

# 1

“You’re going to get violated, madam, that’s all I have to say on the matter.”

Given that her maid, Tanvi, had been lecturing her for over an hour, talking as the other servants of the house had come and gone, Pival Sengupta was quite certain that this was *not* all the maid had to say about the matter. It was irrelevant that Pival had told Tanvi that she was visiting family, that she would be perfectly safe in America. Beyond being scandalized that she was traveling a mere three months after her husband Ram’s death, no one believed that she would survive the trip.

Perhaps their suspicion came from Bollywood, from movie after movie where women on their own in foreign lands were constantly propositioned. Or more likely it came from the thousand lectures that girls from India’s villages received about how travel of any kind led to rape. It was amazing, Pival thought, that so many village girls came to Kolkata to work if their families were all so concerned about losing their honor. If anything, Pival had assured her servants, America would be safer than India. It had to be. But they refused to listen.

Each of the servants had shown their disapproval in their own ways, from Suraj, her yoga instructor, who told her as he stretched out her calves that the prospect of the trip was altering her breathing and negatively affecting her chakras, to Pinky, the cook, no more than eighteen years old and already scowling at Pival like an old village woman. Even the milkman had taken a few moments out of his busy early morning schedule to warn her about the dangers of travel-

ing anywhere, particularly alone.

All of them she could patiently ignore, except Tanvi. Her voice was the loudest, a never-ending fount of dire warnings and forebodings that barely stopped even as the maid chewed and spat paan, her words bubbling out with red spit around the mouthful of leaves. Her lips were stained bright red, which was the point. Pival knew she and the other maids chewed the stuff for its lipstick-like qualities. Pival would catch them admiring their crimson mouths in the mirror, humming songs from the latest Shah Rukh Khan movie. She knew she should scold them for their laziness, but she could never bring herself to do so. They hid their stained red teeth with closed-mouth smiles, but when they laughed it looked to Pival like their mouths were full of blood.

“Such things happen in America, every day. Nice people go on trips abroad and come back violated. And, it’s expensive. Huh! Lakhs and lakhs for a pair of shoes. What is the point, I ask you? Shoes are here. Why go somewhere to get violated for shoes? Visiting relatives is all well and good but decent people should be coming here to comfort you, not this leaving and begging-for-family nonsense.”

Sarya, the other maid in the room, nodded as she received Tanvi’s wisdom and the white garment Tanvi had folded. It was a perfect square. As Tanvi grew upset, her folding became increasingly precise and perfect, until you could have cut onions with the razor-clean corners of the sari silk.

Pival had never liked Tanvi. Her husband, Ram, had employed the girl when they first married, presenting a child of fifteen to his twenty-year-old bride before the maid had the chance to wipe the dust from her village off her shoes, before his bride’s wedding henna had begun to fade. Pival wanted to keep her own maid, but Ram insisted that young Tanvi would be easier to train. At the time Pival had accepted the new servant as an indulgence, one of the many

Ram, then so generous, lavished on her. As Tanvi grew from Pival's maid into a kind of housekeeper, directing all the servants around her with an iron fist, she wondered if Ram had known even then that his wife would be lacking in authority and had found a servant who could act as a substitute. That too she had seen as a kind of kindness, a thoughtfulness on Ram's part, making up for her deficits, anticipating her flaws. It wasn't until years later that Pival realized Ram didn't want a servant more loyal to Pival and her family than to him. He had built himself an ally, who would turn against Pival when needed.

Of course, Pival didn't allow herself to think such things about her husband until much later, after they'd had Rahi and lost him, before he lived and gave her life light and then darkened it again.

The maids continued with their packing and dividing. Pival never knew she had so many clothes until she saw them pass through the hands of so many people. She could not help; she would not be permitted to do so. They would be silently furious with her if she tried, more angry than they were now, even, and Tanvi would sigh and recite the wages they paid each woman, an unsubtle commentary meant to remind her that any labor she performed was a waste of her own money.

Pival looked at Ram's photo in its permanent shrine, warping slightly under the weight of the faded marigold wreaths and lit by small lamps whose ghee was refilled daily. The combined scent of flowers and ghee made her feel slightly sick. Still, she liked the flickering lights, the cotton wicks, the way the fire swayed and gave things a golden glow. She was obligated, she knew, to treat Ram's picture as a sacred object, to give it offerings like she would an idol. He didn't deserve such a place in anyone's home; perhaps that was what made her feel ill, and not the smell at all.

Looking around, Pival realized that the maids had started unpacking the carefully sorted trunks and boxes. At her gasp, Sarya looked

up, her large eyes wide.

“It’s bad business. Best not to do it. What will people say?”

Tanvi shook her head in agreement, clucking like a chicken.

“Going to such places? Begging old relatives to take you in? You will lower yourself, madam. What would sir think? Who does such a thing?”

“And what are you saying, either of you? How would you know what people do? Living in the same ten streets all your life, what do you know but the tread of your shoes? Close your drooling mouths and pack my things!”

Tanvi stared at Pival, her mouth wide in surprise. Sarya had already begun to cry, her childish wails filling the air between them. Pival had shocked even herself. She was never so articulate in Bengali, and she never got angry. While Ram Sengupta might have raised his voice at the servants, Pival rarely spoke above a soft tone, making most people strain toward her when she talked. It was one of her husband’s many criticisms of her. He had called her a little squeaky mouse with disdain.

Pival had tried to speak louder. She had gone to a breathing seminar taught by a prestigious doctor turned guru to improve her lung capacity and diaphragm control. She had even seen a throat and larynx specialist who informed her that what she lacked was not strength of voice but strength of confidence. Pival had known then that it was a lost cause. Whatever confidence she had once had was now a withered thing, dead on the vine.

A cacophony of wailing, like a funeral procession, brought Pival back to the present. She gazed dispassionately at the faces of her sobbing maids. She said nothing as Sarya and then Tanvi left her room. Sarya fled like a deer, but Tanvi made a more leisurely departure, waiting for Pival to call her back and apologize. As the older maid waddled away, Pival couldn’t help but think of the thin child she’d

met all those years ago and looked for her in Tanvi's plump frame. She couldn't find it, couldn't see that girl who had pressed her lips together with happiness when she first ate a piece of chocolate, trying to keep it in her mouth forever.

Pival turned, shaking her head. Why should she care what Tanvi and Sarya and all the rest of them thought? Pival looked at herself in the mirror. She had been avoiding mirrors since Ram's death, afraid she would look too old, too unhappy, or worse, too happy. She couldn't find her younger self in her own face anymore either. The room around her was richly appointed, filled with beautiful and expensive things. They reflected behind her in the mirror, overwhelming her thin, faded face, leaving her feeling ugly next to their glow. She had been overwhelmed and buried by her own life. And now, unable to dig herself out, she was going to leave it all behind.

Pival rubbed at her wrists gently, an old habit to comfort herself. She didn't like that she had yelled at the servants. She may not have liked the maids but that was no excuse for cruelty. Since Ram had died, all their help had been so devastated, mourning much more deeply than Pival could herself. She should have had sympathy for those who loved her husband more than she had.

She rubbed her wrist again, looking at it. She had always been fascinated by the skin on her wrists, the thinness of it, the way she could see blue veins popping up through it like tunnels. She had thought of ending her life this way, with a shard of glass to the wrist, the way women did in the Bollywood movies she would sneak off to watch alone when Ram was at work. Other women in the theaters cried and sighed at every twist and turn, but for her, the only parts that interested her were the mothers, the ones who martyred themselves for their sons. As a young woman she had found this ridiculous. Now she found it shaming. She watched them slice through their veins with a kind of envy, but she hadn't thought she could bear cutting

through her own skin. She had tried it once, when Ram had told Rahi he could never come home again, and there was a small dip in the skin of her left wrist left as evidence of her failure. She had cleaned up and bandaged her wrist and hid it from Ram under her bangles. Besides, after Rahi was banished Ram stopped looking at her at all. She checked now for that little dent, rubbing at it gently, pressing her pinkie into the pucker as her thumb caressed the rest of her wrist.

“This is not done, madam.” Tanvi’s formal declaration interrupted Pival’s thoughts and she hid her hands behind her quickly, like a little girl. It was always this way with Tanvi, like she was the servant and the maid the master. She forced herself to bring her hands back to her sides, pressing her sweaty palms into the skirts of her white sari. “You have hurt Sarya. She is threatening to leave.”

“She should, then. It’s time for her to marry, anyway. Soon she will be too old.”

Pival was amazed by how quickly the words sprang to her lips. Tanvi had never married. The maid looked like she had been slapped.

“This is not doing what sahib would have wanted. Leaving home like this.”

“I have no home, Tanvi,” Pival said, looking at a large family photo on the wall of the Senguptas taken thirty years ago, at Rahi’s first birthday.

Pival knew this was blasphemy to the maid, who had left her village of one-room houses and well water and now lived in the luxury of the Senguptas’ apartment, with a maid’s quarters she barely had to share and fresh milk delivered daily. Pival was lucky, she knew. In another age, in another family, she would have been banished to a wing of the house, forced to live as a pariah for her widowhood. In villages outside of Kolkata these things still happened. Perhaps where Tanvi was from, even. She knew that she, Pival, was privileged, for being so free, for having so much when most people around her had

less than nothing. She saw the maid's eyes dip to the jewelry sitting in a box. She felt her face hardening.

"Please repack my things. I've already told you, you can take whatever you like. You needn't worry about your salary, Tanvi. I told you, I will pay everyone through to the New Year. So you may stop pretending to be concerned about me now. You can have everything you need. Do you understand?"

Tanvi began to cry again, angrily this time, and stomped from the room, though not, Pival observed, without a trailing handful of sari silks streaming from the pocket of her apron. Good. Tanvi should take such things from her. For Tanvi they were riches. For Pival they were fetters, caging in her life. Tanvi could keep them all. She only hoped she would share them with the other maids, who were even now peeking out from their quarters, watching their leader return.

She decided to call her travel agent. She slipped a disposable cell phone she'd bought on the street out of her pocket. It took a long time for a phone call to reach America. Pival wondered how it would be for her, when even the phone seemed afraid to let its call leave India. The phone rang and rang and then the now-familiar voice of her travel agent, a nasal drone, began, inviting her to leave a message in three languages. She left her message softly and carefully, merely asking him to call her back without explaining in either English or Bengali what she really needed, because she wasn't sure herself. Assurance, maybe, that America was a real place.

Carefully removing the drying flower garland, she opened up the back of Ram's photograph, smiling gently to think of the appropriateness of this as her hiding place. Between the back of the frame and the benevolent falsely smiling image of her husband was all her trip information. Her itinerary, her ticket, her passport with its crisp new tourist visa, everything she would need. It was far worse than her servant could have possibly imagined. Pival wasn't going to meet

anyone at all in America. She had no family to meet there, no matter what she had told the maids. At least, not in the way they thought.

Ram had had a large family, many of whom still lived in Kolkata, all of whom had been quick to guide Pival through the rituals of death and widowhood with a speed and sense of authority that left her breathless. While they might not have been true dyed-in-the-wool Brahmins, they acted that way when interacting with the world and expected her to do so as well. This was why it was essential for her trip to happen soon, and silently, while the noise of the massive Durga Puja festival left them distracted. She would escape from her life and take a tour, a cross-country trip of America. It would give her a chance to see the country her son had known and loved, the place he had refused to leave, even for her. It would bring her to Los Angeles. She would have time to prepare, time to make herself ready to meet *him*, the person who had taken her son away.

Pival looked back at the family portrait, her hands in the shot around a plump and grinning version of Rahi, theirs the only two smiling faces in a sea of familial disapproval and stern Bengali brows. She walked up to it and traced Rahi's tiny face with her pinkie. She then dipped her pinkie back into the depression left by her half-hearted suicide attempt of the previous fall. November would mark a year since Ram had told her Rahi died. She wondered as she stared into the fat baby face, not for the first time, if it was really true. Surely her son couldn't have died while she still lived. She refused to accept a universe in which Rahi had died. She knew she would have felt his death like a blow to her own body. She didn't care what had been said, what had been told to her. Everyone could be lying. Ram had always tried to control the way she saw the world, not lying, exactly, but forcing reality to fit his desires. He might have told her Rahi was dead because he was already dead to Ram. It could have been something he had told people so often he really started to believe it



himself. She had to go to America and find Rahi, alive and whole or dead and gone. She had to be sure. And if he was gone? Well, then it was her time, too.

Ram had declared their son dead so often by the time the phone call came from America that afterward Pival was never sure if the phone had really rung or not. While she had always nodded along with Ram in public, in private she had never agreed that their son was dead, and that had, she knew, troubled Ram. When she looked up that day and watched him put down the phone, she realized that she hadn't heard the ringing. That was not surprising; she lived in such a dream world in those days. Ram said, "It's done. He's gone," and Pival had believed him in that moment. But now, months later, she couldn't decide if Ram had really heard news from across the world or if he couldn't stand her continued love for the son who had so dishonored him. Things were so blurry, even now. She had to find some the truth, even if it stabbed at her heart.

Pival Sengupta was going to America to find her son or his lover. And to kill herself.

# 2

Halfway around the world, Ronnie Munshi was, most unprofessionally, avoiding Pival's calls. Perhaps if he had known about her dramatic intentions he might have been more eager to speak to her, but it was doubtful. Suicide is awfully bad for business.

Ronnie Munshi had a policy. He would answer his phone before a tour was booked, but never afterward. His usual strategy with customers was to woo them with relentless passion, but once he booked them he cut off all communication until their trip, to give them no opportunities to back out once he had received their deposit. He was terrified of such an occurrence, and not without reason. Indians, Ronnie thought, with complacent derision, were notoriously unreliable, especially when presented with the bill.

It would have come as a surprise to many that the First Class India USA Destination Vacation Tour Company was, in fact, run by Bangladeshis. The fact that this surprise would have been essentially unpleasant, or at the very least awkward, for his clients made it information that Ronnie was careful to hide. He had heard that Indian-Bangladeshi relationships had improved since his departure from his native land, but he suspected strongly this only applied to wealthy people, who were all the same anyway, wherever you went.

In his fifteen years in America, Ronnie had transformed from a skinny adolescent dishwasher at his distant uncle's Curry Hill kebab joint to a plump and prosperous owner of his own business. He had also learned enough to understand that that business came at the cost of being Bangladeshi. So for all intents and purposes, publicly,

at least, he wasn't. To the best of his ability, that is. It's very difficult to pretend to be from a country you dislike while living in another country that doesn't know that the country you dislike and the country you are from are actually two distinct and separate places. Still, Ronnie had managed thus far, and he had no intention of letting Mrs. Sengupta, uppity Bengali widow, interfere with his performance. Her calls, however, were not doing wonderful things for his heartburn.

Ronnie reached into a drawer on his desk and pulled out a jumbo-sized container of Tums, or rather, an off-brand knockoff guaranteed to get him the same results. His deceit, although carefully calculated and developed over many years, coupled with his avoidance policies, gave him digestive issues, and the right half of his desk was devoted to medicines to aid his ever-aching stomach, be they Ayurvedic or pharmaceutical. As he chewed the chalky mouthful of pink and yellow tablets, he tried to remember the last day he had gone through without stomach pain.

Ronnie had arrived in America at the age of eighteen with four hundred dollars in his pocket, fifty of which were rapidly stolen by a cab driver who could see that the frightened foreigner had no concept of United States currency, and a letter of introduction to his uncle and uncle's family.

His uncle, Pritviraj Munshi, actually a third cousin of his late father's, introduced himself to his trembling relative as Raj, informing him that this name was easier for Americans to understand. This introduction confused Ronnie, then Rosni, because surely his uncle could count on a relative to understand his real name, even if these strange white people couldn't. But Rosni was too tired and overwhelmed to question his uncle, who had, after all, not only survived for some twenty years in the United States but prospered. Pritviraj had left Bangladesh after the revolution and somehow had made it in America, and that made him a hero in Rosni's exhausted eyes.

Recovering from his jet lag, Rosni presented himself at his uncle's Manhattan business the following day to start working. He realized to his horror that his uncle, a proud Bangladeshi man, had set up an Indian restaurant. Instead of mustard-scented fish curries and coconut mutton chops served with plain rice, his uncle was doing good business selling people kebabs and dals and naan in a cramped but cheerful place with large color-enhanced photos of the Taj Mahal all over the walls and sitar music twanging in the background. There was a tandoori section of the menu, but no tandoor in the kitchen, and nothing was the way he had thought it would be. Confused, and less recovered from his flight than he had thought, Rosni almost fainted on the spot.

Ronnie crunched another handful of Tums, his stomach rebelling at the thought of this, the first lesson in America for beginners. His uncle, sensing his complete disorientation and despair, hastily sat his nephew down and, making sure the place was locked, as business had not yet started for the day, explained that most Americans were not aware of Bangladesh as a concept. They were, however, aware of India, made popular by a band called the Beatles in the past, and they had, at least in New York, developed a taste for North Indian food, and so North Indian food is what Raj gave them. Ronnie, who had never cooked a day in his life, could start on the dishwashers and, if he showed promise, work his way up to a cook. Ronnie agreed, reluctantly, because what else could he do? Working his way dejectedly through a plate of sweet butter chicken, which coated his mouth with viscous sauce, he knew his mother's chicken curry with mustard seeds and curry leaves was highly superior, but they could only afford chicken a few times a month at home. Here, it might have been bland, soaked in butter and too sweet, but he could have it every day. If it hurt his nationalist sensibilities to work in a place that pretended to be Indian, well, he was hungrier than he was patriotic.

Ronnie did not, in fact, show any promise in food service whatsoever, for though he ate the food he still disapproved of it. He quit, and soon found himself selling tickets to Circle Line boat tours around the island of Manhattan. If America had quickly lost its glamour for Ronnie there was no reason, he thought, that this experience should be the same for others. He was eager to give people insider tips about America and steer them, should they seem interested, back to his uncle's restaurant, because family is family after all and besides, Ronnie still lived with them.

When one particularly satisfied Ohio-based family turned to Ronnie, who had urged them onto the boat, off the boat, and over to the restaurant with a smooth professional air, and told him that he really ought to give his own tours, he listened. But the competition for American tourists was fierce, and Ronnie's English, while much improved over his five years there, was far from perfect, making him an unsafe bet for many Midwestern and Southern sightseers who did not appreciate accents other than their own. Ronnie was on the verge of throwing in the towel and returning to the Circle Line when a rare stroke of luck came in the form of a family from California but originally from West Bengal. Though Indian, the family was so relieved to find someone who spoke Bengali that they overlooked Ronnie's Bangladeshi roots. It was while showing these people New York and commiserating on the difficulties of this New World living that Ronnie realized it wasn't his idea that was wrong, it was his client base. Once he began to advertise himself as an Indian guide for Indian people (his gut clenched at this, but he soldiered on) the tourists poured in, first from the United States and Canada and soon, as phone lines and Internet connections grew, all over the world.

He looked out onto the office. It was empty now, true, but it had fifteen desks in it, each one for one of his guides. Ronnie ran his tour company from the third floor of a building in Astoria, a cheap space

for a growing business, although if anyone asked they were located “in the heart of Manhattan exactly.” Of course clients didn’t ask, they asked about the Grand Canyon and where to buy the cheapest imitation designer bags. He tended to lie about such things, as he had no idea. Ronnie saw no irony in sending his clients all over a land he had barely seen. He had taken exactly two trips since his arrival to New York, one back home to Bangladesh after the careful acquisition of his green card, to pick up his arranged and mother-approved bride, Anita, and one for their honeymoon to Wisconsin, land of cheese.

The thought of cheese pushed his fragile internal life to the limit. Ronnie reached for his trash can and vomited all the Tums, and then, mechanically, reached for the container and stuffed another handful back in his mouth. He knew he shouldn’t feel so stressed. This was not his only client who expected a Bengali guide. *All* Ronnie’s clients harbored strong expectations of a Bengali tour guide of decent birth and background, but once they arrived in America they were perfectly happy to be stuck with a courteous, helpful, cheerful, Bengali-speaking tour guide who had been well trained in downplaying his Bangladeshi patriotism; concealing his Islamic faith, should any such exist; and flatteringly expressing a strong desire to be re-included in either the Indian or the Pakistani state, depending on the audience.

Picking out Mrs. Sengupta’s guide would be extremely difficult, Ronnie thought, nodding his head in grim agreement with his own mind. *Who shall I give her?* There was Vikrum, a burly fellow with gold teeth who made guests feel safe in this strange country, and serenaded them with early Bollywood tunes and village chants in his surprisingly melodic tenor. There was Ashwin, a mild-mannered guide whose ability to rattle off statistics made him very popular with visiting engineers and the like. There was even Puli, a consummate foodie who had mapped out the finest Indian cuisine possible in all fifty states. The man could find rice in a pasta store. But were any

of them right for this widow? Besides, they were booked already. All that was really left was the new boy, Satya, a recent addition to the team.

Ronnie paused his volley of thoughts and considered that prospect. It might be possible. Perhaps Mrs. Sengupta would want a guide who felt like the son who *should* have been taking care of her? It wasn't a bad idea, that.

Mrs. Sengupta was traveling scandalously alone, without a husband or gaggle of women her own age. This was something that had shocked Ronnie, and he had feared his horror during the initial phone-call inquiry would lose him Mrs. Sengupta as a client. She certainly hadn't seemed very assertive in that first conversation, saying little, asking few questions, and hanging up as soon as she learned about the packages. He had thought it was just another Indian auntie with empty days indulging in a long-distance phone call for a thrill. But she did call back, and accepted Ronnie's laughably expensive packaged "deal" without even a token attempt at bargaining. This saddened Ronnie, who always enjoyed a good back-and-forth over his absurdly padded prices, but money was money, and he swallowed his disappointment along with the fee.

Mrs. Sengupta, understanding that she would be getting a male tour guide—Ronnie didn't hire women for fear that they might distract his employees and male clients—requested that Ronnie provide a female companion/travel partner, for an appropriate extra charge, of course. In short, Mrs. Sengupta was looking to hire someone to be her friend. Ronnie, who had no friends himself, was unsure about hiring one for someone else. He wished, not for the first time in his life, that *escort* meant just that, and not a woman who pretended to be one's girlfriend.

Ronnie's first instinct was to enlist his wife, Anita. It had seemed like the perfect solution, he remembered, munching glumly on

a handful of dried peppermint leaves. He liked to switch between remedies for his stomach, hoping together they might work. Ronnie shook his head as he remembered proudly presenting his plan to Anita at dinner, Thai for her, stomach soothers for him. He had stirred his yogurt with a resigned sigh as Anita happily devoured a papaya salad, comforting himself with his brilliant idea. He was just leaning back in satisfaction when Anita surprised him by laughing her large braying laugh.

“Oh, absolutely not, Big Nose!” Anita’s favorite pet name for Ronnie was one he hated. “Surely you must make joke. No way, no how, nowhere. Over my ashes, as they say.”

Ronnie, stunned, said nothing, not even correcting her English, an opportunity he rarely passed up. They had agreed to speak English for at least an hour a day to each other, using it as a chance to try out new words and idioms that they might have been fearful to try out on strangers. Ronnie loved to assume an air of superiority, having been in America for so much longer than Anita, but the truth was, she was a far faster learner than he.

He realized, sighing through his peppermint leaves, that he should have expected this from his wife, but at the time, almost a month ago, he was flabbergasted. It sometimes troubled him how Anita was nothing like what she was supposed to have been. He had specifically asked for a wife who would be, like the families he guided, enraptured with his intellect and his knowledge. Instead, he had gotten Anita.

Although he enjoyed the freedoms of America, when Ronnie had decided to get married, he looked for his bride in Bangladesh. He had met nice Bangladeshi girls in America through his uncle and the growing network of Bangladeshi friends and neighbors who had flooded into Jackson Heights in the years since Ronnie had arrived. However, he had found the women raised between Bangladesh and



America to be too much of everything. They were bold, these girls; they looked him directly in the eyes, they ventured to touch his shoulder when he made them laugh, and they sat too close at movies and meals. It made him uncomfortable. He would never be the authority with a girl like that. He had to look to the old country.

He called his mother, who was initially annoyed to be disturbed during her favorite soap opera but forgave all when she heard his reason for doing so. She nodded constantly through the conversation, because she had never really understood that her face wasn't visible across the phone line. After hearing Ronnie's careful stipulations, she concluded that she had just the girl in mind, her friend's sister's daughter's niece, Anita Das. Anita would do very nicely for Ronnie; she spent her days in her home helping her mother, who was, by all accounts, an excellent cook, which meant that Anita herself must have inherited this ability.

For her part, Anita was not actually consulted at any level, but if she had been, she would have been thrilled by the new match. Not because Ronnie Munshi, a skinny child she could barely remember from the village school years ago, seemed to be any great prize, but because marrying him would be a one-way ticket to America. Anita would have consented to an Indian husband, a Pakistani husband, even a Chinese husband, had one presented himself, because they would have all meant the same thing to her: escape. Her family was not an unhappy one: she was not beaten any more than was deemed strictly necessary by her parents; she had been allowed to complete several years at the local school, and even took classes and received a junior degree from a two-year college in the nearest city. Still, Anita had been born, she had been told, looking up at the world, emerging from the birth canal with her eyes open and unblinking. Ever since then, she hadn't been able to stop looking for something better or deeper or just more.

She had been considering her own escape seriously, hoarding little bits of money in a hole in the ground in a corner outside of her father's house, when the offer from Ronnie finally reached her, relayed through a series of long-distance interactions. This was two weeks after Ronnie had first contacted his mother, but eventually her mother deigned to explain to Anita that she had, at long last, found a husband, despite her tanned skin and disinterest in domestic duties. Her dance of joy was interrupted by her mother's reminder that now would be an excellent time to learn to cook. Her major selling point had been her cooking abilities, passed down, it had been assured, from her mother. Anita merely laughed. Her mother slapped her hard, but that rebellious giggle was worth it. Her mother didn't matter anymore. Anita was already far away.

Though Ronnie had been certain that his delicate country-bred bride might find the US of A overwhelming, the reality was that Anita took to America like a fish to water. Initially, she had only been worried about two things. One was the food, and the other was the bedroom. However, Ronnie, who had never been with a real live woman, lasted all of twenty seconds after entering his virginal bride for the first time, and it would take him several years to improve on this performance. While not exactly a pleasant experience, it was, for Anita, a mercifully short one that seemed to give her new husband pleasure and, more importantly, a deep sleep.

As for the food issue, Anita very quickly discovered takeout by means of Chinese food menus that were slipped under their apartment door, and that was that.

While Ronnie had carried an expatriate's love of home and hearth, Anita had spent her childhood and adolescence in the Bangladesh of reality, rather than the lovely and lush country village of Ronnie's imagination. Initially confused and disappointed in his wife, Ronnie sought the advice of his aunt and uncle, hoping to find someone

to dictate Anita's behavior more effectively than he had managed to do. But Ronnie was out of luck, for Anita, with her quick mind, respectful disposition, and easy laughter, was seen as brave, funny, and adaptable. Instead of Anita's changing, it was Ronnie who grew to see his wife's abilities and interests as, if not attractive, then certainly rather useful at work.

But not this time, apparently. He begged, he implored, but Anita stood firm.

"You are thinking this madam will be so thrilled to see a nice brown female face she will dance for joyousness, yes?"

Ronnie nodded slowly. He had, indeed, been thinking along those lines.

"You are ten kinds of an idiot. This Kolkata auntie will take one look at me and swim back home. Look at me!"

Ronnie surveyed his wife. She looked very nice in her hot-pink spandex leggings and teal polyester tunic, he thought. Her bangles, all neon plastic, provided a nice contrast to the two other elements, and her sneakers were bright silver and purple.

"Even for dinner with Uncle I don't wear sari nonsense. This mem-sahib will expect someone from another century. I can't do it, Ronnie baby, just haven't the wardrobe!" Anita licked her fingers. "And besides. Two weeks traveling around dull towns with an Indian auntie judging my every movement? It's been too long for me, nah, I'm too USA now for such things. No thank you."

Anita raised her trim body up and gave her disappointed spouse a peck on the cheek.

"Sorry, Big Nose. It's not for me."

Ronnie knew better than to try to convince her, or worse, order her. Ronnie was no match for his wife, a village flower with an iron will. He would have to think of something soon. Mrs. Sengupta was one client, but that's how it began. Disappoint one person, and the

rest stop giving you the chance to do so. He could not afford for his business to fail. He could not be one of those men who clung on to life and thought about what they used to be. He would have to accommodate the widow, if that meant forcing Anita onto the trip with his bare hands.

# 3

Pival sighed with frustration as yet another call to Mr. Munshi went to voice mail. She looked over her balcony rail to the busy street below. Since her dramatic confrontation with her maids the previous afternoon, the house had been silent, punctuated only by the tread of the servants' feet. Pival had never understood how the maids managed to make their walk reflect their mood, but they had a footfall for every emotion, and their steps sounded accusatory. Pival wished she could serve herself tea, instead of waiting for Sarya to do so, but that would never be allowed. It was strange, she knew, that she was more restricted by her servants than served. If she had married someone poorer she could have served herself her entire life, and probably would have longed for help. Now she was jailed by her waitstaff, unable to do anything on her own. She grimaced at the thought. She was ungrateful, she knew, to resent being so wealthy that she was expected to use help. Still, she wished she could make herself tea. It had been so long, she could barely remember how anymore.

She heard Sarya coming from the kitchen, her light footsteps distinguishing her from Tanvi and the male servants. The maid's feet tapped out an unhappy rhythm as she carried the tray. She felt rather than saw the maid's gaze when she entered Pival's room and set down the tray with a thud, but Pival didn't turn around, keeping her eyes fixed on the street and the people below. It was easier to look out the window than to face her servants. She longed to begin her trip, to find her ending. Every moment before that felt like a waste of time. She heard a cough. "Thank you, Sarya, you can go." Her voice had

wavered but held firm, she thought to herself with no small amount of satisfaction. She heard Sarya sob petulantly behind her, and she knew this would be another piece of gossip for the servants' quarters, the cruelty of madam, her refusal to even look them in the face.

Once Pival was sure that the girl was gone, she allowed herself to turn back and look at the meal she had been given. She noted that the cook had left her tea and a light repast of digestive biscuits, but no sugar or cream. They must not have thought she deserved those luxuries.

The quiet of the apartment felt strange. Normally it was a hive of activity, or it had been during Ram's life. A host of people began to arrive as early as six in the morning, starting with the milkman who brought their milk daily, delivering to them first as the result of a few well-timed extra rupees each year. Then there was her breathing instructor, who arrived at seven; the yoga instructor, at eight; and at least three times a week a priest would arrive at nine to lead them in prayers and bless their shrine. Ram's departure for work at ten would empty things out a bit but soon a stream of people delivering things would begin again, and then, of course, the visiting hours, the memory of which made her shiver despite the steam rising up from the cup of tea in front of her. The clock struck two, which meant teatime was upon her. Small wonder she felt uneasy, she thought, her mouth twisting. Although she had eliminated teatime the day Ram died, memories of it haunted her still. She looked around her, reassuring herself that she was alone.

When Ram had been alive tea had not been a beverage. Tea had been an event. Although Ram was rarely home at that hour, the timing of tea was strictly maintained in his absence. From two P.M. to five thirty P.M. a daily stream of visitors poured through the door, a stark contrast to the workers who entered in the mornings. They would include all the cousins, aunts, distant acquaintances, and

close friends, implicitly demanding drinks and snacks and, most importantly, conversation. If not quite the cream of Bengali society it was the richest milk of it, wealthy and well educated, and if not quite Brahmins, trying to make up for it at every turn. Ram, a barrister in Kolkata's high court, was not expected to be present. In fact, his absence was a point of pride for his many female admirers, who beamed and remarked happily, "So busy he is with his work!" Between the countless cups of weakly brewed, milky tea and the vast amounts of commentary, Pival often felt like she was drowning in a caffeinated sea. She wished Ram would return home at two, at first because she missed him, and later because when he was there she could retreat and be permitted some relief and stillness.

She took a sip of her tea, savoring the simplicity of the liquid and the pure silence filling the room. She couldn't help but think of all the teatimes that had felt endless, when she had watched the clock from the corner of her eye and groaned inwardly when the eagle-eyed gaze of disapproving relatives seemed to pin her in place.

Pival's parents had raised her with gentle curation, like the caretakers of a small private museum. Her parents' strict rationality and disdain for superstition had made them disapprove of blind adherence to any custom that could not be explained logically. Pival had grown up trusting herself and her own judgment, and it had come as an unpleasant surprise to find out that her husband and his large and ever-present family did not.

When they spoke to her, offering what they considered to be deeply helpful ways to improve her life, they did so with the assumption that she would already know their expectations, which left her confused, them disappointed, and Ram derisive. Her husband's frustration at her inquiries about these rituals and habits, which seemed so natural and self-explanatory to him, submerged Pival further into silence. The quieter she became, the more he chastised her. Seeing how her

husband treated her, his family followed suit. After a daily serving of their disdain, swallowed with her own snacks at teatime, Pival's confidence had faded and died, replaced by a reserved meekness and deep inner pain.

And then there had been Ram, who had isolated her with his judgments. No one was ever good enough to be their friend, so now she had none. Who could measure up to the Sengupta standards? It had been easier not to argue, easier to just quit. Her brother had died in an accident when he was twenty-seven, so when her parents passed away, her last ties to anyone outside of the Sengupta clan had been effectively severed. Now, she realized, she knew no one else.

Pival took another sip of her tea, trying to force that pale shadow of herself back into the past. *Stop haunting my living room*, she told it in her mind. Today she was alone. She no longer had to bend and mold herself into the shapes others had left for her to fill.

After Ram's death, many of her former visitors had maintained their teatime arrivals to comfort her in her time of need. At least, that was what they said they were doing, but Pival had been aware that their real goal was to ensure that her grief followed the proscribed paths set out for her by the Senguptas. Carefully they observed her, as if she were an animal at the zoo. Even in mourning there were a host of customs for Pival to neglect and perform incorrectly. *That must give them a great deal of happiness*, Pival thought, finishing her tea. Pival sometimes found herself speaking to her husband in her mind in a way she never could have in life. *At least I'm good for something, Ram.*

A crash and then the sound of angry protests floated up to her window. She returned to the balcony and looked down below. A car had collided into a cart full of supplies to decorate the goddess, and now brightly colored paper and paints and flowers filled the narrow road. The owner of the cart screamed at the driver, demanding com-



compensation for his damaged goods. The driver, on the other hand, was furious at the injury to the car, which seemed to have suffered no ill effects that Pival could see, other than a few splatters of paint and a shower of flower petals. Certainly his vehicle would face more such damage during the festival itself, which flooded the city with people and left cars covered in its decorations for days.

Inside the car, the passenger was rapping loudly at the window, and the screaming driver's face shifted instantly from angry to servile. He bowed to the car's occupant, who had rolled down the window an inch or two and was slipping a slim handful of rupees rolled into a neat cylinder into the cart owner's hand. The man accepted the compensation happily as the driver grumbled and spat a large stream of paan right at the cart owner's feet. The driver resumed his position within the car, and the cart owner dragged his cart, now with a cracked wheel, in the other direction. The small street was silent once more, with only the spattered remains of the decorations as the evidence that anything had happened. A flicker of movement caught her eye. There was a child crouched in the gutter, begging. She hadn't even noticed.

When she was young, Pival had loved Durga Puja, but as an adult all the joy of the holiday had died for her the day that Rahi left. Without him in the house, her celebrations felt hollow. Rahi had always loved to take his lantern and dance in front of the goddess, thanking her for her triumph over the evil demon and imploring her for her grace. Ram would watch, disapproving of his son's dancing but unable to say anything because it was traditional. Once Rahi was gone they didn't decorate their house or their shrine; instead they visited with others during the holiest days of the event, leaving their own house empty and allowing the servants time off.

She had thought she had nothing to thank the goddess for this year, but as she watched the empty street she realized Durga Puja was

giving her the opportunity to escape. It would be like the child in the road. People would be so distracted by the festival that they would never see her slip away. She watched the child scratch at his scabs and made a mental note to send down some food from the kitchen if there was extra. The cook had yet to learn how to prepare meals for Pival alone, and they always had too much. The child would have something to eat that night, at least.

Why had Mr. Munshi not returned her calls? Was there some problem with the guide, or worse, the companion? Mr. Munshi, whom Pival would not want to insult but who sounded vaguely Bangladeshi to her, had assured her, "All is possible, probably, prepared, madam!" Now she feared that this was not the case. Her tickets had been booked. She left in a week, at the height of the festival. What would she do if there were no tour guide and companion waiting? She hated to admit it but Tanvi's dire warning echoed in her brain.

She wished she had kept more of herself whole throughout her long marriage. She could have used her youthful boldness now, but it was gone. In its place was fear, and what could that help her now? She thought about Rahi. Why had he left her all alone? What had he found in America?