to him. They’re looking at each other in the darkness. They’re finding God, and maybe other things. Their eyes are becoming one pair of eyes; their hearts becoming one heart. He’s no longer himself, she’s no longer herself. They’re no longer people; they’re no longer worms. They’re something else.

Aditi stepped away from the door, and Mitra felt himself fall to the bed, where he lived as she approached him. She was before him, and she slowly took his face in her hands. He looked up at her as she held him. And then, she was bending down and putting her lips to his.

He was swallowed up inside her, moving until he had all but disappeared: what was left was only a shimmer of a previous self, and her warmth beckoned him forward – calling for that last part of him. She was calling from across the river, and he was paddling through her waters, against the current of his mind. Her flesh became the sand upon the shore, and he grabbed at it

wholly, burrowing into her pores until he was simply no more. And then he was screaming out into the abyss before him, and the tense fervor of his body came to fruition.

When it was over, she stood in the darkness of the room, pulling her clothes back on. He was panting, and his arms lay limply at his sides. His veins pulsed with completion, and he watched her outline as she pulled her jeans back up to her waist. She turned back to him, and as she did he held up a hand, his palm open to her.

But in the stillness of the night she only stared at him and smiled. His hand was quivering under the weight of his exhaustion, and yet her arms stayed resolutely at her sides. “No,” she said finally. “That’s all there is. There isn’t anymore.”

And then she was pulling away from him, taking a step back so that her face was cast in the light of the moon, and Mitra could see her eyes. His hand was wavering, his muscles tensing.

“I know that you love me. And you must understand why I can’t love you. Because I am me. I am strictly me, and I am no one else. I am me, and I will forever be me. And you, you will only break me. You will try to break me; you will want to break me. But you mustn’t break me. I won’t allow it.”

Mitra let his hand slowly fall back to his side.

“And so, that is all I have to give. Because I am me. And I will forever be me.” She stood still for a moment, and Mitra held his breath. He felt as though his eyes might roll back inside of him; he was losing feeling. And then, as if she’d had her next movement set in stone before her, she turned and left the room.

Mitra knew she was gone before she left. He knew she was gone before he had met her, and he knew she was gone now as well. He had no proof of her, only her disappearing smell that

was drifting away from his body. She was taking him with her; she was carrying his soul in the depths of her heart. Now there was only a shell of a human left in the room, frozen in the dark.

He felt something below him, an object touching his right foot. He sat up on the bed and withdrew it: it was his phone. He must have left it in this room. He placed his feet upon the floor and sat in the nakedness of the room, looking at the phone – it was making a sound. Mitra put it to his ear and there was the dial tone. He heard it on the horizon. He let the phone down. He let the darkness engulf him. He was alone.

II. Home

Mitra was thirty-five and living in his childhood apartment. Nikky and his wife – a woman with striking blue eyes and shortly cropped auburn hair – came to the door. He had been in America for seven years, and had come back to visit his family. It was the first day of Ganpati.

He shook Mitra's hand upon entering. It was a burly, hefty hand with long dark hairs collecting at the knuckles. On his index finger was a large gold ring with a small jewel in it. "From the company," he said, flashing it before Mitra's eyes. "Given to associate partners, specifically." Nikky was an accountant, and lived in Philadelphia in a modest condo. He pulled out his phone to show Mitra a picture. "Not big, I know. But we've been saving for a beach house. Keep that to yourself, though; Ai would lose her mind if she knew I was thinking about buying a second house."

Nikky, his wife, and Mitra sat cross-legged on the carpet while Mitra's wife hurried into the kitchen to make tea. "So, how have you been keeping?" Nikky asked, twisting his ring and looking around the hall. "You're working?"

"Yes," Mitra answered, "at the wristwatch shop on Laxshmi."

"Sadashiv's place? That's still around?"

"Satyajeet owns it now," Mitra said.

"Satyajeet? How did he land a job like that?"

"Started working there in junior college, I think," Mitra said. "Doesn't know much about watches, but Sadashiv thought he had an eye for business, so he passed it along to him."

“And do you fix the watches then? Like the old man used to?” Nikky let out a wheezing laugh that eventually turned into a cough, and Mitra’s wife came in with the tray. He recovered, and accepted the tea; his wife smiled at Mitra’s wife and took hers as well.

Nikky suggested cards, and so Mitra pulled out two decks and began to shuffle them in the center of their poorly formed circle. They played for some time, while Nikky talked of work and his wife smiled, moving her eyes from person to person. Mitra couldn’t help but be a bit afraid: her eyes were startling – a neon shade of blue that darted around the room as her brightly colored hair stayed perfectly coifed atop her head. Mitra lost the first two games; however Nikky was playing rather viciously, and Mitra didn’t feel like competing.

“America,” he was saying, as he held the cards firmly in his hairy hands, “well, it’s very different from here – obviously, of course; I mean it would have to be quite different for them to have such a superiority complex. I swear, the way they go around with their heads held high – it’s like a country of celebrities and millionaires, it is. But I’ll admit it, they’ve got it figured out, they do – none of this bullshit that India has. Sure, the poverty line is low, but at least they’re working on it. And the streets: they’re clean! You can walk around and everything – the air is actually breathable!”

Mitra lost again, and Nikky continued. “And look at their foreign affairs. Sure, nearly everyone in the world hates them, but have they had a terrorist attack since September 11th? No, not one single terrorist attack in the United States since September 11th – they made sure of that. But India – what, wasn’t there another one in Mysore a week back? Some lunatic blew up a bank or something? I tell you, it’s madness, that’s what it is. These Muslims, I bet they don’t even know what they want anymore. Freedom? Land? They probably can’t even tell you! And what do we do about it? Nothing! It just keeps happening and happening, like the goddamn plague!

But in America? Not once single terrorist attack since September 11th. And that's because they did what needed to be done. But India – well, we don't do anything! We're cowards! We need the courage to go in there and straighten all of this out. And until then, we're just going to keep getting ourselves blown up by these lunatics.”

The sound of a chirping bird escaped into the hall, and Mitra rose. Nikky watched his cousin stand, forgetting his comments. “Is that Mami?”

“Yes, just a moment,” Mitra said, but before he could slip out of the hall Nikky was standing as well. “Bap rei, why didn't you tell me? I am the absolute rudest – she must think...”

Mitra entered the bedroom with Nikky behind him. Maha was sitting upon the bed. The television set was on, and her eyes reflected its eerie glow. It wasn't until Nikky began to speak that she turned her head and met Mitra's eyes – only briefly – before looking to Nikky.

“Mami, I had no idea you were here – I'm terribly sorry; your good-for-nothing son could've thought to mention it to me!” But Maha was already turning back to the television, as if Nikky wasn't there. “How are you? You look well,” he said. Maha didn't move.

“I have to go the bathroom,” she said, keeping her eyes fixed on the television, and as she said this, Nikky fell silent for the first time that evening.

“All right,” Mitra said, moving towards her and then looking back at Nikky. “Can you give us a few minutes, Nikky? I'll be right back.”

Nikky was standing frozen in the doorway; he started at the sound of his name, blinking quickly. “Yes, yes, of course,” he said, moving out of the room as Mitra picked up his mother and carried her out of the bedroom.

She was still a woman to Mitra, but the years had left her as something else. She let herself be carried by Mitra, and her eyes went nowhere, until they were in the bathroom. Mitra

cursed to himself, remembering the chair, and reasoned for a moment whether to put his mother back and then get it, or attempt to do this all at once. He knew she wouldn't let him go back. He went into the hall and, using two fingers from the hand that supported her back, pulled the chair into the bathroom, placing it above the toilet and then lowering her.

It was an old wooden thing that Mitra had taken a saw to, cutting out a hole in the middle of the seat – a makeshift toilet. After he'd placed her in the chair, he undid her pants and pulled them down along with her underwear, until she was sitting bottomless with her kudta draped over her. He lifted this as well, so she was sitting with her lower half exposed. And then they waited in the stillness and the darkness of the bathroom.

Eventually, her feces came and dropped into the toilet: a brown, damp, immaculate snake that landed with a soft pat in the hollowed-out space. "I'm finished," Maha said, and Mitra turned on the faucet as the water poured into the bucket. He took the pitcher and filled it, then lifted his mother so that she slouched in his arms. Then, using his right hand, he poured the water gently over her backside, using his left hand to clean the area. When he was finished, he took a towel from the hanger and wiped her, before bending down and pulling her underwear and pants back up. He washed his hands in the sink, and then lifted the woman once more. "Wash my hands," she said, and he sat her back down on the chair, lifting the bucket. "Get a basin – I won't use that. Have you no sense?" He went to the kitchen, retrieved a basin, and brought it back. He took a bar of soap from the sink, and began washing them slowly, running his hands over hers. They were gnarled by the years, torn with arthritis so that they were deformed and misshapen beyond recognition. Mitra finished washing the hands, dried them, and then lifted his mother once more, taking her back to her room. He placed her down in front of the television set and left.

The game had finished by the time he returned, and Nikky was talking of a business partner who had taken him to New York, where he'd met some important dignitaries. "Connections are important in America. Well, they're important here, too – but unlike India, connections in the States actually get you somewhere." He was laughing and wheezing once again, while his wife smiled with her penetrating eyes. Once he was through, he stood and wiped his hands, as if getting dust off of them. "Well," he said, glancing around the room, "I could go for some pan – Mitra?"

Mitra stood as well, as his wife said to Nikky's wife, "Would you care to help me in the kitchen?" Nikky's wife gave her husband a weird look, but he only nodded back. Nikky turned to Mitra. "Shall we?"

The two men exited the dark building and began down the street, where a dog was moaning and an old man pushed a cart along the road. "Hai ram, it's strange being back here. How many years has it been, Mitra? Ten? Twelve? The place looks exactly the same, I tell you; just like when we were kids." They were passing a restaurant that was bustling with people, where flies were frantically spinning around the entrance in the dank air. "Do you ever see any of the old gang? Arpit? Saurabh? Darshan?"

"No," Mitra said. He didn't know who those people were.

"I saw that friend of yours the other day. What was his name?" Nikky's brow was furrowing as he thought. "He works at that coffee shop on FC Road, by the Pizza Hut."

Mitra could feel his stomach tensing up and his throat growing dry. He knew the coffee shop. He'd passed it a few days prior, and seen who he thought might be his former friend behind the counter – the round face that might belong to Shree. But he had been too afraid to go in, instead walking by hurriedly with his head lowered. He hadn't returned.

“Let me ask you something,” Nikky was saying, lowering his voice and putting his arm around Mitra. “Do you help Mami go to the bathroom every time she’s got to go? You always go in there with her?”

Mitra felt the weight of his cousin’s hand on his shoulder. “She’s, well, she’s very sick, Nikky,” he said, stumbling over his words. “Her legs are all but gone, and the arthritis is eating away at her hands; she’s got no one else to do it.”

“Won’t Janhvi?”

“I can’t ask her to do that.”

“What else is she there for? I mean, it’s just – look, you’re a great son, better than I ever was, certainly, but that’s a lot, wouldn’t you agree?” They had reached the pan stand and Nikky ordered for both of them. Once they’d received their leaves, they moved to the curb and popped them into their mouths, while scooters whisked by in the night.

“Look, Mitra,” Nikky said, “I’m not trying to get involved here. I’m merely trying to help you. Things are going rather well for me in America, and I think things would be going a lot better for you if you thought about perhaps moving there yourself.”

“Who said things aren’t going well for me?” Mitra said. He was realizing that Nikky had ordered the leaves with tobacco, and his mouth was already burning a bit.

“Mitra,” Nikky said, “I’m your cousin. I’m family. You don’t need to do this with me – I can see it in your eyes. I know how hard it is. Ai gah, it’d be the same way for me if I hadn’t gotten the hell out of here. All I’m saying is that you have a chance for a better life. Priya and I – we go out to eat, we take vacations, we buy ourselves things. I’ve got connections; I’ve got some money tucked away so that my hair isn’t falling out every goddamn minute. I’ve got an apartment in the city, for when I’m working late – some time for me so I can actually think for a

moment. And,” he said, lowering his voice further, “this stays between us, but I’ve got a girl who comes over occasionally – young thing, graduate student. I met her out one night with some coworkers. She’s American, blonde – you know the type. I mean, it’s the real deal – full power, man! I’ve got all the things that you and I dreamt about as kids!” He pointed his finger at Mitra’s chest. “And I want them for you too. You don’t need to live like this. You can come over with Janhvi, get a job somewhere – I can help with that – put Mami in a home, where she can actually get the care she needs, and she won’t be making you clean her behind every time she shits – sorry, but, you know.” Mitra could feel an anger rising in him, but it was receding and being replaced by jealousy, then receding again and being replaced by hope, then receding again, like waves lapping up on the shore. “Let me help you,” Nikky was saying. “I want to help you. I want to make it better for you. Will you let me do that?”

Mitra let his mind fall deeper into the sea, before he looked back into Nikky’s flickering eyes. “No, Nikky, no,” he said. His mouth was flaming up, and he felt sick. “This is my home. This is where I belong. Me – my wife and I – we’re doing fine. It’s tight, but we’re doing fine.”

Nikky paused. “At least let me give you some money,” he said, pulling out his wallet.

“Nikky, no.”

“Mitra, it’s nothing to me.”

“Put that away.”

But Nikky had retrieved a couple of thousand rupee notes and was holding them out to Mitra, letting his eyebrows rise plaintively, beckoning. Mitra looked down at the money. It was nothing to him. It was paper; material wasted in the night, fluttering through the streets, resting nowhere. This paper was no different than the others, and yet its power controlled even him. But

whether on the street or in his palm, it would never rest – he would never rest; it would all never rest, even when it died. He looked back at Nikky. “We’re doing fine.”

“Let family help family, Mitra.”

“Put it away, Nikky.”

“Just take it, Mitra – please.”

“It won’t rest.”

“What?”

“It won’t – I don’t want it. Thank you, but,” he folded Nikky’s hand over the bills before looking back into his cousin’s eyes, “I don’t want it.”

Nikky sighed. “Suit yourself,” he said, pulling out his wallet and placing the bills back inside. “But think about America.”

“There’s nothing to think about.”

“Just think about it, Mitra, will you? Christ, you’ve got all these rules – these institutions in your mind; what do you think they all add up to? This world, it’s not for us. It only takes, and takes, and takes. So take back, or it will eat you – the goddamn earth – it’ll...” He paused for a moment, looking onto the road as a rickshaw passed by, its headlights penetrating the darkness. “It’ll swallow you up.”

Mitra watched his cousin, and felt himself swimming deeper, reaching for the bottom of wherever he now lived. And there, at the heart of his conscience, a question lay hidden – and then the question was bubbling up, a heat rising through the muck, and it was crawling up his throat, bursting forward. He found his cousin again: Nikky had closed his eyes and was collecting himself with a deep breath, turning back to Mitra. “Look, I’m sorry, okay?” He was back in Mitra’s eyes. “I’m just trying to help; you know that, right?”

Mitra looked at his cousin, and could feel the question foaming out of the tight line that was his mouth. “I know, Nikky, thank you.” He paused. “There’s something I wanted to ask you,” he said cautiously. “Have you heard...well, do you know what happened to Aditi?” Nikky faced his cousin, and his brow arched. Mitra could feel his heart beating rapidly, held in the weight of his cousin’s eyes as the motorbikes flew behind him in a haze.

“Who?” he said, and then he turned to the street and spat a wad of saliva onto the curb. Mitra looked down at his cousin’s spit simmering on the pavement, and felt his question die away from him. “Nevermind,” he said.

Nikky clapped him on the back, and they began walking back towards the apartment. When they returned, the light was off in Maha’s room, but the flicker of the television set remained. Nikky shook his cousin’s hand firmly, saying he would call, he would write; then he said goodbye to Janhvi, and then he and his wife left.

Later, after Janhvi had fallen asleep, Mitra went down the stairwell and into the alleyway. It was late, but the cars were still coming along. The night was cool, and Mitra clung to himself as he moved through the alley. A bearded man slept beneath some rags. Two dogs grappled with each other near a dumpster. The dumpster was overflowing with garbage: banana peels, chip bags, newspapers. Mitra walked until he could trick himself into thinking he was alone. He could still hear it all, but it seemed far off – like it was coming through the tinny speakers of his mother’s television set. He breathed in the air desperately. The dirty, bleeding air: the air that was killing him, and yet keeping him alive. The pollution was – was it in the air? Did it come from the waste? Or did it come from the people – did it come from within, as they breathed it out into the earth they’d been given? Where did it come from?

It was late. Mitra checked his watch, but remembered the light was broken. He'd have to replace it – he'd have to pay to replace it. He would talk to Satyajee. He would talk to everyone.

Mitra looked up at the sky, bright with the night of the city. Then he lowered his head, placed his hands on his knees, and vomited into the darkness.

Mitra was thirty-five and living in his childhood apartment. It was on the second day of Ganpati, not unlike any other day that might have crossed his path, that he saw the deer.

It was a sublime creature, weaving its way in and out of modern life's intricacies, its particles appearing and reappearing in infinite forms; it refracted light and time and space, and stood outside of Mitra's cognitive realization that the world around him was occurring and that he was occurring with it. This animal – no, not an animal, but a soldier – no, not a soldier, but a prophet – this prophet came before him and stood on the brink of destruction, pondering its own mortality before leaping off into the abyss, where no one could touch it, not even the gods who had damned it to this earth in the first place.

Each morning when Mitra awoke, he checked on his mother. And each morning she was already awake, the television set blaring before her. Often she had to use the toilet, and he would take her. Otherwise, she would say nothing, and he would leave the room, returning with her breakfast when it had been prepared.

Mitra had to leave for work at eight-thirty, and so as Mitra rose and went to his mother, Janhvi would rise as well and make breakfast. The husband and wife slept in the hall on the two divans that had been in Mitra's home since before he was born. She woke as he did, and would enter the kitchen. She was not a very good cook, but no one in the home was very passionate about food. They had been married when he had been twenty-three and she had been twenty-one.

Their lives before this marriage did not seem particularly relevant to either one of them. Occasionally, Janhvi would go and visit her mother, but for the most part she stayed in the home. She loved Mitra, and it was a love that need not be quantified, yet had to exist. This was a concept she never thought about, and she didn't think about it now as she made him breakfast. Eventually he would come to her, silently, and take breakfast to his mother, before sitting down at the table to eat.

Out of respect, and a deep admiration for the past, Janhvi waited until Mitra had finished eating before she ate her own breakfast. While he ate, she sat with the paper. She read the English paper because she had gone to an English medium school and wanted to keep up the skill. Mitra read the Marathi paper, but he never really read it. For him, the paper was more of an obligation, and a symbol of his involvement in the world. The ritual of the paper was more important than the actual reading. So instead he would stare at the words before him, as if internalizing them was beyond his power.

That morning, Janhvi had prepared pohe for breakfast, and Mitra sat moving the spoon around his bowl. He checked his watch: it was eight-fifteen. He put the spoon down and leafed through the paper, taking a sip of tea.

This was the world before him, and it would always be before him. He could never meet it, nor find it behind him. This was how breakfast was usually spent: looking at the paper and hearing the sounds that rang through the apartment – the treble tones of Maha's television, the ticking clock that hung from the wall, and the ticking of his own watch. It was set either a half-second ahead or a half-second behind the wall clock, and this gave off the sensation that time was moving twice as fast as it should be. Mitra had to constantly check his watch to assure himself that it wasn't.

Janhvi was leafing through the paper. “A primary school teacher was raped in Assam.”

“Hmm,” Mitra said, not looking up

“They’ve got two brothers in custody, but apparently they’re looking for a third involved.” Janhvi turned the page of the paper, and Mitra straightened. He remembered his broken watch light, and his intention to ask Satyajeeet about ordering a new one. He knew he should arrive a few minutes early, for Satyajeeet was usually displeased if Mitra asked him about unrelated subjects during work hours. “I must be going,” he said to Janhvi, rising and taking the last gulp of his tea. He had not eaten his pohe.

“So soon?” she asked, looking up from her paper.

“I’ll need to speak with Satyajeeet before work.”

“All right,” she said, “will you be home for lunch?”

“I’ll have to see; it depends on how busy we are. I’ll call.”

“All right,” she said, and then she noticed his uneaten pohe. “Shall I parcel that for you?”

“No, no,” he said, “I’m not hungry.” Janhvi looked back down at her paper, and Mitra could see her silently judging him.

“Remember,” she said, “the society is having a program this evening. For Ganpati. We will be able to go after dinner?”

“Yes, after dinner. Goodbye.” Mitra stepped away from the table, looking towards his mother’s room. The television was speaking to them. He paused, and then turned to the door, stepped into the hallway, and put on his chappals.

On his way down the stairwell, Mitra ran into the landlord. “I’ve been meaning to speak with you,” the landlord said, standing with one leg raised on a step higher than the other, and twirling a ring of keys on his index finger.

“I’m on my way to work, actually,” Mitra said. “Can we speak later?”

“Well, I’ve been meaning to speak with you,” the landlord repeated. He was letting his free hand hit against the banister lightly. “I’ll be needing to raise the rent at the end of this month.”

Mitra paused. “Will that be necessary?”

“I’m afraid it will be – times are tough.”

“Yes, they certainly are – tough for all of us. I’m not sure if I can afford much more,” Mitra said. “What will the rate increase by?”

“Five percent,” the landlord said. “I’ve got to make ends meet.”

Mitra felt himself sinking a bit, as if the steps below them were melting, and he and the landlord were being sucked into the marble quicksand below. “Listen, is there some way we can discuss this? I mean, my family has been in the building for nearly forty years.”

“Even more reason to raise the rent. Listen, I’m not trying to cheat you here – I’m only trying to make ends meet, myself.”

“Yes, of course, but isn’t there any way –”

“I’m sorry, Mitra. I’ll have to raise it, starting next month.”

“Yes,” Mitra said slowly, “all right.”

“So starting next month then,” the landlord said. “See you.” And then the landlord was moving up the stairwell, swinging the key ring in a circle as he did.

This, Mitra reasoned, would significantly change the conversation between him and Satyajeet: he would no longer be asking that he fix his watch on the shop’s dollar, but he was most likely going to have to ask his employer for a loan. A raise was out of the question: Mitra had asked in the past, and Satyajeet had remained rather firm on Mitra’s salary. “Although I

value you here, Mitra, I can't afford to pay you any more than I do. It's a simple watch shop, and the only way I could pay you more is if I raised my prices, and you know I can't do that. We're already losing business to those chain locations – if I raise my prices, we'll lose even more business. I'm sorry, but I can't help you.” This left asking for a loan, in the hopes that perhaps he could make up the money somewhere else and eventually pay Satyajeet – perhaps by taking on a second job. He did not like the idea of giving his employer this economic superiority over him, but he saw no other options at his disposal.

Mitra stepped out of the apartment into the sun-glazed street. Mornings in Pune were distinctly his: he could walk to work – the *Pleasure* scooter his mother had purchased for him some years ago was now broken – before the sun had reached its peak, pouring heat onto the city in an almost unbearable manner. His walk home – whether at lunch, or at the end of the day – was plagued with sweat and discomfort, as if the earth had decided to punish him. But the mornings – the mornings held a slight breeze, and the yawn of exorcism swelled in his breast as he moved. The walk to Laxshmi led him over the bridge, where he could see the river pulsating by, and watch the waves working together and against each other all at once, fighting their way forward. And this was all before he entered into the shop: a necessary prison, but at least a prison he was able to walk into of his own volition. He turned onto the main road, and as the sun cast its morning light over the street, making the world swim, he saw it.

The prophet was standing in the street's divide, its head raised to the sky, its eyes open in ecstasy; it must have been one hundred meters from Mitra. The deer was clean and immaculate, as if it had flown into the city, devoid of relation and pollution. It was obscured in the heat, and although it lived in its mirage, Mitra knew that the long, slender creature was real. There were other people on the street – a man pushing a banana cart, two women on their way to the market,

a student with his headphones on – and yet none of them seemed to take any notice of the animal. It stood in the center of the road as rickshaws blurred by and motorbikes flew in and out of Mitra's line of vision; Mitra thought that perhaps a cycle would fly by and the deer would vanish, however every time his view was obstructed for even a moment, the deer was always waiting on the other side. And it appeared to be looking at him.

Mitra saw the deer's open eyes from their distance, and could feel the earth shifting, tectonic plates moving, matter erupting, volcanoes forming, worlds destroying. He wasn't completely sure whether he was looking at the deer or looking at himself; he was looking out of one pair of eyes, but he didn't know which pair. He stood rooted to the spot, as the deer watched him and he watched the deer and eventually they were watching each other. And then, after time had passed – how much, Mitra didn't know – the deer bowed its head, as if to touch it to the concrete, and then was catapulting itself forward as Mitra heard himself let out a scream. The deer jumped, as if it was being thrown forward – but this was of its own agency; and it landed on its hooves in the street, narrowly missing a motorcycle that seemed to not even realize it was so near. It was galloping now, dancing between the vehicles until it was jumping again, clearing the sidewalk and then falling into the brush by the side of the road, disappearing. Mitra watched the space where it had been, watched the rustling of the leaves, and then watched the breeze take it over. There was silence once again. The deer was gone.

Mitra was on the street. He could feel his body there, but he wasn't sure that he hadn't disappeared into the brush with the deer. He looked at his watch, and realized that twenty minutes had gone by. He began to run.

When he arrived at the shop, Satyajeeet was opening the storefront, and checked his own watch when he saw Mitra approaching. “Ten minutes late,” he said, looking up at Mitra. “I can’t afford to have you here late.”

“I’m sorry,” Mitra said, and hurried through the door.

Mitra spent most of the workday in the back of the shop, fixing the clocks and watches. The shop was small and old, and yet had a glow to it that Mitra appreciated. All around were various clocks, ticking away at their own pace, forever moving forward: some moving too quickly, while others moved too slowly. This was much to Satyajeeet’s frustration: he had tried countless times to get all of the clocks working at the same speed and at the same time; however, they always found a way back to their original chaos, thus ruining his vision of a perfectly succinct store. Mitra, however, didn’t mind the array of clocks and speeds: there was something unnerving to him about hundreds of clocks all beating together, their culmination destroying all other forms of time. He thought of them all as enemies, working against each other to finish the race – to see who would reach the end of time first. Occasionally, a clock would die and be laid to rest, thus surrendering its goal of being the final clock – the one to find the end before the others, and anticipate it as such.

No one ever bought any of these clocks, however, and generally didn’t buy any of watches either. Satyajeeet, in Mitra’s opinion, was a rather poor salesman, and lacked the charisma one needed in order to sell anything. He would often become flustered with the customers, and yet he refused to have anyone else work in the front of the store, and found a way of blaming Mitra whenever something went wrong. Satyajeeet did this, though, not out of some immoral reason: he was simply displeased with himself, and it made sense to take it out on the

only person who saw this displeasure. He was not particularly gifted at fixing the watches either, and Mitra would often have to stay late in order to undo whatever error Satyajeeet had made.

Mitra enjoyed fixing the watches, however menial and insignificant he knew the job was. Within each watch there were numerous mechanisms, usually put together in a haphazard way – and yet, if maintained properly, they could coexist and work perfectly. It was Mitra’s job, as he saw it, to foster this perfection, and continue this perfection until the machine could no longer perform its duty, and courageously gave up. Watches were not like clocks, he reasoned: watches were not fighting and competing against each other. They had an owner, and they stayed loyal to that owner. Clocks wanted to win – to find completion. Watches wanted meaning; they wanted significance. And that’s why even with the light of his watch broken, he still treasured the device for soldiering on.

At eleven-thirty, Mitra was in the back of the shop working on a cat-shaped clock. The clock itself was working well enough, but for some reason the eyes were moving against each other so that the cat was looking cross-eyed. Mitra had stopped the clock, and was attempting to right the eyes when Satyajeeet came into the back of the shop with a watch in hand. “Here,” he said, “this just came in. The back popped off – can you reattach it?”

Mitra took the watch from him: a Timex with a leather band, clicking away at the correct time. Mitra turned it over, however, and saw that the back had fallen off, exposing the world inside. “If he takes a Philips head screwdriver,” Mitra began, but Satyajeeet was already speaking.

“Yes, yes, I know – he could pop it back on himself, but he said he couldn’t do it. It’s some American – you know they can’t do anything themselves. Can you fix it?”

Mitra put the watch on the desk. “Sure,” he said, turning back to the cat.

“Now – he’s waiting out there.”

“Can’t he come back later? I’m in the middle of – ”

“Of course he can come back later, but he doesn’t want to come back later – he wants it now. So will you fix it and bring it out?”

“Yes, yes,” Mitra said, and Satyajeeet walked back into the front of the store, speaking to the American: “If you’ll just wait one moment, sir...”

Mitra put the cat clock aside and pulled the American’s watch underneath his magnifying glass, reaching into his desk drawer and pulling out the Philips head – but as he prepared to apply the screwdriver to the watch, something stopped him. He peered down at the device and pulled his lamp closer, examining the innards: there seemed to be a small metallic rod sticking out near the backside of the number four. Mitra moved the magnifying glass closer, and looked at the small piece. It was out of place, certainly, but Mitra couldn’t tell where its exact place was, or what it was doing there. He touched it with his thumb, feeling the sweat from his fingers sticking to the metal, leaving his thumbprint upon its shining surface, drawing him nearer to it – more intimate, closer.

The clocks were ticking – he was hearing them – and they were growing, charging in from the outside room, blasting their way into the office, where the constant beat was booming in Mitra’s ears; and then he was hearing his own wristwatch joining in, drowning out the other clocks – a monotonous click that was pulling him nearer and at the same time pushing him away; time was engulfing him and attracting him, and repulsing him and banishing him. He was raising the Philips head to the metal rod, pushing on it as the clocks exploded around him in every direction, shooting seconds outward in vectors and sending minutes flying into the future – growing, growing, becoming, dying, birthing, living, dying, and he was pushing, and then there was a snap.

The clocks stopped, and the crown spilled out of the watch, falling onto the desk with a small clink. It rolled until it rested next to Mitra's right hand. He stared at the shining metal knob as it tilted back and forth from its own torque, watching him. Something had gone wrong – something so definite; and yet something had gone wrong. The watch had collapsed, the circle had broken, the spaces had converged – and now there were two others in front of him. But before he could react, Satyajeet was flying into the back room again.

“What's taking you so long? You should be done by now – what's...” Then he stopped and looked down at the watch. He saw the crown, and smacked his hand to his forehead. “Bap rei! What happened? You broke it!”

“There was something wrong with it,” Mitra was stuttering, but Satyajeet was already shouting over him.

“You fool! Do you have any idea how this looks? All you had to do was pop the piece back on, and you broke off the crown! How could you?”

“It was something – ”

“Okay, okay,” Satyajeet said, putting his hands to his face in exasperation. “Here's what we're going to do. We're going to tell him that when the back fell off, it broke the crown as well. That's what we'll do. We'll – we'll just tell him that it was more broken than it looked, and then we can order another crown and you can put it back on. You can do that, right?”

“Yes, but – ”

“Give me the watch – I'll talk to him. Give it to me.” Satyajeet took the watch in his shaking hand and brought it to the front of the store, where Mitra could hear him talking with the American in English: “Sir, it appears as though there was another problem with the watch... You see, the knob here was broken...”

Satyajeet came back after the American had left, with his hands on his hips. “Well, you’re damn lucky that he believed me. He looked a little suspicious, but I told him that we’d have it back to him by tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Mitra said incredulously. “Look, even if we order the part – ”

“I told him tomorrow, and it will be done tomorrow. Call and get the piece rush delivered. And yes, I know it’s more expensive; and yes, it’s coming out of your salary. And you’re lucky I’m being so understanding of this mistake, considering how foolish it was of you to make such a simple error. That watch better be perfect when he comes back, or else there will be hell to pay.” And with that, Satyajeet left, as Mitra sat in the deafening silence he’d created.

At the end of the day, he walked home in the muggy heat that the sun poured down upon the city: he felt the pebbles below his chappals, and the dust watering his tired eyes. When he reached the apartment, Janhvi was preparing dinner, and after helping his mother use the toilet, Mitra sat at the table as the two clocks whispered in his ears.

He looked through the doorframe at his wife. She was chopping up an onion and humming softly to herself. She was wearing a turquoise sari that rustled in the wind of her work; her dark hair was draped over her as she cut, and Mitra could see the semblance of a smile across her face that radiated beneath her full cheekbones. And as he watched her, he tried to convince himself of this possession: she was, he thought to himself, his. For years she had been his, and would continue to be his – here and elsewhere, in this world and the next. They had gone to dinner the other evening at Tiranga and he had paid; he had placed his hand on the small of her back as they left the restaurant; and then they had gotten home and he had made love to her – he had felt her call to him, from the glow behind her eyes: *I am yours, I belong to you, this is yours and no one else’s*. To brush her hair behind her ear, to hold her in his power, to consume

whatever identity she had left with his burden – it was all before him, tight within his fist. And yet, he could never complete the circle between them – to fully realize the love that was supposed to be there, and destroy her completely.

And even in that moment as she cooked for him, he could not shake what fell beyond these objective truths: he was afraid of her. There was something too present about her: she was too much of this world. He remembered when he first met her, when his mother had arranged with her family for their marriage. He had been sitting in the hall – the very hall that now sat five meters from him – when she entered through the door. She had her head bowed, her sari draped around her, her expression mute. Mitra tried to picture her face then, but he couldn't – and in the years that had passed, he had slowly disintegrated, his presence dwindling. His heart was no longer with him. And as he looked through the doorway at this creature, the possession he towered over seemed little more than a cheap joke – how to possess someone when you didn't possess yourself was something he knew was beyond his reach.

Janhvi brought out the dinner. It was a mushroom dish soaked in gravy. She scooped some into his bowl and folded up a roti, placing it on his tray. She sat down across from him and sighed, as he looked down at the food. His appetite had escaped him. But as he paused, Janhvi spoke. “Is it all right?”

He looked up at her. “Yes, yes, quite all right,” he said. Then, using his right hand, he broke off a piece of the roti and dipped it into the dish. “We've got to be at the program at ten,” she said, checking her watch. “A half-hour.”

“All right,” Mitra said. She rose from the table, prepared another plate, and took it in to Maha. Mitra looked down at the food and forced it down his throat, feeling a dry heave rising in his depths. Janhvi returned to the table just as he was finished eating. “Would you like more?”

“No, no,” he said. She took his plate to the kitchen and then fixed one for herself.

Mitra moved into the bathroom and locked the door. He washed his hands with soap, and then splashed water upon his face. His stomach felt as though it was attempting to claw its way out of his body. He dried his hands and his face, and turned to the toilet. Then, in one elegant motion, he moved to it, lowered himself to his knees, and stuck two fingers down his throat.

The program took place in the basement of the apartment building, where a stage had been erected and a number of plastic chairs had been arranged before it. Some tenants were already seated, while others milled about talking. Upon their arrival, Janhvi joined a group of women near the stage, clutching a sheet of paper to her chest. Mitra watched as the women giggled and took her into their confidence.

Mitra took a seat near the back. He spotted the landlord leaning against the wall, checking his watch. He watched Janhvi as she conversed with the women. He closed his eyes and crossed his arms.

Although his stomach had been relieved, Mitra could feel the pressure building up in his chest, as if his lungs were now attempting to break free of his body – it was making it difficult to breathe. In the darkness beneath his eyelids he could see the deer prancing in the black obscurity of his mind’s eye, and he wanted to go to it – to enter inside his head, somehow, and prance along with it, where it would take him to the final location, where the final clock would be waiting for him, smiling knowingly, as if to say: “*We’ve been expecting you.*”

Mitra felt a clap on his shoulder and he was startled back to life as he heard the plastic chair next to him sliding against the pavement. A man sat down beside him – it was Prathamesh, a tenant that lived a floor up from Mitra who he sometimes saw if he took the garbage downstairs

in the morning for the trash pickers. “Ganpati Bappa,” Prathamesh said, gripping Mitra’s shoulder. “How are you?”

Prathamesh spoke a bit about work – he was employed at a local printing press – but Mitra didn’t feel much like talking. Prathamesh had thick eyebrows, with a full mustache and a mole on his left cheek. A few times he turned to his two daughters and waved to them, and they would wave back from their game in the front of the room. Mitra didn’t want to look at Prathamesh, for he was aware that although the two men were roughly the same age, he looked drastically more haggard than his neighbor. He had seen himself in the mirror as he’d washed his hands, and caught a glimpse of the gaunt human staring back at him. Looking at Prathamesh only made him see some distorted image of what he was supposed to be.

The program began as a man took the stage and said some opening words, before signaling to a boy sitting off to the side with a soundboard. The boy pressed a button on the board, and then the man launched into a rendition of traditional Hindi song. Mitra didn’t know either the man or the boy. While the man sang, he would hold up the microphone with one hand, and use the other to point at the audience vaguely. After doing a few more songs, he moved off the stage and let someone else get up.

The rest of the program consisted of a variety of acts put on by the different tenants: performances on the tabla or the Casio, as well as a couple of skits, and a few more songs. Prathamesh clapped enthusiastically after each performance, and Mitra produced a feeble clap as well. This went on for an hour, as Mitra felt himself slowly slipping in and out of consciousness, before he finally saw Janhvi take the stage.

She stood before the audience, holding the microphone in her hand. She said hello into it a few times, testing it out. Then she paused, as the room fell into silence, and only her breath came across the speakers. Mitra looked up at his wife standing above him, and waited.

Janhvi closed her eyes and lowered herself to the microphone, as she began to sing; her song floated out of her, into the air before the audience, like clouds rolling across the sky: “*When I was a little girl, I asked my mother, ‘What will I be? Will I be pretty, will I be rich?’ Here’s what she said to me...*”

Mitra’s empty stomach was moving, and his chest was burrowing, and his whole body was jolting forward. “*Que sera, sera. Whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see. Que sera, sera. What will be, will be...*” He was being transported now, and the whole world was falling away from him. Janhvi continued; she was singing, her voice echoing through the room as the reverb resonated over and over and over, and she sang the song of those who dream, until it was echoing inside his Mitra’s skull and his ears were exploding outward into the world. “*Now I have children of my own. They ask their mother, ‘What will I be? Will I be handsome, will I be rich?’ I tell them tenderly...*”

Mitra’s mind was circling back, triggering back, to ages he’d tried to forget, to ages he’d attempted to bury beneath the rubble of his mind – to the place where the woman of his heart lived: Aditi. He could not see her, he realized, as he felt a chill running across his skin: all he could see was her shadow. Her shadow, as she danced in the rain, as she walked away from him – her silhouette that transcended everything within reason. Her name – behind him, before him, because of him – where she was, he didn’t know; where she had been, he didn’t know this either. Was she happy, was she alive, was she breathing, was she going, was she coming, was anything that had ever happened in the world of any importance to her, had anything ever been anything

more than a chance and a risk and everything else in-between? He was only a small shell on the shore that washed up and got sucked back in and washed up and got sucked back in and washed up and got sucked back in: Aditi. *“Que sera, sera. Whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see. Que sera, sera. What will be will be.”*

If there was any life left within Mitra it would have cried, but there was no life left in him. He simply sat there as his body disintegrated and his skin turned inside out, and the people around him applauded and Prathamesh was clapping him on the back again. “Can you believe that? Did you know she could sing like that, Mitra? Absolutely beautiful!”

When the program ended, Mitra climbed back up the stairs alone, as Janhvi stayed behind to talk with her friends and receive congratulations from other tenants. Mitra made it to the door and turned the knob, his feeble hand letting him into the apartment where he sat on the divan in the darkness of the room. She was now in his mind, but his mind was with her anyway – wherever she was. Why didn’t Nikky remember her? He had left a sliver of hope with his cousin, only to watch it cast aside like rotten meat – where was she? In America, he thought. Perhaps married, perhaps not. Did she still think of him? Did it hurt when she thought of him? How was he to know when she thought of him? How could his love die and yet keep on living, somewhere out there? How could his heart be hurt and his soul be gone when neither of them had ever lived inside of him? There was no heart to hurt, no soul to take. Only a song reverberating through the basement of the apartment where he’d lived all his life.

Janhvi’s silhouette appeared in the doorframe. She entered slowly, shutting the door behind her so that it didn’t make a sound. Mitra didn’t look at her. She stood for a moment before going into the kitchen, flipping on a light, and doing something. Mitra could hear her movements. This went on. She came back into the room, leaving the kitchen light on. He could

see her shape before him in the hall, looking down at him. He could hear the television from his mother's room. He could feel the heat around him. "Turn off the kitchen light," he said, after a while. She did. Then she came back and stood before him once again. He looked up at his wife, and tried to find some semblance of someone he knew and loved, but all he saw was the shadow of the woman he'd given himself to all those years ago.

They let the silence fill the space between the two of them. More time passed, and they let it pass. After it had all moved through, and they'd both watched it go, Janhvi spoke.

"Do you," she began, and then stopped. Then she started again. "Do you not find me attractive?"

In the night Mitra heard her. He saw her darkness before him, darker than the apartment lit by the television light sneaking out under the door. He looked up at her. He could see her eyes, or at least what he thought were her eyes amid the darkness.

"What?"

"Do you not find me attractive?"

Silence.

"Do you not find me pleasurable to look at? Am I not pleasing to you physically?" she said. "Do you not find me attractive?"

Mitra didn't answer. He looked down at his hands before him, even though he couldn't really see them.

"What am I to you? Do you know what I am to you?" Mitra didn't answer. "These women... we've been married twelve years. Twelve years we've lived here – I've lived here with you. And twelve years you've lived with me. These women, they ask me, 'You've been married so long! In your thirties now! When can we expect a child from you? Soon?' But I hear

what they don't say. They say that I am without character, without distinction. They say that I have done wrong, and that you are being punished for it. They say that it is my fault. And I ask you, Mitra. Is it my fault? Is it my fault?" There was silence once again, but her words lived on. Mitra was looking up at her. In the night, he was seeing her. She was before him – he could see that now. His body was moving backwards; he was a child again. He wanted her to hold him, for he felt so nubile now, so vulnerable. He was seeing a human being before him. He wanted to tell her about the deer – to scream it out to her. Someone needed to know, and she was there. But something kept him deep within, as if he wasn't allowed to tell her any of it anyway – it wasn't what had been decided upon – and so he was alone. He watched her, a child waiting for his mother. He looked up at her and his body wept. To tell her would bring about his revolution.

And then, it stopped. It was over. He was sitting before her. He felt a bit confused. Who was this woman before him? Who was this man before him? He looked down at his hands again. He had no answer for any question. And eventually, she turned away, went into the bathroom, and then returned to the hall, lying down on the divan to sleep.

The following morning, Mitra awoke, tended to his mother, and then sat down at the table for breakfast. Janhvi had prepared uppith, and the off-white mush sat before him while he glossed over the paper. Janhvi was across from him with her English paper. It was the third day of Ganpati.

"A woman killed herself in Lucknow yesterday. Set herself on fire," Janhvi said, not looking up. "It says here she was molested by someone from the Samajwadi Party."

"Hmm," Mitra said.

“They’ve taken the politician into custody, as well as two others who were involved. She was thirty-nine years old,” Janhvi said.

Mitra didn’t answer, noticing an unopened envelope hiding beneath Janhvi’s paper with the corner sticking out. He pulled it out and studied it, before peeling it open and examining its contents. It was a notice from the electric company: how much they owed for the month. He ran his finger down the transactions, finding the final figure near the bottom. It was much higher than Mitra had anticipated. He could feel himself sinking once again, ever so slightly into the wooden chair below him.

“Janhvi, did you know about this?” He held the bill before her, and she looked up from the paper, taking it in her hands. Mitra watched as she searched the document, saw the total, and then looked up at Mitra.

“Oh dear,” she said, “that’s rather high, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Mitra said. He was trying to make his voice sound more severe than usual. “Listen, don’t leave the fan on all day, nor the appliances in the kitchen. We can’t afford something like this, not at all. And keep the lights off as well – this is... why, this is much more than we can afford.”

Janhvi’s brow furrowed as she trained her eyes past Mitra, focusing on the wall behind his head. “I hardly use any electricity,” she said, looking down at the paper and twirling her finger on the page. “You know what it is – it’s that television in there. If she leaves it on all day it costs a lot of money. It’s on all the time – that’s why the bill is so high.”

Mitra sighed and rubbed his temples. “And what do you suggest I do? I can hardly tell her to turn it off.”

“I think you certainly can,” Janhvi said, looking up at him. “Tell her it’s too expensive and we can’t afford to have her watching television all day like that – it’s the truth.”

“I can’t tell her that!” Mitra exclaimed, looking at his wife incredulously.

“Well, why not?”

“Listen, I don’t want to speak about this anymore. Just be cautious when using your appliances and the fan, and keep the lights off during the day.” Mitra was burying his face in his hands, pressing them firmly to his eyes.

“I need to cook, and I need to use electricity for that.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, Janhvi, but I’m only telling you to use caution. All right?”

Janhvi looked back down at her paper. “Yes, of course,” she said. Mitra heard the clocks ticking as he released his eyes, startling them with the daylight. After a moment, Janhvi looked up and spoke. “Are we in some sort of financial trouble?”

“No, no, it’s just – just use caution is all,” he said.

“Because if there’s some kind of financial trouble – ”

“There’s no financial trouble, just please be considerate. Can you do that?”

Janhvi said that she could and then looked back down at her paper. Mitra checked his watch and realized that he had to be going. Despite yesterday’s incident, he intended upon asking Satyajeet for the loan, and he knew he’d have to arrive early if he wanted to. “I must be going,” he said, looking down at his food. “Can you parcel this for me?”

Janhvi found a tiffin and put the uppith inside, along with Mitra’s spoon. “Will you be home for lunch?” she asked.

“It depends on how busy we are.” Mitra stepped out of the kitchen with his parcel, pausing once again as he heard the television from under his mother’s door, and then left.

Once outside, Mitra made his way onto Paud Road. He found a driver sitting in the backseat of his rickshaw, reading the paper with his feet up. "I'll give you my breakfast if you drive me over to Laxshmi Road," Mitra said, opening the container and showing the driver. The man lowered his paper and peered into the tiffin, inspecting the food. Then he shook his head and lifted the paper back up, hiding his face from Mitra. Mitra walked on.

He came upon a dog with black fur and a few white patches. The dog was scratching itself with its hind leg. Mitra opened the tiffin, turned it upside down, and dropped the contents in front of the dog, bending down to retrieve the spoon. The dog sniffed the food for a moment, and then went back to scratching itself. Mitra watched the dog for a bit, and then walked to work.

When Mitra reached the shop the gate was pulled down, but had been unlocked. He lifted it and entered the store. Satyajeet was standing behind the counter, rearranging the watches inside the display case. He looked up as Mitra entered and then back down at the watches as his quivering hands moved them, then moved them back, then moved them again. Mitra stopped in front of his employer.

"Satyajeet," he said, clearing his throat slightly. Satyajeet did not look up.

"Yes?"

Mitra cleared his throat again. "Well, I wanted to apologize for yesterday. That was – that was a foolish error, and it was my fault. Thank you for dealing with it so generously, and thank you for providing me with time to fix the error."

Satyajeet looked up from his watches and eyed Mitra curiously. Then, he sighed and looked back down at the glass. "Mitra, I understand. Thank you for your apology. You're a good worker, and I value that. But sometimes your carelessness, your lack of attention to detail – well, it ends up costing the store and, in turn, costing you."

Mitra could feel the anger rising in him at Satyajeet's words, but he let it die below him, seeping out of his feet and grounding into the tile.

"The problem is, Mitra," Satyajeet said, "that we can't have errors like that happening. We're a small shop, and we count on our customers to return. And an American – well, that's an important customer; a customer we can charge more. You're lucky I was able to cover like that and keep him from losing his temper."

Mitra listened to Satyajeet and took this. It was his body, his full body, feeling the submission – submission to an employer whose facts need not be true, but needed to be facts. Satyajeet sighed and raised his head once again, crossing his arms. "I understand, though, Mitra, thank you for apologizing. I'll take the fee for the new crown out of your paycheck and you'll fix it up. There's no worry."

Mitra could feel his blood beating. "Well, that's the thing," he heard himself say as Satyajeet moved onto the next display case. "You see, Satyajeet, money is very tight – very tight for Janhvi and I, what with costs rising and my Ai's care... It's been a very difficult time."

Satyajeet wasn't looking up, and so Mitra pressed on. "And see, they've raised the rent in my building as well, now, and, well..." He paused, trying to find the right words. "I know you said a raise wasn't possible, and I understand that, certainly. But, if you could just help me out, with whatever you can, until I'm able to maybe find work somewhere else as well..."

Satyajeet looked up now, his hands still on the watches. "Are you asking me for money, Mitra?"

"Anything would be of great help, Satyajeet, and of course I would pay you back – it's just until I'm able to find a job in the evening –"

But Satyajeet was slamming the display case closed and glaring up at Mitra. “You’re asking me for money?”

“Really, Satyajeet, just – ”

Satyajeet crossed his arms once again. “So that’s why you’re apologizing to me, eh? Trying to get on my good side so I’ll give you money? And then what? So I give you the money, and you do with it as you will, and then in a month’s time you come back asking for more money, and then I’m supposed to go out of pocket – ”

“No, it would be just until I – ”

Satyajeet was moving out from behind the counter and propping open the door. “Bap rei, the nerve on you, Mitra. You try to give me that apology as if I’ll sweeten to you, and then you ask me for money? The nerve, Mitra, the nerve!” He was crossing back behind the counter and facing Mitra. “We’re open now, Mitra. Go in the back and begin work. And that American’s watch damn well better be fixed by the time he comes in here.” Mitra looked at his employer, searching his eyes for some sign of emotion, but the only thing reflected back at him was his own hopelessly shriveled figure. And so, he turned, went into the back of the shop, and sat down, pulling his lamp over the next clock he was to fix.

The hours slid by and Mitra found his mind sliding by as well. He tried to think: how would he make up the extra money for the rent and electric bill if Satyajeet wasn’t willing to help? Every time an idea seemed close to his mind’s field of vision, it disappeared, whisking by in a flash until another was flying by behind it, like cars in the dark. The hours moved like the drawl of old speech, and the clocks ticked around him and the world continue spinning and his mind churned and boiled over as he listened to Satyajeet fumbling through transactions from the doorway.

At midday, Satyajeeet came hurrying back, nearly out of breath. “The American is here,” he said, “is his watch ready?”

Mitra opened the drawer of his desk and produced the watch, holding it up to Satyajeeet as he recoiled. “Don’t give it to me!” he yelled. “Take it to him yourself – I want him to know this was all your doing!”

Mitra stood from the desk, sighing heavily as he walked into the front of the shop with Satyajeeet close behind. The American stood at the counter, looking particularly sweaty in his oversized suit and narrowly framed glasses. He was an older gentleman with red cheeks and skin that sagged like a hound dog. “Ah, finally,” he said as Mitra approached him with the watch. “You’re lucky I gave you the time that I did for this – absolute nonsense.” Mitra stood behind the counter as Satyajeeet retrieved the American’s receipt. “Well, show him that it works,” Satyajeeet said to Mitra in Marathi, and Mitra held out the watch to the man, showing him that the crown had been reattached. He pushed it in and the watch lit up. Mitra pulled out the crown slightly and changed the watch back to the correct time. Then he handed it to the American and watched him inspect it. After a moment, he said: “All right, very well,” and Mitra took it back from him to wipe the glass. As he did so, however, the crown suddenly spilled out of its hole and tumbled onto the glass counter, spiraling to the floor. The American cursed loudly and Satyajeeet gasped as Mitra quickly went down to the floor, searching for the piece between the dirt and the rubbish.

“Jesus Christ,” the American said, “I thought you fixed the damn thing! Now that’s twice you’ve broken my watch – honestly!” Mitra was still searching for the piece as Satyajeeet bumbled through several apologies, one falling over another; he finally found the glimmering crown, picked it up, wiped it on his forearm, and then stood.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir, if you’ll just give me the rest of the afternoon,” Satyajeeet was saying, but the American was cutting him off.

“I’m not giving you any more time with my watch – you’ll just do more damage! Honestly, I came in here to have something simple done to my watch, and now you’ve complicated this whole thing – is this place even a business?” The American was nearly laughing and Satyajeeet was still apologizing profusely – but the American was holding up a hand, motioning for him to stop. “Give me my watch,” he said to Mitra, and Mitra handed it over, looking at the ground. “I’m taking my business elsewhere.” The man nodded politely to them, said: “Good day,” and then was gone.

Satyajeeet was rounding on Mitra with fury in his eyes. “You fool! You damned fool! You said you fixed it! You told me it was fixed!” Mitra said nothing, his head bowed. “So irresponsible, so unprofessional! Who knows who that man will tell – we’re ruined! And all because of you!”

Mitra could feel the dirt from the ground tingling his palms. “Well,” Satyajeeet said, glaring at him, “what do you have to say for yourself? Speak, if you know how!”

Mitra swallowed his tongue and gulped out some words. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“You’re sorry? That’s all you’ve got to say – you’re sorry? Get out of my store at once, you embarrassment! And don’t come back until you’ve sorted yourself out – and when you do you better pray that I keep you on – I should fire you, I should!” Mitra didn’t move. “Get out!” Satyajeeet screamed again, and Mitra stepped out from behind the counter, keeping his head lowered as he moved through the open door, with Satyajeeet still muttering to himself in anger.

Out on the street, Mitra didn’t know what to do next. He certainly could not go home: that would alert Janhvi and his mother, and he didn’t necessarily want them knowing about this.

Best to stay away for a few hours and return home later; then return to the shop the next day and hope that Satyajeet had cooled off enough to not fire him. But in the meantime he didn't have anywhere to go. He felt the loneliness creeping over him: he had nowhere to turn with his shame, and no one to comfort the hopeless anxiety that was growing in his chest. He stood on the street as a lost child, alone in the expansive world.

Then, as if out of a dream, he remembered Shree. His friend, who he'd seen working at the café not far from here. His friend who he'd left behind so many years ago; his friend who now had the ability quell the defeat that was overtaking him. It had been years, Mitra knew. But he also knew that the bond was still here – it had hidden inside of him as time had pulled him forward. And perhaps it was hidden inside Shree, too. So he began to walk, slipping his hands into his pockets.

The sun was hot, and it was beating down on him. He could feel sweat forming on his forehead and he wiped it with his sleeve; however, in a few seconds more had appeared. He was squinting as he walked, as the street fluttered before him, the colors warm and ominous.

What had happened with the watch, he wasn't exactly sure. He'd checked it a dozen times – rechecked it, fiddled with the mechanisms until he wasn't sure there had ever been a problem. And yet, he had seen it just as clearly as the American and Satyajeet: the piece had fallen out before his very eyes. The watch was against him: time was against him, certainly. Its limbs were dragging him down, attempting to bury him under the earth. He knew this, and he wanted desperately to fight against it, but he was far too tired – far too exhausted to continue.

He was crossing the street, narrowly missing a motorbike. He was looking around with burning eyes. It was killing him. The city had eaten him alive. But now, it didn't have room for him anymore and it wanted him out. It didn't want him, and so it was spitting him out. It was a

city he loved, the city hated, a city he made love to, and a city he beat. And it made love to him and it beat him, and now it was done with him. The dogs were all banding together and they were going to eat away at his flesh and gnaw away at his bones until there was nothing left of him, and then it would be done with him. And he shamelessly, shamelessly wanted the thing that didn't want him – he wanted to push it away and he wanted to draw it closer.

Mitra reached the café and stopped on the sidewalk, surveying the street. Across from him there was a man napping under a tree, his head resting upon his jacket with one arm draped over his eyes. A large white dog lay on its side panting, its red erection wobbling under his strain. A woman sat on a bench next to her cart of bananas, waiting for customers. Three men stood with their rickshaws a block away, muttering to each other while a fourth man wiped down his windshield. There was a boy selling corn, peeling back the green and piling it up on the ground. An old autistic man was passing by, his eyes glazed and his teeth falling over his gums as he mumbled to himself, placing his weight upon a cane. None of them were aware of any of the others. They were all in their own separate spheres, awaiting the next rotation. It was all routine, all so specific. It was all so – so situational.

Mitra turned to the café, and it was then that he saw him standing behind the counter. It was Shree, wearing a light blue button-down with the same wide face he'd always known peeking out at the collar. But something was different – something had changed. He'd grown older: there were lines tracing his face and bags under his once wide eyes. His form seemed twisted and contorted, and his arms hung loosely at his sides like a rag doll. And it was then that Mitra realized that Shree was suffering as well. This body was crumbling too: he was being dragged down into the muck, and it was horrific to see the defeat thrown back at him through this mirror. The misshapen image of his friend was too much to bear; he shouldn't have come

here, he knew. They were doomed to be alone, wandering in the wilderness in search of something that would never come for them.

He turned away, horrified, and in the delirium he looked across the road – and it was waiting for him. The deer was standing, closer than before – maybe twenty meters. It wasn't looking at him, but instead was gazing down the street towards some unknown destination. Mitra felt his heart jump, but stayed where he was, not wanting to scare it away. People were walking past it, taking no notice; motors were flying by, remaining oblivious. The deer was turning its neck, the muscles rippling, and then it was looking into Mitra's eyes, and the reflection of everything was shining through at him. Sound was fading away and silence was filling him. His sense was leaving him, as if the roar of the city was slowly being removed. There was the deer and there was home, and there was everyone else, and there was no noise. There was a noise, though: the ticking of his watch. He pulled his eyes away from the deer as he brought his arm up, looking down at the watch – leather strap, brown, silver finish, Timex – was it the one that the American had brought into the shop? Was it his watch? He could hear the seconds clicking away, as the hands moved towards their conclusion – the conclusion of all things. He held it up to his ear and the ticking grew louder; he was looking back at the deer, and the watch was resting at the side of his head – it was growing louder. The deer was ticking. The watch was speaking. And Mitra opened his ears and listened.

The earth was moving suddenly, but he was staying still. Everything was shifting: the ground was above him, the sky below, the earth crashing down. He stayed still while everything moved. A deafening roar drowned out his watch and smoke filled his consciousness as the world was thrown into oblivion – everything was vanishing. And then he was colliding with the street, his head falling against the pavement, and the gravel was spilling out against him, taking

him with it, as his body recoiled and burst open. When he finally came back, he was lying facedown in the street with rubble surrounding him and the motors screeching to a halt.

Mitra breathed the breath of life and gasped for it, hugging it close to him. He felt something in his mouth and let it out: blood splattered upon the street. Everything was blurry; there was a ringing in his ears that seemed to echo into infinity, and he couldn't shake it. Around him, people were screaming and crying: a woman was grabbing her face and shrieking, but no noise came out. People were running, but he couldn't tell where they were going. Mitra rolled over onto his back and looked up at the sky as snowflakes of black and grey rained down upon him, covering his face. The earth was still moving and he moved with it, getting onto his hands and knees and pulling his head up to the world.

What had once been the café had been reduced to nothing; it was smoldering in the heat of the sun as people ran to it, screaming into their phones. The sound was coming in and Mitra could hear the cries and the yells racing back to him – the deafening echo of the explosion was still ringing through the street as he slowly got to his feet. The café was transformed – it was a hollow, made by man and destroyed by man. And Mitra realized that somewhere within this cavern Shree was waiting – alone, destroyed, but perhaps alive.

Then he was charging towards the remains, dragging his left leg behind him, with pain shooting up his thigh and into his spine; the world was going in and out of focus and his eyes were attempting to readjust – but he kept moving, his breath bursting out of him. He was stepping through the rubble, tripping over himself as the cries of the wounded rung through the sky. He fell, dragging himself through the fear until he was among the bodies; he tried to scream but nothing would come to his throat. All around him lay death; all around him lay suffering. People who were no longer people but remnants of people; half-bodies clawing at the earth,

gasping for breath; body parts sprawled through the disease, blood covering the ground as if it had sprung from the earth like oil. Here there were screams for salvation, screams for someone, but no one came. And Mitra was among them, his senses overcome as if he was drowning in the blood and the bodies – as if he was drowning the way Ganesh did each and every year.

People were entering the café and grabbing what they could of who they could, pulling them from the wreckage – and Mitra clawed himself forward, screaming his friend’s name hoarsely, searching for something familiar. He crawled through the blood and the bodies, collecting souls as he went. Finally, he spotted the blue button-down in the debris, and grabbed the body from beneath the armpits, dragging it out of the wreckage; Shree’s legs were gone and his torso trailed blood onto the cobblestone sidewalk, until Mitra fell over in exhaustion and Shree toppled onto him. Mitra’s heart was pounding, and he was pushing back Shree’s hair – whispering, screaming, that it was okay. It was going to be okay.

But then he looked down at the body and saw a thin mustache and a narrow pair of eyes – it wasn’t Shree. The man howled into the air and Mitra heard the scream reverberating through his being, pushing away in horror from this stranger, turning, standing, scrambling up, dragging his leg behind him, and then the café was behind him, and it was only a distant memory still echoing through his mind. He ran, and he tore through his betrayal once more; he felt the closeness of death and the vastness of life underneath his feet.

Mitra groped through the city until he found his apartment building and clawed up the stairs, grabbing the banister, screaming his silent scream as he made it to his floor, where the door to the apartment was open, illuminating the inside. He stood on the threshold as Janhvi walked into the hall; and then, silently, he collapsed through the doorway as Janhvi’s scream roared through the air. She dropped the teacup she was holding and the sound shattered on the

granite as Mitra shattered on the granite; then, she was running into the kitchen for something, anything, and Mitra crawled through the tea and the glass and the blood and the bodies until he found his mother's room, and pulled himself up, limping through the door.

The whole world fell away as he came into the room. She sat on the bed with the television set on; she was staring at her son, who stood before her with the remnants of his body collapsing and rebuilding and collapsing and rebuilding. He came to her slowly, until he was looking down at her as she watched his tattered body fall to its knees and look into her eyes. And then he was burying himself in her lap, crying tears that came from deep within him, deep within a place he hadn't known to exist and yet had always been there, falling into his mother's lap, unashamed, unafraid – a child crying for the future and for the past and for what it had become.

Maha took her son's sobbing face in her broken hands and pulled it up to hers so that she was looking into his eyes. And then the moment was beginning: the moment where they knew each other better than anyone else in the world, better than anyone had ever known anybody before – as if they were the only two left. And then, time was no longer of the world. And then, she came down upon him.

Her hand broke into Mitra's face, colliding with his cheek – but they were both so weak that it barely left a dent in whatever was left. Her hand was barely recognizable, and his face was broken from the world, and this was all in remembrance of what had been – of what they had both been. Her hand was still her hand, and his face was still his face, but it was all over anyway. It was love in its purest form and that was why it hurt so much.

Mitra washed himself. He turned his hand against the faucet and let the warm water rush into the bucket before him. He was kneeling. He dipped the pitcher inside and brought it up to his head, pouring it over himself; he washed the blood from himself – his own blood, the blood

of the dead, and the blood of Shree. And it all went down the drain, circling itself until it was falling into the abyss – down, down the tubes – until their memories, their dreams, their souls, were lost forever.

When Mitra's eyes opened the next morning, it was still dark out. He checked his watch, straining to see the hands – it was four-thirty. Janhvi was asleep on the divan next to him, her body rising and falling as she breathed. He watched her while she slept, as the grey morning began to take hold of the sky, and then he pulled himself up, tightening his muscles in pain. It was the fourth day of Ganpati.

His arms were weak, and although Janhvi had bandaged his scratches he could still hear them moaning out softly to him. The most painful, however, was his leg: a dull, cold burn that throbbed below him. He massaged it with his hands, kneading into the muscles; he pressed down and succumbed to it. He let it engulf him, as if it had always been a part of him. And then he released himself as the hurt emitted outwards, causing him to shiver. Numbness was crawling over him. Very slowly, he rose from the divan, still seeing the world in shadows at this early hour, and made his way to the bathroom.

He washed his face and held the cool water against his eyes, before pulling down his hands to look at himself in the mirror. The man he saw was drastically different than the one he had known: he was emaciated and hollowed, and the left side of his face was bubbling up in bruises. He touched it lightly and felt the deep wound. He was trying to picture a face without this pain, but he couldn't: Janhvi, his mother, Satyajeet – they all came to his mind bloodied and beaten. They were screaming to him from the wreckage of the café – or perhaps he was in the wreckage and screaming to them. The lines were becoming blurred, the faces becoming horrors.

He looked down to his chin and saw the scar from his childhood: a small line that ran from one side to the other, almost a shadow beneath his face.

He felt it with his index finger, tracing the length of it, and remembering the fall from all those years before. And then, he felt himself being reeled backwards into his past – what he had found in the cavern and what he was searching for now. He had seen the deer before, he realized. And he knew where it lived. He let his hand fall away from his face, and left the bathroom and then the apartment.

Mitra closed the door and the sound of the television snapped away from him. He moved to the stairwell and slowly began his descent, grabbing the banister and wincing in pain as he cautiously moved down. The left leg was immensely painful and each time his foot hit the ground, it shot a lightning bolt up his leg that nearly made him collapse in agony. Eventually, he made it to the bottom of the stairwell and pushed open the door, pulling himself into the street.

It was dark outside, and the sky was a deep shade of grey and blue. The buildings were black around him, hanging over the street. It was quiet, as the city still slept. The street was empty, except for two dogs that were trotting along the sidewalk. One of them stopped and slid underneath a car, curling up to sleep. The other dog kept on moving and then disappeared down a side street. In the far distance, Mitra could see a motorcycle approaching, and could hear the engine growing into existence until he could make out the woman on its back. She was coming toward him and the engine was building, and then it snapped past him. And then the woman, the bike, and the sound were dying away until the motorcycle was gone. The street was empty.

How different the city was in these early mornings, he thought to himself. In a few hours there would be no silence: he wouldn't be able to hear the birds chirping or the muffled patter of the dogs' footsteps, or the ever-so-soft voice of the breeze blowing in his ear. In a few hours,

everything would be thrown into intense light and heat, and it intended on blinding him. There would be people everywhere: people watching him and watching each other. People moving quickly and people moving slowly. There would be men: men sitting on the curb, rubbing their pan into their palms; men spitting wads of tobacco out into the street; men clasping hands with other men, their eyes shifting back and forth. There would be women, too: women with a hand on one hip and a baby on the other; women crouching in the shadows as they weaved flowers together; women carrying baskets on their heads, their eyes focused on nothing. And then there would be children: children frolicking through games, chasing each other; children sitting and playing with garbage they had found; children in the streets asking for a coin. All of this would be happening, and it would blot out the moment that Mitra was now experiencing. He wished they would stay inside for just a little bit longer, if only to give him another minute alone with his city, so that he could talk to it and maybe even love it. But before the conversation could even begin, people would be coming and they would be wanting things from it. And they would never stop taking. And so, because of this, Mitra turned down the street and began heading in the opposite direction – away from Laxshmi Road, towards the hills.

His breathing was heavy as he strode along, pulling his battered leg behind him, racing the sun that was slowly climbing. He needed to beat it; he needed to make it out of the city before the sun came up. Before people started coming out with their carts; before the motors burst to life; before the shops were pulling up their gates. But he could do it. He only had to make it to the hills before the city started and everything would be okay.

The sun was rising and the grey that he had known was vanishing, as a fiery glow hit the buildings and turned their finish into a hot red. The once-dark structures were now coming alive with their own hint of the sun, and now Mitra was racing, his breath panting, his leg throbbing,

and the road ahead of him was narrowing, and the buildings were becoming more seldom. He was close to the hills now: he turned down a side street, and there at the end of the road was the steep incline of the mountains. He pulled himself towards them. The dogs were getting curious and were starting to sit up from their slumber, watching the man drag himself down the road. They were trotting behind him; Mitra tried to wave them off, but they kept coming, following him as he made his way towards the mountain. He was afraid they would start barking and alert the city – they would tell the city that he was trying to escape and they would pull him back. He would scream and cry, clawing at the pavement. But the dogs only watched and licked themselves, leaving him alone. He reached the end of the road, where a chain-link fence was separating him and the mountain; he shook it and the chains rattled against the metal bars. He looked upward at the barbed wire: it was rusting and red in the sun, as if its thorns were covered in the blood of its enemies. He grabbed ahold and began to climb.

Pain ripped through Mitra as he dragged himself up the fence. His right leg found footing in the chains, but the left merely dangled below, weighing him down as he winced in pain. The metal rusted against him and made his hands burn. He finally found the bar at the top and grabbed hold of it, pulling himself up to the barbed wire; he tried brushing the barbs back, but they dug into his clothing. He sat atop the fence and the wire cut into his pants, finding his skin. He could feel the barbs working into him and he looked to the sun in agony, the sweat pouring down his face. Everything was blurring, and the tension was rising in his chest; he knew he had to break way from it. And so, with his head still raised to the sky, he breathed in deeply and then let himself fall.

Mitra landed on his shoulder in the dirt, and cried out in pain as he felt the barbs detach. He was on the other side and the dust was billowing up in his eyes, sticking to his face. He

clawed himself forward until he was on an incline, and then he was pulling himself up onto a rock and lying on his back. The sun was up now and he could feel it crucifying him. The back of his throat was burning and it was closing up as he swallowed the dirty air. He looked up and realized that the day was now beginning and that he needed to move before someone saw him. Moving upward, he crawled along the rock, scrambling forward.

His body was growing weak; he could feel the life slipping away from him. But he kept going, letting the sweat fall from his brow and drain down into his eyes. He was clawing at the world before him, moving up the mountain; he was slipping, falling, picking himself up again; he was climbing. He never looked behind him. His brain was beating with a pulse that ricocheted through his mind and he clenched his eyes shut, trying to find a sound within him – but he didn't care about any of that anyway. It was forward that he cared about, the sheer accomplishment of the trial, and he would fight against these walls until his final breath – perhaps even beyond.

He reached level ground and stood as pain flooded in and out of him like a furious tide. The city was bustling below him now, and his head whirled in the fires of the panting ritual; he was spitting forward and a red liquid oozed from him. Patches of vibrant colors obscured his vision, and he stumbled, looking up to the heavens – but then his feet were finding concrete beneath his chappals and he stopped. His head was dangling from his neck, and somewhere inside of him he found the energy to focus on what was below him – the entrance to what had once been his home, and the completion of all things. The darkness below him was so familiar and yet so foreign, and in the whipping of his mind he focused in on the black: a creature within the cavern – the deer lying on its side, panting in fervor. Mitra looked down at the animal, but everything was leaving him. And just before he fell away, he could see from the bowels of the animal that another life was forming – another creature clawing its way out of the shell; and then

there was the thick scream of an animal begging for salvation – perhaps from Mitra’s mouth or perhaps from somewhere else. But then, the swirling overcame him, and Mitra fell. He landed on his side and came into darkness.

It was evening when he awoke. The sun was descending. The city was ending. He pulled himself up from the ground and looked back down into the cavern, but whatever had been there had now been replaced by stillness. Drenched in sweat, he turned and made his way back down the mountain.

When he got back to the apartment building, the night had surrounded the city. Dogs were walking around under the streetlights. They weren’t looking at him. He moved through the door and up the stairwell, clutching the banister for support. The door to his apartment was open, and he dragged himself through it.

The apartment was dark, save for a light flowing in from his mother’s bedroom. He followed it and found the open door. The television was off and there was silence. He limped into the room and met the warm glow.

There, in the room, were Janhvi and his mother. Janhvi was standing next to the bed where his mother sat, and she looked up at him as he entered. Maha looked up as well and trained her eyes on her son. He stood before the women and no one spoke for a moment. Then, out of the silence, he heard Janhvi’s voice.

“Something has happened,” she said, her voice shaking. “Something – something beautiful.” She looked down at Maha, who was smiling up at her. Mitra was still standing in the doorway, hidden from the light of the room. Janhvi took her hand off of Maha’s shoulder and turned her body towards him. “I,” she began, “I went to the doctor today. I had been feeling ill

and I thought I might see what he had to say. And, well...” She paused, and looked down at the floor. This was the only time that she would ever be like this. “I’m... I’m pregnant.”

She looked into Mitra’s eyes and he could see a glistening tear rolling down her cheek. “I’m pregnant, Mitra. We’re – we’re going to have a child.” She laughed a little bit as she said this and wiped the tear from her face. Maha took the girl’s hand in hers, rubbing it with her mangled, rough devices. Mitra didn’t move. Maha turned to him.

“It’s wonderful news,” she said simply. Then she let go of Janhvi and clasped her hands in her lap. She was gleaming. Janhvi was still laughing and crying and putting a hand to her stomach, looking at Mitra. Everyone was looking at him. There was happiness around him. These women were happy. But Mitra – Mitra only felt himself sink to the bottom. He felt the bottom. It was cold and hard and he had it at his feet now. And as the women looked at him, he felt his body roll back, out of this life and into another – until he was running, fleeing, turning, chasing, head first, bolting himself down to the ground, and then he was out of the apartment and flying, flying away, away, out into the night sky where he could hear Janhvi’s sobs behind him as she screamed his name and it bled into the night, the piercing cries of his wife – but he was gone, he was out, he was dragging his leg and he was in the darkness, out in the city, and he was running and he wasn’t feeling anything anymore, except the beat of his heart.

When he finally stopped, he fell to his knees on the cobblestone street and vomited blood out before him. He was breathing deeply with his eyes closed. There was a light coming from somewhere near him, invading his eyelids and turning everything into a deep crimson. He opened himself and saw it: a blaring bright light coming from the alcove of a building – an ice cream shop. It was a small place, with two counters set adjacent to each other, and a man sitting in a chair behind them, looking out into the night. Mitra couldn’t tell if he was an older man or a

younger man, but his stillness made him think older. It seemed as if he was looking at Mitra, but Mitra couldn't tell. He pulled himself up and made his way towards the shop.

When he came into the light, he was sure the man was looking at him. He had thick glasses on that made his eyes look bigger than they were and he was still as Mitra stepped into the shop, only moving his head to follow Mitra's motions. Mitra stopped at the cooler and rested his hands upon the glass as the man watched him, and there was silence. Then, the man stood and pulled out an ice cream scooper, opening the cooler as Mitra moved his hands off. The man reached inside and took a scoop of ice cream: a golden, yellow color. He put it into a dish and handed it over to Mitra, who took it. The man turned and produced a little spoon, and Mitra took it as well. He looked down at the ice cream while the man rested himself on the counter and waited. Finally, Mitra took a bite.

The ice cream was cool against Mitra's mouth, and wetted the dryness that he'd forgotten was there. The sweetness of the sugar melted into him and he closed his eyes for a moment, closing off all of his senses other than his taste, and let himself live in the ice cream. And after an infinite amount of space had passed, he heard the man's voice before him: "Pretty good, eh?"

Mitra opened his eyes and looked at the man. He still couldn't tell if the man was older or younger than himself. He had white hair and a bit of stubble on his face that was also white. His face, though, was remarkably young, and the only lines that appeared were on his forehead as he raised his eyebrows. He was smiling at Mitra. He had a red mark between his brows. Mitra nodded slowly.

"Are you alright, Baba?" the man asked. "You look like you've had a bit of trouble."

Mitra, who hadn't spoken in what felt like years, heard his mouth forming the words: "I'm fine."

“All right, Baba, if you say so,” the man said, and looked down at the glass. There was a long pause before he looked up at Mitra again. “I’ve seen you before somewhere,” he said. “I know you from some place.”

Mitra didn’t say anything, but continued to eat the ice cream.

“Are you a teacher?” the man asked. Mitra shook his head. “Thought you might’ve worked at my son’s school. No, I know you from somewhere. You look familiar.”

“I’m sorry,” Mitra said, “I don’t think I know you.”

“Well, we all know each other,” the man said. “We just forget that we all know each other.” Mitra didn’t say anything.

The man paused. “Maybe we’ve just forgotten where we know each other from.”

Mitra was finishing his ice cream, and realized that the plastic dish was broken. The ice cream was spilling out onto his hands.

“It’s a shame,” the man was saying, “that we forget things. But I supposed it’s far too much for us to remember everything. Maybe I know you from another life. The one before this one, or the one after this one.”

The ice cream was now covering Mitra’s hands and it was falling through the crevasses, journeying down his arms until it was collapsing on the floor. The man saw this, and exclaimed: “Oh, I’m sorry! Those things are really no good – they break all the time. Here, I’ve got some napkins in the back – you just wait here.” And then the man sped into the back of the shop and Mitra was alone.

He stood there for a moment. He could hear the buzzing of the bugs outside and the buzzing of the coolers in the ice cream shop. He placed the empty ice cream dish into the trashcan next to him and then stood with his ice cream-covered hands at his sides. Then he

reached into his back pocket and withdrew his wallet. He opened it up and looked at its contents. Maybe a hundred and twenty rupees inside. A couple of business cards he'd been given. A small passport photo of a woman he'd found lying on the street a couple years back. He closed the wallet up, and set it down on the counter. Then he brought up his right hand and pulled the strap of his watch back, taking it off and setting it down on the counter next to the wallet. Then, after he'd set both of these objects down and his pockets were empty, he turned from the store, stepped out of the alcove, and went off into the darkness.

Mitra awoke to the sound of rushing water. It was far off, in the distance, moving through a tunnel towards him, reverberating against the walls of his mind and shattering the world he'd closed himself into. Its distant hum woke him from his slumber and his eyes were bending open, until the damp world was coming into a haze before him. All around were rocks and debris, littering the earth over a dull, dirt-laden ground. Grass was sprouting up where it could, and rippling slightly in the window of the wind. Mitra could see a few blades writhing timidly as the breeze tried to uproot them from their home. They flailed and frolicked, sticking to their land, claiming it as their own. Around him were discarded cans and empty chip bags and cigarette butts and alcohol bottles with some liquid still in them. The whistling sound of the water carried them away, even though they stayed where they were. They were all coming into focus around Mitra; they were all working on their own plane, their own axis, and yet cohabitating. The grass was the only thing left to the real world. Mitra's eyes slid in and out of consciousness as they tried desperately to roll back into his head – to escape this realm – but he held them steady, briefly closing them every now and then to give them respite from the glowering shore side. The world was dark again, as it had been the previous day, but the colors seemed to have disappeared

from the setting, and he was seeing elements in a deep greyish-blue that clattered against his irises and made his eyelids sting with satisfaction. This was all around him, and he was a part of it. He was blue and grey as well.

He could feel his fingers interacting with the dirt, and he began to move them, to roll them over the sharp stones around him; then he was moving his legs, feeling the harsh pain once again – he was only making sure he was still alive. His hands were feeling the cool dirt and they were eating it up, consuming the land. He was clutching to it harder than he'd ever held onto his memories. A fistful of dirt became him, and he let it work its way into his palm: indefinite declarations of land, finding its path and dribbling over him as the grains all found their own stories, their own definitions, their own articles. Then he let them go, releasing them back into the wild; their interaction was over. They had their own story they needed to tell, and although their stories were inherently tied together, they must now part ways. He felt sadness around him, knowing he would never see them again. How would he find these lands if they were moving away from him? But they had to, he knew – it was their way, forever and ever.

He focused on the rushing water now, and realized he was at the river. He must have collapsed at the bank on his way toward the bridge that would take him across to Laxshmi. Not twenty meters from him sat the water, its dull grey echoes lapping forward, the torrents of waves working towards their goal. He could see the river's edge: deep concrete carved into the hollowed earth. Before him was the dirt and the garbage and what little grass that had been left, and then the water. And beyond that, the city, and beyond that, the world. He could see the pale bridge out of the corner of his eye, casting its shadow over the river, throwing it into darkness if even for a moment. Those waters were unknown to the rest of the river. That was not for them; it was not of this world. No one believed in that water anymore.

Mitra pulled himself up so that he was on his hands and knees, and was able to look down at his imprint in the earth. He had been there – the imprint showed him this. He had existed; he had been real. Humans, animals, ideas, societies – they hadn't been able to tell him this, but the earth could. He raised his head to the sky and saw the dense clouds passing overhead. The sun wasn't there yet. He still had time. Mitra had time.

He sat down once again with his elbows on his knees. His body was still hurting, but it was a different kind of pain: a pain that knew itself and knew its end. His mouth was dry and it called for justice. He touched his dirty hands to his dirty face and felt the inconsistencies. He looked down at his clothing; torn, splattered with blood and dirt and sweat and ice cream. His arms were dark from the mud and from the general atmosphere of things. His hair was quivering in the wind and his eyes stung with redness. He knew that this was where he was now and the last of his tears fell from his eyes. They fell into the earth, and the earth gladly welcomed them. It told him that they would hold onto his tears for him, that they would keep them safe. He was crying, but it was soft cry, a last momentary cry. He had made all of this possible; it was all a part of him now. He could go back, but backwards was time he could not contend with, and time was still against him, and if the city was with him now, then time and the city were battling. He felt the salty tears on his face and watched them drop, and then watched them cease to exist.

He rose, slowly, placing a foot into the ground and pushing himself up on his knee. He realized that he'd lost his chappals somewhere along the way and now he was barefoot. That was better, he thought, that was much better. He stood, in full form, as the clouds soared. The day was coming, but he was readying himself for it now, because he needed it. He needed its illumination and its quiet peace.

He moved himself towards the river, stepping over the dirt and the bottles and the trash and the feces and the bodies of those before him – but he let the grass be, because it had let him be. He stepped over these passages until he found himself nearing the river, and then he was upon it. He could look down into it now, because this was whom he had to talk to. He had come face to face with its waters and he could now see the dark, cool liquid before him. There was no reflection that stared back at him. It wasn't dirty, but it wasn't pure. It was talking, and he watched it speak. Its slow ripples moved forward and he said hello to each one of them, watching them go and missing them already. Could one be only a ripple in another life, he wondered. If he could be a ripple, and thus move with a ripple's innocence, he certainly would. He could pray for this, but prayers were only in that which were dreams. Instead, he watched the water, and then sat down on the concrete, dipping his feet inside.

It was cold, but it was also alive in a way that had warmth in its heart. He felt the water run over him, sweeping through his toes and echoing distinctions all over his tired, aching feet. It was so cool and understanding, and this he was thankful for. He closed his eyes and felt only this. He could hear the chirping of the birds and the lapping of the waves. Then, with his eyes still closed, he slowly pulled himself down into the water.

It was quite shallow – the waters were receding back into another time. He could touch the bottom easily; the water went up to his knees. There were even some points in the center of the river that looked as though the bottom was completely exposed. He felt the water running through the hairs of his legs, and felt himself stepping forward out into the river, away from the edge, ever so slightly so that his body was finding its place away from the wall.

The sun was near, he knew. He lowered himself to the water and drenched himself, felt his pants churning away below him, and then he was lowering his hands and splashing his face

as the cool shock went against him, awakening him to truths he had only supposed had existed. This was a revelation – the cool water before him – and he reveled in it, feeling all of this against him. He splashed the water up against his shirt and could feel the water over his wounds and his ailments, both internal and external, both physical and the other. The water was answering him in such an honest way, provoking him forward, until he was dipping his head under and the sound of the water was swallowing him up in its midst, and the bubbles were rising up around him; the rushing was vanishing and being replaced by the pure solace of space – and then his head was coming back up and the rushing was rushing back and everything was falling off of him into ecstasy and his body was being washed into the river in an immediate way, one that he hadn't known or even expected. He felt his face fall into a smile, and it echoed over his whole body. And in that moment, he knew what was coming and where he was; in the water and in the depths of his own existence.

The sun was rising now, finding its peak somewhere on the horizon, and was setting everything aflame. Atop a building on the other side of the river – a hotel – it was coming into existence and the redness was shooting out onto the sky, dazzling all around him. The water was soaking it up and the glint was crushing the water, causing it to light with a twinkle so that he could almost see its insides without even having to look. It was all around him, and the sky was opening up, and the clouds were parting and making way for their own god, even though his form was only a whisper to them. Everything was coming together before him; everything was alight. It was all around him.

Mitra looked out at his city. He could see the bats flying and he could hear the honks of a few vehicles off in the distance. The city was waving to him from its perch and he watched the city – he watched Pune. It had taken off its mask and it was showing him its true self now. This

was all happening before him, as he let himself creep on his hands and knees into the water. The buildings were near him, nearer than if he'd been standing right next to them. The trash and the violence were mating, and he watched them make love. This was all happening, now, and the sound of the city was rushing in his eyes and his ears and displacing the roaring of the waves, and displacing every sound he'd ever heard – it was all being erased before him. The ambiguity of sound reached up around him – it did not have to compete with time anymore, and so it freely roamed the earth, finding its own form of waves and patterns and frequencies, until it was growing so loud that it could not hold its own weight and it was crashing around him in every direction, spewing this way and that – crashing, calling, crying, coming, crescendo – and then it stopped. There was silence.

Everything was still moving, but the sound had gone. The waves moved rapidly, but their voices were silent. The birds and the city and the wind no longer spoke. All this had left him alone in the water.

Then, on the horizon, he could hear the patter of feet – a galloping. He could hear hooves moving somewhere, working toward something, but he couldn't tell what. He squinted through the sun and could see a hazy black figure moving towards him on the other side of the river – moving across the bank – some epic creature, something he couldn't make out. It was a blur in the future, and then it was lifting off of the ground and crashing into the water, galloping forward out of its shade and into the sun, foaming the water around it up into existence in a parabolic arc. Then, as the hooves moved in the water, and he could hear the galloping growing, he realized what it was.

It was the deer – or rather, some form of the deer that had once been and was now again. It had one head and four bodies, and they were all rushing towards Mitra through the water,

splashes rising up in its wake. The four bodies were attached at the deer's one head, and it moved through the water – it wasn't graceful, though, like Mitra had imagined it would be. The four bodies were tripping over each other, and sometimes one would fall and get dragged along by the rest – they were fighting their way forward, the sixteen legs pounding against the water as their muscles tensed. The head looked onwards towards its destination, its eyes meeting Mitra's as he knelt in the water before it, watching it come. It was time now, he knew.

He took one last look at the sky. A bird was passing overhead. How beautiful the sky was, he thought; a mixture of pink and orange and azure and new colors that did not exist anywhere except in the morning's sky. And the black outline of the bird, soaring above him, its silhouette defined by its elegance; its shadow cast over his eyes until he was back in the sun. He was squinting upward; he was smiling. He smiles. He watches the bird. He watches the sky. He watches them all work as one and he weeps in joy. He weeps without tears. He's not alone now.

When he's finished he looks out at the horizon. The creature is close; it's ready to overtake him. The water is rising, and the waves are reaching upwards, and everything is opening up. He closes his eyes and lets it open.

In the stillness of his heart he finds something beating.

And then the beast is upon him.

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