Lives of Barter

Kalpana Negi

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LIVES OF BARTER

by

Kalpana Negi

A Thesis

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Abstract

The ancient Hindu text, Rig Veda states that there is only one truth. It’s not merely secular universalism that Hinduism alludes to here, it’s also the thought that universalism extends to all life forms—the integral unity of them—the belief that life and death (even that of the universe) is cyclical, that everything dies and takes birth several times over in different forms. This belief and several other myths emerging from this belief system are an integral part of the world in which the characters of this thesis reside. This thesis explores how stories can change lives and that the myths and tales of a community have deep connections to their history and even though they are told only as stories, they communicate some deep truths about the people that tell them.
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CHAPTER ONE

If Rajeev wasn’t already late for the nine o’clock meeting, he would be. It was the phone, tugging and yelling like a little boy in want of attention. But he couldn’t look at it. What he hated more than being late for meetings was to stare at the phone screen when he should be looking at the windscreen. It was just irresponsible. Unsafe for the driver and everyone around. The act of driving needed attention, undivided and unsplit to get through the maze of basement parking where cars ran around like berserk athletes, honking and braking in frustration because they were all running late for a nine o’clock.

But of course, like all drivers, Rajeev would look at the phone quickly, just the name, without getting sucked in by the hypnotic screen. So, he did. It was his father-in-law. It was an odd time for him to call—it was evening in India, his time to watch TV and badmouth politicians. This wasn’t a Hi, How are you call. It seemed urgent, but so was finding a parking spot. “Move, asshole!” the man behind him honked. “Sorry!” Rajeev yelled back, in a closed car and still looking for a parking spot, thinking about the green shirt his father-in-law wore in the display picture. Green. It didn’t suit him, made him look older. There was a spot next to a beat-up Subaru and in the split second it took Rajeev to accelerate, a Honda parked there. It was a cocky white young man, not the kind one should mess with in mornings, not with Rajeev’s color of skin. They had nothing to lose. On Monday mornings it was always hard to find a parking spot. As though, some collective conscious told people to drive to office all at the same time. And then he found it, a tiny space, between a Toyota and a Ford. He tried to make a small circle but almost hit Toyota’s sideview mirror. The Toyota had a tiny Satō Inc logo—his workplace, his money machine. Satō, Japan-made engines, loved in America. This made it hard for him to hate the Toyota for parking badly.
All that haste went down the drain because by the time he parked the car, his phone had stopped ringing. The phone buzzed again. It was a text message: “Call back, urgent.” He would’ve waited until after the meeting to call back, but it did seem unusual for his father-in-law to call, it was the kind of call you dread in the middle of the night. He rang back. Rajeev noticed that there were white flowers on that green shirt too. Thank god, they were tiny. He’d been so out of touch, was that what was in fashion? His father-in-law answered the call but didn’t speak. “Hello, hello?” Rajeev said, not intending to sound panicked, but he couldn’t help it. The silence on the other side of the phone was pitch dark, giving no clue of where his father-in-law was. He couldn’t even hear him breathe. Rajeev could feel that silence, it was in the car too. Was he in trouble? Was Lata in trouble? She’d only left a day ago and had told him she’d reached safely. Just a day ago, when she’d called, he could hear everyone in background, his father-in-law cursing the right-wing prime minister and Lata’s mother asking him to turn down the volume.

Still in the quiet of the car with commotion outside—the drivers still wanting to have their way, he realized he didn’t much care for the nine o’clock meeting and he had that feeling, like a pungent pain in the ribs when you can’t breathe, the feeling that something was not right. He called his father-in-law, but the call didn’t go through, he called three times and then four, finding some new facet of that green shirt each time—the faded seams, the pocket with a black dot on it. Was it an ink blot or a design? Rajeev realized he was still in the basement and it was probably for that very reason he couldn’t get through to his father-in-law.

Rajeev held the phone in his hand, and felt a throb of fear that went right to his heart. It was beating very hard now, in spite of the fact that he hadn’t forgotten to breath, hadn’t forgotten to employ that one sure-shot technique of keeping stress at bay in corporate America—a deep breath. He slung his backpack on this arm careless, not even pulling it all the way up to his
shoulder. His eyes were on the phone and his father-in-law, eyes brown and pixelated in that low-resolution picture, smile without the trace of his teeth.

Beep one, beep two, he counted them as he placed his leather shoes on each stair. And then beep seven and nothing. But he kept trying, phone signals are like roaches trying to make their way through crevices, they don’t need a lot of space and it can happen any time. No response. His father-in-law wasn’t disconnecting his call, the call wasn’t even going through.

He could tell when he got to the Satō Inc floor, there was a distinct smell of cigarettes people smoked on the stairs. He didn’t think it was allowed for any other company, but rules were different for them. It was a usual Monday morning—bustle and bleached smiles. He employed a smile too, he had to, there was no way he could show stress, it wasn’t good for his annual appraisal meet—it was a key trait he had learnt during business meets, the more you can reign in your emotions, the higher the chance of landing a deal. It was like playing poker. Emotions were currency, leverage you got on opposition. The receptionist smiled back, impressed at his straight posture, he knew it, he could see it on the blinding Satō Inc logo, each letter size of a human coffin. A worker spent two hours, cleaning that logo each day. He decided not to go to the meeting room, and he decided he’d tell Stephen, he had an urgent call with the New York office.

His cabin had an excellent view of the Mississippi, but the view that mattered was that of his phone. He called his father-in-law again. Still nothing. He opened his computer—in case someone decided to barge in and thought he was whiling away time. He opened a Dasani water bottle but the water tasted stale. This wasn’t his favorite brand, but there was nothing else available. He emptied the contents into his mouth, in the hope it would calm him down and he
was right. The oxygen hit his brain, his palette was moist, and his heart was slow. But his hands were still cold, and his legs were shaky.

“All good, buddy?” It was Stephen and he hadn’t knocked. He was Rajeev’s boss. He could do anything.

“Sorry, forgot to inform you. A last-minute conference call with New York. I am sorry couldn’t make it to the meeting.” Rajeev’s phone was still in his hand, which made the whole excuse sound unbelievable, he hoped.

“Cool! Any update on the high horse power project?”

“Nothing at the moment. Still talking with Chile and Peru. We should know by the end of this week,” Rajeev said. Stephen showed him a thumbs up. He was good at reading faces, but not as good as Rajeev when it came to hiding emotions. Rajeev could only hope he didn’t give away the anxiety that was making its way through his body.

It was time to decide: should he dial Lata’s number and face more anxiety or wait and dial his father-in-law’s number again? But then he realized he couldn’t dial Lata’s number just yet, her cellular connection never worked in India. So, then, WhatsApp? But between the decision to put his finger on her name and something else, fear seized him.

He had a few more options. He could call his wife’s number, saved as Lata Mom in his phone. Lata’s mother had insisted on being called Maa even before they were married, and he had obliged. But that could never happen in his personal space, on his phone. He’d only ever called his own mother Maa and his mother was dead, and he didn’t want any second-tier replacement. He hated himself for this subtle anger he felt towards Lata’s mother, but it wasn’t a norm, it was circumstantial. She wasn’t picking up the phone and Rajeev was stressed out. He
opened another bottle of Dasani—he would never drink Dasani after this, it felt like the plastic was leaching into the water—and finished its contents. Or was it the poor quality of water or stress because it did nothing for the symptoms of nervousness?

That feeling he had been carrying in himself now surrounded him. Like his father-in-law’s faded picture that communicated nothing but uncertainty, the Mississippi River in front of him looked faded too. Almost as though it had stopped moving. Whatever this feeling was, it was trying to take his skull in its hands and crush it. It was a feeling of contrition, it was in the chair he was sitting in, it was around him, plotting against him. As though if he spent any longer on the chair, it would dissolve him while he sat there. That thought, that the chair could dissolve him, made Rajeev stand up. He took the laptop in his hands, balancing it, looking for answers in it, as though, he wanted to into the screen and that would somehow make things better, take him away from whatever had him in its claws.

On his computer, he didn’t open Outlook to check previous week’s numbers—his job as the Corporate Strategist at Satō Inc—work wasn’t even remotely on his mind, instead, he Googled “how to calm down” and found that you could listen to music, sure, change your focus, couldn’t happen, admit that you’re anxious, wasn’t helping, challenge your thoughts, he wasn’t going to call Lata, release anxiety, he lifted an empty Dasani bottle in his hand and crushed it but to no avail, say positive affirmations, it’s meditation in words, Google said. Say “it’s all going to be okay” three times over and then three more times but it didn’t work. It had an effect exactly opposite to what he had expected. In fact, he felt physically distorted as though the chair was made of salt and was melting his flesh away. He shut the laptop and drank some more water.

It was his fault. He should never have let Lata leave for India alone. How could he? She’d never travelled alone in an airplane leave alone a sixteen-hour inter-continental flight. But
he had tried to stop her. Did everything he could to dissuade her. Or did he? He did. She said she
was afraid her father wasn’t well. When Rajeev persisted, she said she feared for her father’s life,
in fact, he’d been so angry when she called upon reaching her parent’s house and her father was
watching cricket in the background, possibly wearing that atrocious green shirt. But when she
said it was her father’s life, he just couldn’t say anything. And she was serious. True, they’d been
married only six months, but happiness and worry were very easy to read on her face. Rajeev’s
phone buzzed again, that cockroach had made its way in, his heart almost stopped. It was his
father-in-law.

He picked up the phone, only to hear that pitch-dark silence again. But not long after that,
a stable but coarse voice broke it. It was Rajeev’s father-in-law.

“Come home,” he said. “My daughter, your wife, she’s gone, she’s left us all.”

“Hello, hello? Papa?” Was it really him? There was no doubt it was him. “Papa? Papa?”
He hated calling him Papa, but it was not the time to delve on that. He said hello a few times
over and held his breath for the fear that it may be misinterpreted. He waited for his father-in-law
to say something else, something that denied the awful thing he’d just said, dismissing it as some
sort of a mistake or a bad joke. But he didn’t.

“Papa? Lata? What happened to Lata? And you? How are you?”

Rajeev’s father-in-law repeated what he’d said. Slowly this time, with emphasis on the
words that Rajeev dreaded.

“Missing”, he said. “She’s missing.” and then the silence fell again. Rajeev called him
back immediately, but nothing. This time he tried Lata’s mother and Lata, but nothing.
Missing, gone, left. Those words weren’t perfect replacements of each other, didn’t he know? Hadn’t he seen those crime shows? Each one of those things had a different consequence, a different reason. This was a prank, of course. A hoax, Rajeev thought. Just that thought, the thought that this was all a hoax gave him a feeling similar to soaking his feet in warm water, but not for long.

Rajeev tried his father-in-law’s number once again and then again and then “Lata Mom” and Lata, but nothing. It wasn’t a prank call. There was no mistaking that voice, like a pencil scratching the concrete. Mix of mild panic and sadness, that of the loss of a child. A kind of enforced pressure to keep his voice from wavering. It was no joke. He had hardly ever heard Lata’s father nervous, and that was a voice of a nervous man.

If this wasn’t a prank call and that was her father, then what was he to do? Sit around in the office, blaming himself? He couldn’t shake the thought that if he had accompanied her, this could not have happened. But then, he knew better than dwell on things that could not be undone. But, what he could’ve probed her harder. How important could it have been? “My father’s life is at stake,” he’d said. And obviously, she hadn’t believed her. It had seemed like a very obvious emotional move, he’d seen his clients play on him many times and he had been very good at sensing it, but he was wrong this time.

When they’d gotten married, Rajeev had seen it as an advantage, a desirable trait that Lata and he were not the animals of logic. They paid attention to what their gut said, their intuition, that feeling inside their stomach. For Rajeev and he had noticed, for Lata too, if something didn’t feel right, she wouldn’t go ahead and do it, or not do it. For Rajeev, his intuition, gut-instinct, the third-eye, as Stephen called it had made him head of corporate strategy from just an analyst in ten years. He was all of thirty with a team of twenty reporting directly to
him. “You have something that can’t be taught in B-school,” Stephen would say. “Don’t let it go to your head,” he’d say, to balance a very obvious compliment.

Rajeev believed this skill of his, this intuition and he had demonstrated it too. One such instance that had left Stephen particularly impressed was after a meeting with a client in Seattle, a top-boss of a major auto-corporation. He was way too charming to be believable. Stephen was impressed with him and he had a track record to prove it, this top-honcho. But Rajeev had warned Stephen against it and after much convincing, he had let Rajeev’s decision prevail and they called off the deal. Soon after, the top-honcho was soon found guilty of insider trading.

But he didn’t know why when it came to Lata, he’d tried to be logical even though it was completely unnecessary.

“Can’t you just call them and put to rest this anxiety you’re having?” Rajeev had asked her when she said she wanted to go to India to see her parents.

“No. It’s something a phone call can’t put to rest,” Lata had said, and Rajeev has found the logic ridiculous. True, it was a logic, it stood not ground in front of raw gut feeling, which told him that without giving it much thought, he should board the first available flight to India. But what if he was wrong? But then it had worked for that Seattle deal. But then work was impersonal, and this was as close to his heart as it could be. What would waiting yield except a slight change in circumstances. And there was no way to tell if those changes would be favorable or not. Whatever he decided, it wouldn’t hurt to at least have all of his choices listed in front of him. He took a pencil and a writing pad and wrote the things he could do:

a) Call Lata’s father.

b) Call Jitu uncle.
c) Call Lata.

d) Call Lata’s mother

e) Catch a flight to India.

f) Do nothing

He check-marked things he had done and do nothing wasn’t an option. Could he call Jitu uncle? That would have made things easier for him, but not for Lata and his parents. Rajeev didn’t want this unconfirmed news to start rumors. Once people started to speak about things, the facts changed. He decided he’d take the first available flight to New Delhi.

The expanse of what he was feeling was so wide that he feared that perhaps, something had happened in the city itself. He Googled “Dehradun” for any possible news, but there was nothing. No calamity, not apocalypse. There was the usual write-up about Air India launching new routes, ambulance strike and some scandal involving the chief minister. What did he expect? It wasn’t Delhi or Bombay. If something had come over them, if there had been a calamity, he would not know about it. The only time in its history Dehradun made news was when it was named the capital of the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand and that was in 2001.

It wasn’t an apocalypse or a calamity, there had been something else. Why had Lata, who feared for the life of his parents, gone missing? And how could a person go missing? Had she been kidnapped? Did she choose to leave him and run away? Was that possible? Thinking logically, statistically, how many men lost their wives the way he did and how many found out about it on the phone? Wasn’t finding out about it on the phone better than finding out himself or not at all? These were all possibilities, scenarios, not facts or truths and they confused him.
But then, who knew what the scenarios were? What the facts were? All he had was a whiff of them, an outline of what was possible. He felt confused and helpless and gave himself permission to be both. His confusion wasn’t unwarranted. Things had happened to him and he had no idea how. But that did not change the fact that he shouldn’t have let her travel alone in the first place. Lata had never been on a plane all by herself, let alone a sixteen-hour trans-Atlantic flight. If he had travelled with her, stayed with her, this mishap could have been averted.

But there was no use thinking about what could have happened, if he would’ve taken one path or another, to go down that road was to call trouble on to oneself. What would have happened, if he hadn’t married Lata? What would have happened if she had never come to Memphis with him? Who knew? He couldn’t wish to undo everything he’d done to reverse one course of action. He had persuaded and when she had insisted, he gave in. He couldn’t come up with any other reason, he couldn’t keep her captive. Although he regretted coming up with arguments and suggestions that he knew she would not agree to and it wasn’t in his nature to argue as much as he did.

“Why don’t you video call? Couldn’t that solve the problem?” he’d asked her and now regretted how he could’ve said that. He didn’t believe it.

“I don’t believe the phone, what I see on it. If you trust a picture, if you trust anything that comes from a camera, you are stupid,” she’d said and at that point he’d given up arguing with her. He was stupid. They had been quiet for a while after the squabble and then he’d started again like a jammed cassette recorder.

“Is there nothing else you can do instead? Nothing to cure this unreasonable fear of yours?” he’s said and knew it was a mistake.
“Unreasonable? Maybe for you, but not for me,” she’d said.

“I didn’t mean that. I was just—,” he said.

“It’s hard to explain, Rajeev. It’s a strange feeling,” she said. “Like something is scraping the insides of my stomach. It’s not a good sign. I know it,” she’d said and Rajeev had known not to speak after that. Who wanted a needy husband? Who wanted a man who would put his needs before her needs, her parents”?

“I will come before Christmas,” she’d said. Rajeev could tell Lata had sensed insecurity in him. “We will go to New York,” she’d said. *Serendipity* was her favorite movie.

Now that he thought about it: why did she feel the need to assure him he’d come back. Had she sensed she wouldn’t? Had she been afraid? He was sure the flow of the river had stopped, he was sure, time itself had stopped.

He rose from his chair and walked around his office a little bit, he drank some more water. There was no need to turn into a grieving man yet, she wasn’t dead! Not grieving, he realized, he was nervous. Should he just call Jitu uncle and tell him to check on her and their home? But then uncle would tell their neighbors, the neighbors would tell their neighbors and even before he knew it, the whole of Sunderwala village would be talking about it. He couldn’t do it. It required immense self-control, but he knew he had it in him. He’d undertaken several high-risk projects, earned billions for Satō Inc. Just that thought, the thought that he should feel the need to compare everything with his performance at work made him ashamed. Maybe he deserved to be abandoned. Maybe she did the right thing.

There was shame in this frustration, he realized, not just nervousness. Shame was slowly tugging at him, somewhere near his heart, like a weight, where it becomes hard to breathe. He
was now a man whose wife had left him. There had to be type of man whose wife leaves him. The kind women regret having married.

Now that he thought about it, he’d deserved it. His track record with women included treating them as test subjects for business school behavioral economics. That Gordon Gekko-like obsession, belief that economics was key to everything that human relationships, institutions, businesses, with the help of theories, analysis and graphs could be reduced to one key motivation: money. Heuristics, non-rational decision making, loss-aversion, prospect theory, non-linear probability—it was all there. He’d read *Pre-Suasion* five times and had been to every Cialdini conference he could.

What was surprising wasn’t that despite being a total jerk, as Rajeev knew it very well, was, the reason his only girlfriend before Lata had left him was boredom. That devastated him more than anything else. If she’d said time or, emotional unavailability or sex or something else, he could have lived with it, but boring? He spent his entire business-school time trying to be interesting, trying to the indefatigable man of logic who had an explanation to everything. But boring? His friends told him boring wasn’t a flaw of the charter, it an alpha-male trait. She left you not because you were boring, she left you because she found you boring, they said. It is not your fault. She is like the rest of averageness in the world and will die from this disease, this sickness of the century: boredom. Those words were a great balm while they lasted, but no one could believe that for very long—he couldn’t have made it to thirty.
And the funny thing was, Rajeev didn’t believe this himself. If intellect drove the world, there would be no heartbreaks. Then what drove the world? How did people fall in love, out of love? Why did people make key decisions not with intellect but with intuition?

Rajeev didn’t sit down near a river in a yogi’s clothes and asked himself those questions, but gradually, with noted fear he felt when he thought about something too much, when he intellectualized things like love, trust, family and feelings. He was away from India, from home and here, in America, in his new home, he could have many identities but a money-obsessed psychopath wasn’t one of them. And he couldn’t shed that mask all at once, all layers of it—some of it was his job. But slowly and gradually, he became what he was to start with: a man who would understand what Lata meant when she said there was something scraping her stomach from the inside. A strange, unexplainable feeling that won over thoughts that arose in the mind. If he wasn’t the same person he had been, then why did Lata leave? Despite shedding his inner Gordon Gekko, was he still boring?

His chair had made him a prisoner, just as the Mississippi was a prisoner of its own body—what it was and what it couldn’t become. A flooded river but never a sea. Could Lata sense, just as she sensed things going on with her parents that everything he saw, everything he thought, made Rajeev worried? Or was she, like the river visible from his office window, immune to his feelings? In the first few weeks after Lata moved to Memphis, they would both go by the river each Saturday. Lata had said a river reminded her of the concreteness of things. Of things too large to change or those that couldn’t change. A wave of intense worry came over Rajeev thinking about the woman he loved, who was a part of his life some moments ago and now wasn’t.
A journey starts not when one boards the mode of transportation, but with the thought of undertaking it. Rajeev would book first flights available to Dehradun—his journey had started. He started to look for tickets, this time, not sorting them by the prices but time. How liberating it was when human wants and needs, and love took precedence over money. That’s where the real happiness lay: in the issues beyond economics, supply-demand, buying and selling. Not that he was going to by a three-thousand-dollar ticket, but there was no problem of moral conflict, not war of opposing emotions. He booked the Air India flight that left in two hours. MEM-JFK-DEL, sixteen-hour, non-stop, and then to Dehradun, cost him a little under three-thousand dollars. AI102, AI102, he said to himself, loud and clear, as though cementing some truth in his head.

He had two hours until the flight and no time to feel panic, fear, abandonment. It was a good thing, this lack of time, but it wasn’t going to last forever. There would be a time when he’d have to sit, all by himself, with a stranger for sixteen hours thinking about what awaited him when he reached Delhi. He knew what awaited him: his missing wife and the journey to look for her.

But there was still time to get there and doubts need very small snatches of time to form themselves, which is why, even after he had made up his mind, even after he had booked the most expensive flight of his life, he still wondered if all this could just be a hoax? There were several moments of him sitting on that chair, looking out at the faded scenery when he’d dialed Jitu Uncle’s number and then logic had stopped him. Sometimes, logic was the right thing. But it wasn’t logic that kept him from telling Jitu uncle, that kept him from sharing it with anyone, it
was the urge to keep a secret, a secret. A secret whose contents he wasn’t really sure of, whose
contents he did not want to alter before he knew them.

It had nothing to do with his trust for Jitu uncle. He was an old friend of his father’s and
the only person he’d stayed in touch with ever since he moved to the United States. He was there
when Rajeev’s grandmother was ill, he was there when she died. He was there when his parents
had died. More than anything else, Rajeev did not want to say those words, or write them—as
though that would make it easier. Those words that would cement the fact that he did not totally
want to believe. She had gone and it didn’t matter any which way, but at least the reasons for
why she had left were still in his control, he could go from “she left me”, to she was, god forbid,
kidnapped. Not that he wanted either, but he had some say in how he felt, but the moment he said
it loud, his mind would make that a fact and there was no way he could carry that fact with him
for the next twenty-four hours. It’s fact that you only had to say mistruths aloud a few times to
make them truths. He wasn’t going to say, not until he got to Dehradun.

Even though he didn’t have much time, his mind still thought in the logical sequence.
Were his clothes right, was his bag ready? Did he have his passport? His pants felt loose, suitable
for travel—it hadn’t been even two days since Lata left and he’d eaten only a packet of ramen
and a protein bar. He was logical, but not silly—there was no time to go home and pack
anything. He took inventory of his office bag, each pocket, he might need space if he needed to
buy something on the way. He had some cinnamon chewing gums, his earphones in a case, he
liked to keep all wires together, there were his house and office keys and a few Perfect bars in
the main pocket. His passport was in his office drawer, locked. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t
moved it since it had come back from the embassy for renewal. He had exhausted all the pages.
He had his Green Card, driver’s license and credit cards and some Indian currency in his wallets,
ten-rupee coins that he had been fascinated with. If he kept his laptop, there would still be space for his jacket or a water bottle—he hated carrying it in the slot outside the bag. He was ready.

First there was the fear that he had nothing to carry but then came a sense of liberation. If he had nothing to carry, he couldn’t leave it behind. It was amazing how optimism showed up in pockets when it was needed the most. But then, what fear could possibly overtake the fear of losing his wife. It was as though everything had possibly gone from him and the rest of the fears were just part of the mundanity. It wasn’t as though he didn’t need things when he travelled, he could think of at least a few—eye drops, slip-ons, pillow, almond oil, eye mask. But compromising his comfort didn’t seem like a suffering in front of the one that he had not chosen.

Now was the time to play cool. He walked into Stephen’s office and closed the door behind him. For effect, Rajeev hadn’t knocked at the door. Stephen looked up from his computer, his stress ball was in his right hand.

“It’s my father-in-law, Stephen. He’s probably not going to make it,” Rajeev said. Hands in pocket, gaze averted—he had to break every corporate rule of effective confusion. He was sad and he didn’t care about.

“Oh, I am so sorry, buddy,” Stephen said and got up from his chair. “What can I do?”

“I’d have to leave for India now. My wife had left a day ago and news came that it’s gotten worse,” he said.

“Was that why you were late for the meeting today?” Stephen said, soon realizing that wasn’t the way to tackle their star employees. “Anything I can do? Anything?”
“No. Just take care of the Chile-Peru project for me. I mean, if you can. I will be available online, as much as I can but because of the circumstances, I can’t promise anything,” Rajeev said.

“It’s all good, buddy. Don’t worry about it,” Stephen said.

“Do you want me to drop you to the airport? You’re leave asap, right?”


“Take care, buddy,” Stephen said. It was his sign off, his “fuck-off and let me work.”

Rajeev liked this about Stephen, he was bothered but not overtly, he cared but not too much. Rajeev had noticed this with most Americans. They let you be, they didn’t thrust their care or judgment and it suited Rajeev fine. Americans knew that the only person responsible for one’s own plight was them and no one else should question them for decisions the consequences of which were for him to bear made total sense to him. Once he was out of his hair, Stephen instant messaged him Rajeev knew how long he’d be gone for and Rajeev shook his head. At that, Stephen said “Take your time,” and sent a thumbs up smiley.

He called an Uber. It was unthinkable for him to drop his car home. He didn’t want to go there, he didn’t want to stand in the same garage that Lata had rearranged with his hands. He didn’t want to be in that patio, where she often sat holding a cup of tea and her knitting. She was making a ribbed scarf for Rajeev.

Rajeev could have agreed to let Stephen drive him to the airport, but he did not want to talk about any of it, he didn’t want to say any more lies that he already had. It was so hard to talk
to someone without feeling like you were giving away something important, like a treasure. But he could do that with Lata. There was something marriage did, perhaps seal some kind of a pact that seemed hard to break.

Uber buzzed. Her name was Lucy and she drove a red Camry—78ZTY3. Her mugshot was a selfie she’d taken at mall and had forgotten to crop or had intentionally kept the G of the Gucci in the background. She’d seemed talkative from her picture, almost annoyingly so and Rajeev was interested to find out if he was going to be right about it. He’d do it sometimes before his meetings: he’d look up the pictures of his clients on the internet and make assumptions and test himself on those assumptions and then file it away in the directory of his mind. He looked for his car keys, but they were not in his pant pockets, neither were they in his jacket pocket. Everything had decided to lose itself, what a day! In the bag, of course, they were in his bag.

The car was locked, and he struggled to get out of the basement with his bag not properly mounted on this back. He had to hurry up, get to the first floor but the basement was at its worst behavior—now he couldn’t find the way out. “The way out?” Rajeev asked a stranger, like a stranger—he had been working in the building for almost ten years. The stranger was a man in his cleaning gear, the only kind of workers in the building who had spare time, courtesy to give directions. “It’s that way,” the cleaner said, pointing to the direction opposite to where Rajeev was headed. Goddamnit! If Lucy had already arrived, she may have even left and if she called him, it’s possible he would never receive her call. He climbed two steps at a time on the stairs that led to the first floor, skating through the slippery floor, he made it to the door, the heavy glass door felt heavier and there it was, the red Camry. Lucy beamed in an upbeat voice:
“Rjiv?” She stuck her head out of the window. It was the head of a petite woman. Her hair was cut in a bob, silken and blonde.

“Yes,” he said, and did not bother to correct her. The Camry smelled of cheap air freshener that went to his head and all the way to his taste buds and ruined the after-taste of the protein bar. “I am so sorry I am late,” Rajeev said.

“Oh, no problem! How are you doing today?” Lucy had an upbeat voice, the sharp, nasal, upper inflection ridden. She looked at him through the rearview mirror and her eyes smiled.

“It’s been a day!” Rajeev said and regretted saying something that would encourage probe. He was right. She was the talkative-type. He spotted pet hair in the car and as soon as he did, he could smell the pet too. Cats, dogs, they all smelled bad. The perfume of the air freshener could not mask the stink.

“Where are you flying to?” she asked. He was surprised she didn’t pursue any conversation after he let out what a day it had been. He was still catching his breath and when he didn’t say anything, she spoke again. “You are going to the airport, aren’t you? Did I get that right?”

“Yes. Sorry, yes!”

“No need to apologize,” she said and made eye contact in the rear-view mirror and smiled.

There was a basket of red candies next to him and he picked one, but then put it back. He thought he saw some of that pet hair in the basket too. But that wasn’t the only reason, red
candies were his least favorite, all of them tasted like cough syrup he’d eaten as a kid growing up in India.

“So, where?” Lucy asked, when he was dialling the numbers that he’d been dialing for the last three hours.

“I am sorry?”

“Where are you flying to, sir?”

“Oh, well, home,” Rajeev said. Outside, it was sunny, but it was misleading, this sunlight. He knew if he stepped out, he would feel a chill.

“And where is that?” One star, he thought, she wasn’t getting more than a single star.

“India,” he said, and he thought maybe that would shut him up.

“Oh. I love Indian food!” she said looking back at him.

“Glad, you didn’t ask me if I worked for FedEx,” He wasn’t planning on saying anything mean, but he couldn’t help it. She was unrelenting.

“Well, well. I just picked you from Downtown. I know FedEx has no office downtown,” she said, pleased with herself. “So, where in India are you from?” she asked.

Rajeev put his phone back in his pocket, as though getting ready to draw his sword, ready to walk this lady through the map of India, but first, he’d like to avoid it.

“Have you been to India?” Rajeev asked. If he could save his breath, not give geography lessons, why not?
“Well, a close friend of mine went to Goya and she wouldn’t shut up about how cheap everything was,” she said. Her eyes were wide with the emphasis on the word cheap. Rajeev just smiled—it was a fact. Goa? She must have been in her forties. The skin on her face was largely taut, of someone much younger, but the skin flesh around her eyes told a different story.

“Where in Goa? Good place for fun. The churches, I like the churches,” Rajeev said, not quite quizzing her on it, but transported to that time when he was in Goa, by the beach eating good food, living in an excellent hotel, driving on a scooter with dollars turned into Indian rupee. “It’s a great place for young people,” he added, he didn’t know why as though he was already old or the experience of Goa was only associated with youth. He was only thirty. Did he not feel young? Is there something inside oneself that must hold the right to be young? Something biological age had nothing to do with it?

Rajeev’s experience wasn’t Lucy’s and she didn’t pick up on what she said. She was white, a woman, and anything she and her friends experienced, whether it was the food, the air, a place or love wouldn’t be the same as him.

“You got family here?”

“Yeah. My wife and I,” Rajeev said.

“Children?”

“No.”

“Newly married,” he said, faking a smile, hoping she understood how strongly he rejected her conversation, the path of it, the implications.
“Oh, how wonderful! Congratulations! I bet she is as good-looking as you are,” she said and met his eye in the rear-view mirror and then back on the road. He took it as a good-natured compliment and not flirting and while Rajeev was still thinking of something to say, she spoke.

“I have a husband too. Not a day goes by when I don’t hear about some business he plans on starting. Not one. I tell him Katie is growing up and he needs to get his act together, get a real job. I tell him I don’t want to be a single mother taking care of a man and her child. If you don’t take care for me, someone else will.”

It was too late, Rajeev thought. This is was why she worked as an Uber driver. To offload her days on strangers who’d listen to her without judgment. It was a wrong subject to discussing and more than anything, Rajeev could sense a pleasure in this perverse one-sided conversation where there was nothing she wanted other than lighten her heart. But, was that such a bad thing? Perhaps not, if Rajeev himself did not have something similar to say, something that he wanted to speak about with someone, but couldn’t because of shame and embarrassment. He decided he was envious of her, of how unabashedly she was able to talk about her private life. What could he say to that? What should he say?

“I am sorry to hear that,” he said. He couldn’t think of anything else, that was the shortest lie he could tell. He couldn’t talk about himself, he just couldn’t. “Marriage is difficult,” he said. The best way to say without really saying was to mask thoughts in generalizations.

“You are so right, Rjiv, marriage is difficult. They don’t know your worth until you leave them, you know,” she said.

Rajeev’s heart stopped. Was that why Lata left? Generalizations, he told himself, truth in generalizations.
“Is that why women leave?” Rajeev asked her.

“Now that you ask: Women don’t want to leave. In fact, she’d do everything to avoid leaving, especially when there is a child involved. But when she leaves, know that you have pushed her as far as you could. That you haven’t treated her the way she wanted to be treated. Take my husband, for instance. The other day, he came back home from work, whatever that is for him these days and sat down in the living room with his beer and sulking. Now, if you don’t tell me what in the world is wrong with you, how am I supposed to know? I wasn’t going to be the one to ask him, again, obviously. It’s their act as a child they can’t get rid of, to tell you the truth, Rjiv. And that’s the problem,” she said.

Rajeev looked into the mirror and caught her eyes, looking at him, but he wasn’t really looking, as the act involves, it was just his eyes, his mind was thinking about the possibilities, about the depth and breadth of things Lata could think.

“You know how every goddamn issue of Cosmo says communication is key, but this man, just sat there sulking,” she said and took a deep breath as though her mission was over as though, she had extracted everything she could from Rajeev from this ride, the income, the money she made off it could be bonus.

Rajeev was disappointed. Was that the fate of every marriage? How was it that of so many Uber drivers he had to sit in this one, had to meet her, at to have this conversation with him? He couldn’t leave this conversation on a dejected note, he couldn’t fail himself and Lata and what their marriage stood for.

“But at least you still have each other. That’s important, that you have each other,” Rajeev said.
“Do you mean, I am at fault?” she asked. How could he not understand her plight, how could he side with him? Her voice was brimming with anger, but Rajeev didn’t care.

“No. I am saying you have a chance of working things out with each other because both of you are still with each other, you know. You are lucky you have someone. Someone to love, fight with. The problems, they come and go.” She may have nodded, it was hard to tell but she did not look his eyes through the rearview mirror after that.

“You’re right, Rjiv. But men don’t value the very thing they have,” she said and then probably realized there was one in the car. “Most men. And my husband, he is like most men,” she said.

They drove in silence after that until Rajeev could see the control tower of the airport.

“Which airline?” she asked, her eyes were on the road and her voice was different now. Not that of a complaining wife, but a woman trying to earn a living for her kid, hoping for a tip.

“American,” Rajeev said and searched for her eyes in the rear-view mirror, but they were looking ahead. The car came to a halt.

“Have a good one,” she said and drove away.

Rajeev gave her a single star and wrote “cat fur” as reason.
CHAPTER TWO

Was ten years ample time? Could one choose to suddenly stop grieving? Logically, Triveni would say no. Grieving wasn’t turning off a tap or switching off the gas or picking a fly out of a cup of tea, but it had been ten years since the death of their son, and how long was this to go on? This thought, the thought about “how long” was somewhat borne out of frustration, irritation, even boredom. And it wasn’t so much for his own grief which was, no doubt there, like a sea in low-tide, but for that of his wife, which had gotten worse to a degree that he was afraid. They hadn’t exchanged very many words in those ten years, they hadn’t shared too many smiles, and they still shared those meals, each night in quietness and for Triveni there was no other time of the day as dreadful as that. Triveni had now started to believe that he’d probably done something wrong that perhaps, it was a matter that needed to be taken in his hands that it had to be stopped like you stop a free-running pulley. It was something they had to work at or cure with distractions and perhaps, hobbies.

Ten years ago, Triveni and Mira had fled their village with a dead baby to live in Sunderwala. Triveni could never forget that day. He hadn’t wanted to do such a thing, but Mira had insisted on not parting with their baby. She knew they could have cremated her or buried her at a burial ground, but Mira, shocked by her four-month-old baby’s death, would not agree to it.

When the baby succumbed to pneumonia, and Mira didn’t come out of her room for days, he broke the door down. The state she was in, he could never forget that either. The entire room was smelling of the dead body that Mira had wrapped in linen and a woolen throw, as though the baby could still feel the cold.
“You can’t keep the baby, Mira. Let it go. Rupa is dead,” he’d said to her. She was sitting in the corner of the bed, her face red and her eyes tired from lack of sleep and grief. “We will call the hospital, we will call the doctor. Please let the baby go. It’s a body with nothing inside it. It’s not ours to keep anymore,” he said.

“It? It? It’s not IT. It’s my baby. It’s our baby. Don’t you dare call it IT,” she’d said and started to cry again.

Triveni had thought of calling the police, call someone who could understand, but he was ashamed of what people would say about her and about him. They’re desperate! They’re crazy, they’d say. They are mentally sick.

Triveni was a Brahmin by caste, a pundit, and even though he wasn’t a very devout one, he knew the basics of Hindu rituals. Once the prāṇa, the life, has left the body, the body must be discarded—cremated at a holy place like Haridwar. The body needed to be given to the Brahma by being placed on the ground, offered to Shiva by being burned in the fire and then finally to Vishnu when the ashes are scattered into the water, so that the soul could move to another world.

But there was an exception. If the body had spent less than five years in the world, it must never be cremated. The body of a child hasn’t formed a soul which commits paap, an offense on the self, which is why a child is considered innocent. The soul doesn’t need to earn punya, get rid of the paap, so the body doesn’t need to be burned. Since there is no soul, it doesn’t need riddance from the cycle of birth and death.

Mira was relentless and wouldn’t let go of the dead body. The entire house had the stink of the baby that wasn’t theirs anymore. It had gone to another world, belonged to someone else.
“You don’t have to get rid of the body. We don’t have to burn it,” he said. Which is when Mira looked up at him.

“What can we do?”

“The baby can be buried,” he’d said.

“No. I will not let you take Rupa away from me,” she’d said.

“But you can’t keep her. Rotting flesh can give us diseases, it can kill us,” Triveni said, using logic that she understood for the first time in five days after Rupa’s death.

“Then what are we to do? You will bury her in some sad place no one cares for her? Will that make you happy?”

“We will not bury her just anywhere. We will keep her close to us,” he said. And she understood. “But we can’t do it here. We’ll have to leave town, get away from all the questions that will be asked,” he said.

And that night, they left their village for Sunderwala, a tiny village in northern India that they had never heard of and where an acquaintance of his had arranged to live.

It was Janpal Singh who helped Triveni. There was no one else he could think of. He wasn’t a good friend of Triveni, but their fathers had been friends and he knew that his own father had done some favors for his. Things that can’t be talked about in front of people. Which is why when Triveni requested Janpal to not tell anyone about this move, he had agreed. He knew instances such as these always went in a debt register. Triveni was now taking care of their
son Ranu, who was a tenant of theirs. He was aware of the rules—you have to give back in some form.

Since the time they moved to Sunderwala, Triveni had been sure someone would find out about their secret, would come after them, but ten years had passed, and no one had been able to find out. Although, Triveni had hoped it would be a new life, it wasn’t. It was mere transference of the old grief to a new place.

They had buried their daughter, Rupa in the backyard, and each morning they woke up to it, a mound in the soil like a grave of a dead bird. For ten years, Mira and Triveni watched it, with both a certain relief that they hadn’t completely lost their daughter and a sadness she wasn’t with them.

Triveni could never forget that day when they’d carried the dead body, not like a dead body, wrapped in a plastic sheet, but securely like a live thing in soft linen. The child’s face covered, revealing only eyes that were closed. Triveni had borrowed someone’s car at great expense and had driven for ten hours with Mira in the back seat and the smell of the rotten flesh in it.

Even now, when Triveni thought about that day, he wondered if, even in the dead of the night, people who saw them drive by were aware of the odor of death and nervousness inside the car. They may have sensed something strange but when they’d have seen it was just a couple with a baby, they’d have been convinced of their harmlessness.

There was a certain belief that having a baby made people less dangerous, more moral probably because they suddenly had the responsibility of a life thrust upon them. They hadn’t
talked to each other throughout the journey. Mira, as usual, hadn’t eaten anything, and was only living on some water.

While driving, Triveni had thought about how all this could have been avoided, but he realized it could not have been. Mira’s grief came from the fact that she blamed herself for the death of their baby.

When Rupa was born to Mira, the doctors told her that she’d not be able to feed their baby, that she’d have no milk. Triveni had asked Mira why she thought the baby’s death was her fault? The baby, after all, had a bad case of pneumonia. They had done their best. They’d consulted every possible doctor in town, every Ayurvedic practitioner, tried every home remedy.

But it was no one’s fault. Not hers, not his, for not trying hard enough. It had happened so quickly. Even weeks before her death, Rupa had been perfectly well. A healthy, three-kilo baby with red cheeks that were the sign of good health. Triveni could tell she had her mother’s eyes and his lips. People thought differently, but what did they care? They’d had her after ten years of marriage and although the doctors had been able to cure Mira of her infertility, they couldn’t do anything about the fact that she couldn’t feed the baby. That’s where Mira’s doubts had started. She thought she was an unwomaned woman, one who didn’t deserve the joy of motherhood.

This had made her possessive of Rupa and she’d grown over worried. In a way Triveni wasn’t surprised by Mira’s strong reaction to baby’s death, he just had to accept it, and he did.

After the death of the child, there had been nothing to suggest that they couldn’t have a baby again if they tried, but Mira said she didn’t want one anymore, that if she bore another child, it was going to die just like their first one. There was no evidence of that, doctors had said. She could, if she wanted, bear a child—she was only forty. But even the doctors couldn’t say for
sure how long it could take to conceive. Five, ten, fifteen years. But the fact was, that Mira had chosen to make grieving the goal of her life not the pursuit of having a child and Triveni couldn’t do anything about it.

But ten years was a lot of time and they were still young and one of the days when they were both sitting in the yard, looking at that slight bump in the earth, small as a bird’s grave, Triveni decided he didn’t want to be sad. It was a decision and he was going to honor it. He realized that one of the reasons Mira had been sad for so long was also because he had been party to her sadness. He knew that if he wanted, as a husband, he could cure Mira of that sadness.

He decided that each Saturday and Sunday he’d make himself adept in the art of hunting. He was sure that when Mira would see this distraction of his, the effort he was making to not cling on to his past, she would make an effort too. He would set an example, he decided. He would slowly take the energy out of Mira’s grief.

Triveni didn’t know why he thought of hunting as something he could do. It wasn’t in his nature to kill. There had been no reason for it, but he was sure he’d wanted to do something that was unlike him. He didn’t want to raise chickens—he was already raising plants, he didn’t want to go back to the normal work routine in a bank, they had enough rental units to not worry about having a job, so, he would hunt.

Perhaps, he’d thought that by picking a gun and pointing at something, it would be easy to face the fear and sadness that had lived inside him. For over ten years, he had believed that if he let it be, there’d come a day when everything would be back to normal. That time could cure
even something as big as a death. But in time, he realized it wasn’t enough to sit around and wait for grief to leave.

The next morning, Triveni started his morning as he usually did all mornings: with tea and biscuits and a chair in the backyard, while Mira worked in the kitchen. She liked to keep herself occupied, fill her head with thoughts of work.

While she was at work, Triveni couldn’t be completely without it. Since there was no routine of an office to be followed, there was a routine he had carved for himself. Routine gave an illusion of control over life, even though there was much in his life that he had not been able to control. But that’s what it is, an illusion. He knew the truth beyond that. The truths that were hard for him to see.

Like the truth of hunting. He knew that if he did it not for recreation, not because he found joy in the act of killing but for a purpose, like getting himself and his wife back on track, then there was nothing wrong in it.

It was a pity that that purpose could not be meat, which seemed nobler than anything else he could think of. Animals killed animals to stay alive, one life depended on another. Everyone killed in order to survive.

Neither he nor Mira ate meat but wasn’t growing vegetables, tending to them and then killing them to turn them into food a complex variation of hunting? Granted it was bloodless, without the loud sound of killing, but that didn’t mean it was hurtless. If we don’t recognize a wound, did not mean it wasn’t there.

As he drank the tea with traces of ginger root floating to the top and looking at the expanse of things that would finally land on their dinner plate, the tomatoes, the peas, the
pumpkins, the green chillies, he knew plants could feel and even though they did not bleed in the way humans and animals, the beings with nervous system bled, they did make a snap sound when you plucked them. That wasn’t any different from the breaking of a bone in the human body, was it?

Even in his mind, even as he was doing it, comparing the snap sound of plucking a green chilli to the broken bones of a chicken seemed ridiculous to him. But he was trying to make the idea of taking up hunting easy on himself, easy on Mira, even. He knew she would argue how he could kill something when his own young daughter had died. Somehow that could be used as an argument for everything, and Mira did it all the time.

But he realized if he convinced her to take up a hobby too, something soft. Stitching or knitting, they she probably wouldn’t mind him doing whatever he wanted. He decided he’d not think about it and tell her when the time was right. Mira had hidden a huge chunk of her grief within her for the last ten years and he had been nothing but understanding of it. What difference would it make to her if he was also hiding something within him. It’d be like water that was always present in the well, but never visible.

Triveni was well aware that the idea of hunting hadn’t come out of thin air—it must have always been there, hidden in some part of his mind. That night, while Mira was in the kitchen, he went to the source of it, into the store room, where the gun he had inherited from his father was stored.

Inherited was a wrong word because it had belonged to his father, who, in Triveni’s memory had never hunted either, but possessed a gun at a time when it was rare to have a gun.
When his father died, it had just come to him, without him having asked any questions or without the ability to say no.

People had said he was lucky to have that gun, it was a rare thing to have, but it was no use to him. In fact, the only thing that had kept him from selling it off was that it belonged to his father and the sentiment he attached to it was the same sentiment he attached to anything that his own daughter, if she had lived would have attached to things he’d have given her.

It was as though, the desire to hunt, which, to be clear, wasn’t the same as the desire to kill, had come from this gun, he was sure. Mira had known about this gun and it meant to her the same thing it meant to Triveni—a mass of metal that killed, a family possession that was useless but important in ways only those who inherited understood.

But it was one thing to touch a gun to transport it and another to touch it with a desire to kill. When he lifted the air rifle in his hand, Triveni could feel the difference in him. Was it that will to be able to decide someone’s life and death that had brought the difference in him? In that moment, he realized it wasn’t an ordinary thing. It was unlike anything he had inherited. It was not a land, the gold or silver, not precious stones that just lay there to make one feel rich. It was something that could be held in the hands and used to fulfill a purpose, a desire, exact revenge. He had no idea if it even worked, but he kept his hands away from the trigger. A part he had learnt from watching TV always led to consequences.

He knew he should feel shame, what did he, a Brahmin’s son had to do with a gun? But it was this same wisdom of a pundit, a Brahmin, that made him realize that there need not be any shame in it. It was a thing that had been made to exist in the world and had equal rights to exist as anything else. It existed to be hated as he had done so far, to be loved as he would from now.
It was almost eleven in the night and he wondered what would happen if he directed the gun up at the sky and pulled the trigger. Would anyone know it was him? Does a gun in one hand sound different than in a different set of hands? Does a gun in a set of hands command more fear than in a set of different hands? The longer he held the gun in his hands, the more questions arose in his mind and the clearer the answers to those questions became.

With the gun in his hand, it wasn’t just the questions of his own future that seemed to get clearer, it was also the questions concerning Mira’s. Would Mira take up knitting and stitching with the same kind of enthusiasm that he had holding the gun?

He was trying to kill his grief by using a gun. It was an action, a violent one, involving movement and what he wanted Mira was to do the opposite of movement: sitting still and engaging herself. He wondered what took one away from grief faster, movement or stillness? While he was out hunting and Mira was in the front yard, with his knitting, would it remind her of their dead daughter or would it cure her of grief?

But before the gun goes off there is always a silence, a stillness. One can’t shoot without that stillness. He couldn’t think of that kind of quick succession like the one that happened with the act of hunting. It happened sometimes with flames, he thought. The all-powerful, that can can kill and also rid the soul of the cycle of death and birth.

It was late. He kept the gun back and hid it from Mira, who had for so long, hidden it from other people. It was right next to a broken umbrella and the box of tools. There was an old curtain on it, a sort of a cloth that he guessed Mira had thrown on it to make it less visible, but had not succeeded in doing so. The gun rested on its stock, and its barrel, even under the old

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cloth that Mira had thrown on it casually, seemed formidable. A cold ran through Triveni. He decided to go to bed and save the secret in his heart.
CHAPTER THREE

Rajeev was there. At the airport, about to undertake another leg of his journey, inching closer to the point of no return. For once, everything about the airport that usually bothered him, did not bother him at all. Strangers with travel anxiety, breathing in the same cold space as you, their wheeled bags sticking to them like their children and going past you like rogue cars on the road. Generally, it all made him nervous, gave him a bout of anxiety. But not this time. He was nervous, but he was glad to be there. How else was he going to find Lata? What other way was there? It was like a stage of life one had to go through to get to the next. He had to trust the journey. He knew he’d get there.

His phone buzzed, and he felt his abdominal aorta beating. It’s a funny thing to feel emotions in your stomach. A biological response, Rajeev had read somewhere, to stress. The brain takes the blood away from the body to tackle supposedly life-threatening situations leaving the stomach in distress.

It was Stephen, with his “take your time, I understand” text. Since Rajeev had unlocked the phone, there came an urge to call his father-in-law, and he did. And then he called Lata and Lata Mom, but there was no response. He was strangely relieved at this status quo. Not at the disappearance of his wife but at the fact that in a span of a few hours, nothing had changed, which was a good thing. His wife had left him, what worse could happen?

An airport, like a temple, is a place of rituals. You could call the TSA agents priests, but that would be taking it too far. There is something in the order things are supposed to be done, the perfectness of that order was like a prayer. There were no bags to check so, Rajeev went straight to security. For a second, like all men of his color, he worried he hadn’t shaved, but then
realized he had because it had been a work day. He removed his shoes while he was still in the queue and the sweater and jacket. He did everything sooner than he was expected to. He didn’t want to give the security personnel any chance to stop him even though, he had never been stopped at the airport and yet sometimes, even a casual remark from a security personal, who complimented him on his “funky socks” seemed like an intrusion. But he managed to stay calm. He hoped the TSA agents didn’t spot the nervousness on his face. They weren’t observant enough. Grief ran deeper than anxiety and, they didn’t care about it.

Lata had no travel anxiety and often put weird, questionable things in her bag. Once, when they were going through the security checkpoints and she was asked to pull out a packet of chopped green chilies from her bag, something she always kept fearing tasteless food. Why did we need security checkpoints, Rajeev thought? Because people are never what they pretend to be. They are never what they say they are. Even friends and husbands and wives.

Once through the security checkpoint, he took a seat near the boarding gate, he still had an hour. Usually, he’d go through his mails. There was never enough time to get the work done, but somehow it didn’t feel right to be caring about work when he should be thinking about other things. About his wife, who he may never see again. But didn’t the common wisdom suggest that work was an antidote to grief? But he wasn’t grieving, he wasn’t exactly sad. He was, probably, despite not feeling it, just anxious or even afraid, something he wasn’t willing to admit.

People around him looked at their screens as though deep in some rapturous dream, but Rajeev put his head on his bag, which he’d balanced on his legs and closed his eyes.

Closing one’s eyes doesn’t always lead to sleep but it’s a state most suited to sleep. Which is why one never hears of people falling asleep with their eyes open. It had something to
do with withdrawing into one’s own world. Most of the engagement with the world is visual and when the eyes are closed, you feel no obligation to engage, which is why one is taken to a more private place, that of dreams, which is what happened with Rajeev.

In his dream, Rajeev and Lata were both in their village, Sunderwala. Lata and he, they were both alone, in a forest. They were in the middle of it all. Its thickness, the darkness that comes when the leaves are determined to keep everything out. They couldn’t see anything outside the forest, only the tall sal trees. There was no mistaking those trees. They were in Sunderwala, his village. Their village. A tiny place of cold nights and warm days and from where mountains looked like someone guarding their dreams. He had been to those forests many times before and they were a part of his constitution. When he thought of home, he thought of those forests, where leaves never shed. Sal trees make a promise to you and they keep that promise. They stayed green, leaves glued to the branches, never abandoning them. On one of these trees, there lived a bird and he could hear it, but he couldn’t see it like he had one day of December when he was just eleven.

In Rajeev’s dream, Lata was perched upon a sal tree like it was her home. He asked Lata in his dreams if she was the bird. But she’d said no. She didn’t say no because she couldn’t speak, but she shook her head. What if she’d lied and she was the bird? But Rajeev believed she could not because Rajeev would have caught her lie.

The tree swayed with the wind, but that did not bother Lata, who was still sitting on top of it and very much at home. As though, like a bird, the tree was her home. Rajeev asked her why she was sitting there, and he asked her to come home, but she said she didn’t mind it and Rajeev could tell she wasn’t lying.
She sat on top of the tree like it was the most natural thing to do. She could have lived all her life on that tree and not complain. For a second, Rajeev thought she was eating something. He was on the ground and so far away from her that it was hard for him to say what she was eating. But when he paid attention, he realized she wasn’t eating but moving her mouth to say something, but Rajeev couldn’t hear her. It occurred to him that he could climb the tree and ask her what the matter was. He placed his foot on the coarse skin of the tree but could not climb up. He tried several times over, but his shoes were too slick, and he kept slipping. His dream ended at that unsuccessful point. His hands were on the coarse surface of his American Tourister bag and his feet were in his office shoes, which felt tight because his feet had swollen a bit. There was no forest around him.

This wasn’t the first time he’d had a dream about a bird. It was a slice from his past. If every memory of his childhood was arranged in a stack, the bird would be at the bottom of that stack, holding other memories. It’d stand out, like the black spots on the moon.

Before the bird had appeared in his dream, it had been a part of his reality. He couldn’t forget that day when he first went looking for the bird. He was only eleven and it was September. He had never laid eyes on this unnamed bird. He knew it existed because he’d heard it sing, but like his mother’s cooking or the heart, it was one of those things he never saw happen. But he knew they occurred quietly, invisibly, but surely.

Although, he’d never seen it, he was sure the bird lived in the thick lime bush outside his room, in his backyard. He was, of course, wrong because deep down he knew the bird sang in the sal jungle but as an eleven-year-old, he wanted to hold on to his facts. He wanted to believe that the bird was close to him, so close that if one day he called her, she would fly into his room. He had no idea what he would do when it did come into his room, but that’s all he wished at that
age—to be able to see the voice he had heard. It never happened, but the bird sang each day and like the heart, it always sang in the beats of two—put-pad, put-pad.

It was probably something more than curiosity, something else that had made him go in the search for that bird, as though it was holding some secret in its heart that he must know about. So, he did, that day in the month of September when he was eleven.

That day, like each day, he was on his way back from school. The fact that he decided to go after the bird was probably because it was a Friday and he didn’t have to complete his homework for the next day. Or the fact that he was wearing his father’s boots and he knew that the water-soaked leaves would not make their way to his socks and he probably felt sure of himself, more confident to face the secrets in the forest.

That day, he still remembers, how much his mother had fussed about letting him wear his father’s shoes, because for some reason, she thought Rajeev would lose them. She didn’t understand it wasn’t possible to lose one’s shoes, but that’s what he had to convince her of that day, and he did. He asked her mother to keep two extra rotis for him, in case it took him longer than usual and he also carried a bottle of water. They had an old Bisleri bottle which fit in his bag perfectly.

That wasn’t the first day he’d worn boots to school, but each time Rajeev had worn them to school, everyone had seemed very impressed with the way they looked. They were black and made of good quality plastic and each time Rajeev wore them, he didn’t know how to tell the boys at school what they were missing out on. And he was sure that the boys could tell, from the way he walked and his demeanor that he had something they did not possess.
Just like he remembered the bird, Rajeev remembered that each time he wore the boots, the boys were extra nice to him, very kind, and he couldn’t think of the reason to be anything else other than what he was wearing on his feet. He must have looked intimidating to them. An eleven-year-old boy with the feet of a grown man. Whatever it was, it made him feel good, it made him stand out and one could even say, gave him the courage to turn a left towards the jungle instead of a right to his home.

It had not been a hard decision to make, a left in front of Lallu Chacha’s grocery shop in the village. He was chacha, father’s younger brother, for everyone. He was the man with large eyes and hated by children and loved by women because of the quantities of bitter gourds he carried in his grocery store.

It was Rajeev’s wish as a child that he should wake up one day and all the bitter guards should disappear from the world. For once, Rajeev wondered if in those shoes, in that avatar of his, he could make Lallu Chacha disappear forever, along with those bitter gourds of his. But that wasn’t possible, he knew, what was possible was he seeing the bird, the creature he’d heard sing for such a long time.

The difference, Rajeev realized, sitting at the boarding gate area, between a boy and a man was wonder. As a child, he’d wanted to find that bird out of sheer curiosity. He’d believed that there was a secret about the bird that would be revealed to him only when it was visible to his eyes. It wasn’t a search driven by the ego of a grown man who sees the world as something he must conquer, as something that must give in to him because he was a man.

It was probably why he’d felt so angry about the loss of Lata. It wasn’t the fact that he’d lost her—no doubt that was the reason—but the fact that she had come into his life with his
permission and didn’t need it when she left. But Rajeev was glad that on that day of September, he was just a child, not the man he now was. The truth would have been less clear to him if he had been.

On that day when he first saw the bird, in those boots, Rajeev had felt the first time, that he wasn’t himself, but his father. But the fact that his feet were as big as his father’s wasn’t enough. It didn’t make him his father. It didn’t make him the thirty-year old man he was. The man roughed up by life’s experiences who knew right from wrong. But that day and even at that age, Rajeev didn’t feel like he had to know what was right from wrong. The question of wrong did not exist because the question of lie did not exist. He had to go looking for the bird because that’s what he felt he should do and that’s why, that day, he stepped into the forest for the first time ever.

It was 4pm in the watch his father had gifted him on his tenth birthday. It had a nylon strap and it was thirty-meter water resistant, which was perfect for Rajeev’s journey into the forest. He had to go into the forest and make it back home before it was too dark. It was September and the sun did not set until seven in the night, for which he was glad.

Everything in the middle of those trees was new to him. He had never known that leaves of a tree could carry water and sometimes even break from their weight. He had little idea that even after the monsoon, the soil stayed moist for a very long time. He didn’t know that forest could be a three-dimensional entity one could enter and not a flat picture that was there just to be stared at and to be watched. Each drop of water that fell from the leaves of the tree had a sound of its own. And the one that fell on the leaves was different from the one that crawled down the bark of the tree.
At first, he looked at every single tree, and wondered if he could spot the bird. He wasn’t following the bird’s voice, and like a child, had hope from every branch. But as he walked further into the forest, soaking the soles of his boots into the muddy monsoon water, he realized that his feet were following the singing of the bird that came from deep inside the forest. As an eleven-year-old, it was hard for him to gauge the depth of the forest. He had only ever seen them on Discovery Channel or National Geographic but he knew when it got darker, there was more of the forest and when there was light there was less of the forest.

He walked toward where there was more of the forest. Why else, he knew even as an eleven-year-old boy, would the bird want less of anything? Why would it make easy for anyone to find her? The rules of hide-and-seek wasn’t to make it easier, it was to make it harder. He decided he had to go into the heart of it all, where he was sure the bird lived.

As he walked further into the forest, it became hard to tell the barks from the leaves, insects from flowers. What he thought was a grasshopper was just a leaf and what he had thought of as a fruit of a tree had been a mothball. Rajeev didn’t remember feeling any fear. There was a fear of disappointment, but not that of the unknown. Not that day, at least. As an eleven-year-old, even with that imagination, he couldn’t imagine the worst that could happen to him. It was an unknown place in a village he lived. He could find his way in and it was just a bird. What could go wrong?

There was a whiff of rottenness in the leaves, and it grew stronger the further into the forest Rajeev went. It wasn’t the kind of smell that comes from the kitchen when his mother cooks, this was something that he could smell even when he covered his nose with his hand, but it was as though, the ghost of a smell made it through his hands. But he walked and walked on the muddy road of the forest, without caring about dirtying his feet because he had the boots on.
It wasn’t something he understood as an eleven-year-old, or at least not in the way he now did but a forest was like a chakravyuh, a concentric circle of defenses mentioned in Mahabharata. Abhimanyu, the son of Arjun, learnt how to break into the chakravyuh while he was still in his mother’s womb. He was a natural warrior. Although, Rajeev didn’t flatter himself with such compliments, but the defenses of the forests were not very different than that of a chakravyuh. They were layered and often not visible to the person entering them.

In Mahabharata, the ancient Hindu text, Abhimanyu was the son of Arjuna, who led the great war. Arjuna was married to Sri Krishna’s sister Subhadra and sometimes during one of their many excursions, he told her about the stories of war. While she was pregnant with Abhimanyu, Krishna told her about Chakravyuhah, a military formation, a circular grid a type of defense that made it hard for the enemy to win. However, as the story goes, Subhadra found the story boring and fell asleep while Krishna was still narrating it. But Abhimanyu listened and understood everything Krishna had said. However, when Krishna did not receive any response from Subhadra, he stopped. Although, Krishna had narrated the technique of entering the sixth circle, he did not mention the technique of entering the seventh.

But Abhimanyu committed this to his memory and when he grew up to be a warrior himself, he was called on to fight the enemies and break the formation. Even though he had learnt to break the six grids, he had no knowledge of breaking the seventh one. Knowing this weakness of his, he was killed by the enemies.

It’s the same with the forests, Rajeev knew, in fact more difficult. You can kill people in a war formation, and they were never going to come back to bother you, but not only is a forest hard to break into, whatever it is that protects the forests, doesn’t die. It becomes more formidable when you are trying to get out. Once in, you couldn’t always guarantee that you’d
come out. As an eleven-year-old, Rajeev understood that a jungle isn’t a two-dimensional entity, like it is in the picture, it’s a living thing that can be as big as your mind understands it to be.

A forest is deceptive. It welcomes you when you first come in and then as you spend too much time in it, walking to its core, it begins to see you as an intruder and then doesn’t let you go. Rajeev did not realize that the forest was deeper than he’d thought, as though it was multiplying with itself, like an amoeba.

This forest was nothing like he had seen on the television. Those on National Geographic or Discovery Channel that were fraught with water bodies. He hadn’t expected to see a tiger or an elephant, but he had expected a surprise. And just when he thought the forest was multiplying, it ended. Now he could see the other side of it—less of forest, more of sunlight. He was disappointed.

Rajeev had come prepared and he’d expected there to be something worth telling his friends when he got back. He hadn’t even walked enough to feel hungry, although he had taken a few sips of water from his Bisleri bottle. Once he knew that he was towards the end of the journey, he could either go around the forest or go through it once more, looking for the bird, which still sang, although it felt like it was far away from him. He must have missed it, he thought, because he surely did hear it when he was walking. When he did not find the bird and had to walk back through the forest, the exciting journey became a thing that he must do, and he didn’t want to do.

He felt tired at the things he had to do for no reason. It was like his mother insisting on making him eat bitter gourd because she thought it was healthy. It was the things we must do, that annoyed the eleven-year-old in him. The things that we wanted to do, like watching TV and
eating sweetmeats and walking aimlessly were the things that were fun. Which was when he lost the heart to find the bird. He sipped water from his bottle and decided to walk back home, toward where he could see the light instead of the dense forest.

That day and many days after, Rajeev imagined that bird. The bird, no different than the aero plane he was about to board. He imagined the bird in many forms. It could be small, like a sparrow because its voice certainly suggested it. Or it could be a bird with the head of an eagle and enormous wings but a slight voice. Or it could be a cross between two things like a dinosaur that could fly.

He wondered if his search for Lata was going to be as futile as his search for that bird. He knew he couldn’t answer that question just yet. All he knew was that unlike that eleven-year-old boy who’d rejected what he must do and embraced what he wanted to do, as a thirty-year-old man, he needed to do what he needed to do. Duty had become more important than fun. He tried not to fall asleep because if he dreamt of Lata, he’d miss her even more. He decided he’d wait with his eyes wide open, when it was hard to sleep.
CHAPTER FOUR

It was a Sunday morning and on Sunday mornings, there was nothing better Triveni liked than sitting in the sun and drinking tea. Sunday mornings were special too because he got to chat with his tenant Ranu, Janpal’s son, who had come to Dehradun to study. After what Janpal had done for him, Triveni had promised him he’d do anything for Janpal when the time came and keeping his son as a tenant at no cost was a very small way of paying back what Janpal had done for him.

Whenever Ranu came to spend time with them, Mira got him a cup of tea too. Ranu talked about college and how the upcoming elections were a nuisance and did nothing to cure the state the country was in. They were probably one-third way into their teas, transparent cups in their hands that Triveni, who had still not forgotten about the silhouette of the rifle under that curtain, thought to ask Ranu, who, although only twenty, talked intelligently about things.

“Have you ever hunted?” he asked Ranu, deciding not to mention the gun yet. It wasn’t unnatural for Ranu and Triveni to break into conversations about ideas and things and mythologies. Do you know who made the first painting? Do you know what shape is a drop of rain? Do you know which was the first supercomputer?

“Hunted what, uncle?” Ranu said. His tone was casual, still far away from the tension in Triveni’s head. Could he tell, what Triveni was thinking? Could he, at such a young age ever gauge the complexity of what was going on in Triveni’s head? Ranu had the intelligence but not the experience of gauging what lay underneath the scaffolding of Triveni’s question. This made it easier for him to talk to Ranu and hide things from him. He knew Ranu didn’t know about their daughter who was buried in the backyard. Assuming that Ranu’s father had told him Triveni’s
story before he moved here, Ranu would never be interested in finding out why they had moved here.

“Anything,” Triveni said. Trying hard to not bring what was in his heart to the surface.

“Hunting rabbits, animals, birds?”

“Yes. Yes. Have you?”

“No uncle. Although, in our village, it’s not uncommon.” Ranu was smiling. He hadn’t hunted, but Triveni could tell he’d thought about it.

“Not uncommon? What do people in your village hunt?”

“Birds. Teetar, they call it. My older brother. Much older with wife and kids. He does it sometimes. Goes out in the fields or the jungle with the gun.”

“Gun? You have a gun?”

“Yes, my brother does. He keeps it hidden, under his bed, like a secret.”

“Does it fascinate you? The gun?”

There was a little chill in the air. The sal trees swayed as though they might fall any time. But both Ranu and Triveni knew that wouldn’t happen. It was just a ploy to make their presence felt. Ranu was inching towards the end of his cup. He swirled the liquid in it, to mix the sugar settled at the bottom and took the last swig.

“I picked it once in my hand. When I was fifteen. I felt a very strange kind of power in me. At fifteen I felt like I couldn’t handle that power.”

“What kind of power?”
“It was the sort that overtakes you if you are not careful, you know. Something that goes beyond your will.”

“Was the gun loaded?”

“No. I don’t think it was. I don’t think my brother is so stupid as to do that.”

“It’s heavy, isn’t it? The gun?”

“It can kill, uncle. It would be a joke if it wasn’t heavy. The feathers of a bird aren’t heavy. They don’t kill people.”

“But poison can and it’s hardly even visible.”

“But what kind of a man would kill with poison? I don’t consider killing with poison killing. I think it’s cheating someone into death.”

“If you have a gun, give the man a chance to fight?”

“Yes, uncle! You think like I do.”

Ranu had surprised Triveni with his insight and each time he talked to Ranu, he uncovered a new layer of his personality.

“So, have you never hunted. Not even without the gun?”

“Is that what you really want to know? I think you want to know if as a young man I have ever killed anything and how I felt?”

“I guess you could say that. We can change the subject if you like. Anytime. You are like my son, I don’t consider any kind of talk with you taboo. But I don’t want to force you to talk about unpleasant things. It’s a beautiful day.”
“Even though I have never used a gun, I have tried to hurt a bird with a slingshot.”

“You tried? And?”

“It flew away.”

“Were you just trying to hit it or kill it?”

“I was just trying to hit it. Why kill something unless you have to?”

“But then, why did you hit? You couldn’t have not assumed it could have died had you hit it?”

“I guess there are those of us, who don’t think of bird as something living but a moving aim,” Ranu said. He looked at the empty cup in his hands as though doubting his own wisdom.

“You are right. The hunter never thinks of the thing its pursuing as anything else but. Isn’t that a tragedy? Give me that cup. Let me keep it on the table for you.”

“This is how things are. There is a hierarchy in the world that’s hard to disturb. Anyone with a privilege is a hunter, uncle. Don’t you think so?”

“As much as I would like to disagree with you, the truth is that you are right.”

“But I am still opposed to hunting. Let me tell you a story, uncle. A very interesting story about a hunter and two birds. It is just a story and it has no moral and it’s not mine,” Ranu said. Triveni liked this about Ranu. This immense knowledge. His ability to gossip wisely.

“Go for it, beta.”
“Once there lived a hunter who was a bad man. Now, uncle, I am not saying that all hunters are bad and if you became a hunter, you will be a nice one, I can tell you that,” Ranu said and laughed.

“You don’t have to say that, Ranu. Go on with the story. I don’t have a lot of time,” Triveni said.

“Sorry, uncle. Okay. So, this hunter was a very bad person. Not only because of the fact that he was a hunter and killed animals, but also because he was a bad man and treated people badly. So, one day, he went into the jungle and while he was still hunting, it started to rain really hard. He was still in the forest and couldn’t go home, so, he stood under a tree and asked the god to help him. He said, ‘Whoever resides in this tree, please give me shelter. I am cold and hungry.’ The male dove that lived on the tree was worried that his wife wasn’t home yet and he was afraid that she may have been caught by someone, so he said: ‘I can’t provide you shelter because my wife is not home yet and a home is not home without a woman.’ The male dove had only said this once that the female dove, who was in the cage the hunter carried spoke. ‘Don’t deny a guest shelter. Don’t hate him because he has caged me. I am here because of my past karma. Everything that a person lives is as a result of their past actions. Give this man shelter and do good,’ the female dove said. The male dove heard his wife and agreed to give shelter to the hunter. But the hunter was greedy. When the hunter asked the male dove to protect him from the cold, so, the male dove got a piece of burning coal and dropped it on some twigs that were still dry. But the male dove said, ‘I am sorry I can’t provide you with any food because I have none. I don’t want to send my guest back hungry.’ Saying this, the dove entered the fire so, the hunter could eat it. The dove’s wife who was caged, broke it and followed her husband and both died. Seeing this the hunter had a change of heart and gave up everything and started to live as a
tapasvi in the jungle and one day, to repent for all the bad things he had done in his life, he threw
himself in a forest fire, too.”

“That was the saddest story I have ever heard. Everyone dies!” Triveni said.

“Sorry uncle. I lied. And you know what the moral is.”

“Okay. Okay. I wasn’t serious about hunting anyway,” Triveni said. He wasn’t convinced
by his own answer, but he didn’t pursue the argument.

And with that agreement, Triveni was certain that the mixed feelings he was feeling were
not his own. It was in the nature of killing itself and the instrument you used to kill.

Human beings had forgotten to kill because they didn’t need to kill for food or didn’t
have to do it themselves. But think of the butcher, and he’d tell you the truth about killing. But
Triveni knew he’d never have to go to the butcher to know the truth. He somehow knew it.
Killing anything wasn’t right, but he knew if he did, he’d become a different man. He’d kill a
bird, he’d kill a rabbit and kill it with the gun, not dirty his hands. He’d not be the primal man
who killed with hands but that who imagined that just because he hadn’t touched his kill, it made
him more powerful.

He was aware of the delusional, faulty man he was about to become, but he didn’t mind.
Ranu had left. He had to meet with his friends, he’d said. In some hours or days, he’d forget
what they’d talked about. Triveni was left alone, with two empty tea cups and sal trees that
threatened to fall, but never would.
Triveni may have found a distraction, but there was no denying that the evidence of their grief was still very close to them, right in their backyard, the mound, as big as a bird’s grave or as small.

That night, when they’d reached Sunderwala with their dead child, he had had no inkling of how deep he was digging, how plane the grave was, nothing. All he was doing was honoring his wife’s will, keeping the dead child close to them. He was ashamed he’d thought of it like that: evidence of grief. Not their dead child that had meant everything to them, and who had died a death that no child should ever have to. But now he thought different. Was it the grave that was keeping them from coming to terms with their grief? How could he even think of digging that grave, of putting it away. What would his wife say?

_You are thinking of exhuming a dead body?_ Mira would be devastated. He looked around as though afraid she could read his thoughts, that were so despicable, so unthinkable. Of course, she wasn’t around him.

He had now gotten down to some work, in the vegetable patch, tending to the crop of tomatoes that looked rich like blood and even though he could see their child’s grave, far away from the patch in the corner of their yard, he decided Rupa could never go anywhere.

So, what could he do? Would the grief, that undeniably came from this dead body, buried right in their backyard, ever go away if he didn’t do anything to remove it, even though even the thought of exhuming the body made him ashamed.

_Or remove ourselves, and never look at it again_ his wife would say. But he knew that deep down she wouldn’t want to remove the memory she was still attached to. The physical evidence that she had a baby once. If that helped her live her life, who was he to question it?
But if he didn’t question it, who else would? He had taken care of her after the death of their child. There had been those nights, when she’d wake up screaming, calling their daughter’s name, assuming she was still there, like a phantom arm. Which is why they’d buried the baby close to them in the first place, which is why each night when Mira woke up from a bad dream, all that Triveni had to do was assure her that Rupa was still close to them, still in front of their eyes, in the backyard.

She thought of it as a physical possession and it was. It was a physical thing, a biological thing that went through the processes of decomposition. What, he wondered would have left of their daughter, under that soil? The skull, he’d read, survives for the longest time because it’s thick. The heart, he’d read goes the fastest. The soft skin, the eyes, all the flesh soft to the touch doesn’t survive with the grit and acid in the soil. But it doesn’t just disappear. It’s eaten by things not visible to us. The worms, the microbes, the bacteria, things a human imagination can’t make up. When alive, the body feeds on death and when dead, the life feeds on it. That’s how the cycle goes on. What bad was killing, in that sense? Whether with a gun or with bare hands? Isn’t everything going back to the soil, to be eaten by things we cannot see?

When the body has been eaten, the bones remain. And if the dead is lucky, they’d stay fossilized for millennia. To be dug out by people who come after it, to be studied how it died and even how it lived. Whether it had died of poisoning, gunshot or, like in their daughter’s case, pneumonia.

But a child’s body could not take as long as an adult’s? There was less of it to disappear, less of it to work on by the elements of nature. Would he find nothing if dug up now, save the silver bracelets that he’d bought for her? Nothing eats the metal. Metal never has any life to start with. The thought of exhuming the body scared him. The thought of seeing a completely
different creature than what he’d buried. Or was he worrying for no reason? Mira had said nothing and he was thinking way too much.

It was a cold night and Mira had decided to cook something special. For once, Triveni had wanted to ask if she was doing because she, like him, wanted to move on with the grief too? But he decided not to ask. She was making parathas and from his room, he could smell the home-made ghee.

When Mira called him for dinner, her voice sounded upbeat. He could talk to her about it if he wanted to. His hunting plans and how it’d been ten years and it was the right time for them to move away from the grief they had been carrying in their hearts.

In his head, Triveni tried to lay out a structure of the way he’d take the conversation. Praise, general talk about the garden and then something more directed about their daughter, who, he reminded himself, he should not address as it. For Mira, it wasn’t just a body.

The table looked sumptuous. The thought of a sumptuous dinner did not seem appealing to him. He was stressed by the thing he had to accomplish in such a small stretch of time. He was scared. It was the kind of fear that he’d gotten for a long time after they ran away with the dead baby. Even though they were hundreds of miles away from their old home, he was still scared that one day, someone would come to them and ask them why they had run away like that. Where their dead baby was? And that they had seen them carry the baby in the car. When enough time had passed, Triveni’s unreasonable fear started to go away. He knew that as time passed by, it was easy to dispute people’s memories, what they remembered about him. He’d
already made up a list of excuses for those who could ask him about their child, who everyone knew about, who was sick with pneumonia and on her death bed.

He’d tell them they’d taken the child to Delhi for treatment, that they had to do it overnight, but the hospital could not save their child and they never wanted to return to the same place that reminded them of their daughter’s death. No matter how many times Triveni tried to tell the story to himself, it always sounded convincing. There was something illogical in the way emotions of those who lose their loved ones worked and the world, to their advantage, never questions the way they operated.

The food was ready to be eaten and he was ready, with the sequence of conversation he was going to have with Mira. He was not going to, he decided, say anything about hunting. But he would gently ask her to try if she could, to leave her grief alone. She kept the best china plates they had in front of him and kept two parathas on the plate. He took some curd and pickle and kept a paratha on Mira’s plate as a gesture. She smiled and they ate.

“The food is excellent. You made this after such a long time. I thought you had forgotten to make them.”

It wasn’t as though it was all bleak between the two of them, no room for jokes. But what had made it harder after the death of their daughter was Triveni joking about something commonplace and Mira not responding to it. Not ignoring it, but not smiling with fullness like she used to. But it seemed to Triveni that it had all come back, that smile, that life in her that was in many ways unaffected by things outside.

“There is something I want to tell you,” Mira said. She was playing with the food on her plate and it seemed like she wanted to say it as soon as possible before something else stopped
her. Before she changed her mind. “I don’t know how you would take it. I want you to understand that whatever I say does not imply that I don’t love our daughter anymore. She will always be in my heart. She will always live there. I cannot forget what happened that day. But we have already been through a lot. Why go through more?

I don’t regret anything, but I am sorry what I put you through. But now I want to rid myself of this weight I have carried. I want to start anew. I don’t want a baby. I don’t think I have the courage to take care of one. But what I want is for you to remove the last remains of her memory. The physical remains. Last night I woke up in the middle of the night and I saw that mound. It’s so small. Because she was small. Just four months, not even ready to live a life. Why is there a mound, I thought? It may have been an accident, no? You probably see that mound each day, working on that vegetable patch. How inhuman of me to never think of that? Of insisting on having a dead body in our yard.” Mira said and started to cry. Triveni, who was sitting opposite her, got up and sat next to her.

“It wasn’t your fault. You were going through something difficult. And it’s not just a dead body, Mira. Dead or alive, that fact doesn’t change. That is the backyard is her physical form and that’s what you gave birth to, that’s what we fell in love with. It’s not just a body.”

“But it won’t be the same. It’s been ten years and the physical form of that child would have disappeared. It isn’t the thing that came out of my body anymore. It’d be a stranger. I don’t want it in our house. I don’t want to see that mound. I want us to start a new phase of living without her.”

Now that Mira had wanted exactly the same thing as him. He didn’t understand why he found himself opposing it. He thought that just like when the baby had died, Mira wasn’t
thinking right. She hadn’t gone through what he had gone through, with that dead body right next to him, digging and digging and digging. And he didn’t want to do it all over again. He wanted to tell her that they could live without it but there was no harm in letting it be. In having slight physical evidence of the fact that there was someone else in their life once except the two of them. But he understood why Mira wanted to not see that mound again. She felt just as he had felt.

“Will you make it go away? Don’t tell me anything about it. I don’t want to know. Just take care of it. I don’t want to see that mound again.”

The food had gone cold but the two of them didn’t mind. They ate. Triveni in a sort of satisfactory silence and Mira in a quietness that for the first time in years was lacking grief.

Even though it may have seemed like a permission to get their daughter out of the backyard, Triveni knew well it wasn’t. And even if it was okay with Mira, he was not going to do it. He would, he decided, plant a tree right where he’d buried their daughter.
CHAPTER FIVE

Waiting is an act of kindness. Sitting at the boarding gate, fresh out of his dream of Lata, Rajeev had thought that it was an act of kindness that was perhaps disappearing. Books get read in the waiting time, stories are written, people can fall in love when they are sitting among strangers, especially in a place like an airport where one could afford to look into the eyes of other people with time to spare which was directed towards nothing but waiting. But, perhaps, it wasn’t possible to wait in peace anymore, because of the phone.

Rajeev called the three of them again and thought of leaving a voice message on Lata’s WhatsApp and tell her how close he was to finding her. Was it possible, that like the dream she was able to hear him but not speak?

Rajeev should have been angry, but what use was anger when all he could do was wait. He was 7,311 miles away. Seven thousand three hundred and eleven miles was the approximate aerial distance between Memphis and Dehradun. He didn’t always know that number, and he didn’t deliberately commit it to his memory. But it was hard to separate distance from time. The more the distance the more the time. If sixteen hours seemed too long a time, then it didn’t make Rajeev feel any better that he was possibly seven thousand miles away from India.

Rajeev had even calculated the time it would take to cycle, walk, drive or drive to Dehradun. One hundred and twelve hours by car, and two thousand eight hundred hours on foot if he didn’t sleep, eat or didn’t attend to anything. Some Googling told him the number seven thousand three hundred and eleven miles was a sort of magic number. It was the approximate depth of Mariana Trench, and the average height of the Himalayas. The highs and lows, they aren’t very different from each other. Rajeev realized his mind was looking in the wrong places
for answers. He should have stayed away from the internet. Search bar after search bar, he was only building anxiety and not getting closer to what he was looking for. But what was he looking for? Some sort of a relief in his real world by tapping on his phone.

Lata didn’t like it when Rajeev did that. Monkey mind, she called him. It wasn’t as though she needed attention that Rajeev was giving to the phone, but she didn’t believe Rajeev could find any answers on the phone. She said looking for answers in the smart phone was like looking for a pearl in the ocean. *Do you know how many search pages Google could give you, how many words and how many ideas there were in those words? Which one of those do you think has your answer?*

Lata was right, Rajeev knew it. Needle in a haystack. But then, he’d ask her where he should look. And she’d ask him to close his eyes and if he didn’t find the answer, he could ask her. The only way to look out is to look in, she’d say. Rajeev, always eager to find an answer, would ask her what if he didn’t find an answer even after closing his eyes. “Then you look around,” she’d say. But then, he’d pick up his phone again and either laugh about it or tease her. But this time, he put the phone away and closed his eyes.

Under the darkness of those closed eyes, he thought about his father and the dream about that day he went after the bird. He could never have worn his father’s boots if it wasn’t for his mother. His father would not have liked it if he’d found out that Rajeev had used something that belonged to him. It wasn’t about the boots. The boots had no big significance to Rajeev’s father. It could have been a sweater or a bag if not the boots. Rajeev didn’t think his father liked the idea of a son, grown up and like him who wasn’t just an abbreviation of him, but an entity that could match him in some way.
But could that completely and reasonably justify why Rajeev’s father was never how fathers are to sons? Rajeev tried to remember that moment when he had been subtly disowned by his father. Was there an occurrence? An episode outside of the long instances of silence, the reason for which was, Rajeev thought, simmering hatred or was it indifference? Then he realized, words were hardly useful when things were made clear with actions.

But Rajeev always had hope. For his own sake, his interpretation of his father’s actions changed over time. There was even a time when Rajeev thought that probably, his father was one of those fathers who was strict as opposed to the more liberal ones who liked to eat ice-creams and cook food for their kids. At one point, Rajeev had even believed that it was his father’s style, a good way to prepare him for the world. In fact, in the years before his father’s death, Rajeev was convinced that was the case. But Rajeev was hopeful that there would come a point in their lives when his father would consider him ready for the world, ready to play the son.

Now sitting in the strangeness and distance of the airport and somehow closer to the intimate memories in his head, Rajeev knew that his father hadn’t been changing. He may have been looking for love if he ever saw traces of it, but it was never going to come like a big gift bestowed on him by the god.

Rajeev’s mother tried in her own ways to convince him that his father loved him, just like a father in some way is hardwired to love his children. What other argument could she give? But to present an argument was one thing, but to site everyday evidence to back it another. She couldn’t, even if she wanted to, list on a piece of paper the times his father had displayed his love for him. At some point, Rajeev may have given up, even if he wasn’t aware of it, he may have lost hope and after that everything between him and his father was inert, and that complete
absence of feeling where there were no complains in Rajeev’s heart and after that things were
generally okay.

Rajeev was scared to keep his eyes closed, somehow, each time he did it, he came away
with unpleasantness of memories. But what else could he do to avoid the awfulness his present if
not go back into the past? He decided that it was somehow less daunting on him to look around,
at the strangers, make up their lives in his head than close his eyes and think about his own.
Reality always falls short of imagination. That is the nature of reality and that is the nature of
imagination.
CHAPTER SIX

If only all problems in the world could be solved by planting a tree, Triveni would plant an orchard. But this hiding of things under the shade of trees didn’t seem like cheating. Planting a tree on the grave of their dead daughter seemed like a choice made to avoid not the less pleasant truth but the more dangerous fact.

As before, Triveni wasn’t to mention any of this to his wife. He had to do this all by himself and Mira would, without ever knowing the fullness of the facts would change the course of her own life. He felt alone in it for the first time in life. He understood that she was unwilling to share her grief but now that she was going to park her grief aside, she didn’t want him to be a part if it either? Had he become an instrument that took care of things that suited her life? Was he ever going to be anything separate from their dead child in her life?

Triveni thought these doubts as part of the difficult life they had lived together and decided that no matter what the case maybe they were both suffering or had suffered in their own ways and for him to match his own suffering to her’s was not only unfair but a rejection of what the bond entailed.

He had to think about practical considerations. Was exhuming the body the best thing to do? For him and for her and for their life? Should he just go with the suffering of taking this one difficult step as he had ten years ago, on the insistence of his wife or take the other way? Triveni did a very obvious thing that he did not think of before: what did he want to do? It was easy for him to answer that. He didn’t want to exhume the body. He didn’t want to undo what he had done. He didn’t want to go through that again. He couldn’t imagine it.
Planting a tree was also a matter of practical consideration, the first question being: which one and why? The first thing was to face his fear of trees. One of the reasons he did not have a tree in such a huge backyard was because he was afraid of the permanence of trees.

The fear had grown in him more ever since the death of their daughter. When they had moved to Sunderwala with a dead baby, he had always been prepared to move in case, someone from their other life identified them.

Another reason he was afraid of them was another reason that came out of their permanence: they were too big. They grew big by absorbing life around them. But now that’s exactly what Triveni wanted from them: to grow so big that they stole even the smallest strain of life around them. In a few years, it would be hard to tell human remains from trees and roots from the soil.

Would any tree do? Should the trees bear fruits? Was it a practical thing to consider? No, he decided. He couldn’t completely shake the fact that whenever they consumed a part of that tree, they would consume a part of their daughter.

If not the fruit trees, then what could he grow? He decided to go with a Neem tree with its lush leaves and medicinal qualities. It’s said that Neem trees make the air around them clean. He hated to think about it in those way. Was their dead daughter unclean?

If Triveni was going to plant the tree, he had to get used to the idea that their daughter was nothing but a body now. Something that had probably disappeared beneath that mound. He decided the only way to get out of this jail of questions bothering him was to engage himself in the practical matters: find a tree to plant.
Triveni had bought all the plants in his house from Mani Kumar’s nursery. It was amazing for Triveni to think that all the plants at their home were from there. They were born there and grew here and then were transplanted not very far from there and yet they grew embracing what they got. Never revolting. Never threatening to die. Tending to smaller plants was so much less intimidating than the big trees. The size of the trees scared him and at some point he realized they grew wildly, out of control. Did he still want a tree in his backyard? Yes, he decided he did.

Mani Kumar was in his work wear: Old pyjamas, kurta and rubber chappals. The rubber chappals had spent a lifetime on those feet and even in the slightly nippy cold of November, he insisted on wearing them. He had worn socks to go with them, but they were muddy and wet because of the moist soil around. He leaned over on a few plants, nipping some weeds from them. He was so engaged in what he was doing that Triveni thought it to be almost criminal to disturb him. He was engaged in some sort of meditation that only those with the purest form of love for something could understand.

“The news is you have something for me,” Triveni said, smiling knowingly at Mani. He walked towards Triveni and shook his hand, instead of joining them together—he was a friend of friend, he was a friend.

“Anything you want, brother,” Mani said, offering him tea and a seat. His nursery was an extension of his home. He lived there, he had found a way to make a living of it, he had made plants and flowers and trees his family even though he had no family to speak of. “What are you taking this time? Onions?”

“Mani bhai, I am here for a tree,” Triveni said.
“I have lots of trees here, you know. And if you can take them with you, please take them,” Mani said and laughed.

“Saplings or whatever you call it in nursery language,” Triveni said and laughed with him.

Triveni had always been fond of growing plants. He didn’t understand how people could overlook the magic of a seed turning into a tomato or a brinjal or a green chilli. How people could ignore the vastly selfless life of a plant. It doesn’t need much—water, that’s it. You could be generous and give it some fertilizer and it will grow taller and stronger, like a child, but that’s all it ever needed. And even though you may think that all that a plant needs is water, what it really needs is your commitment to it. Triveni had seen many dry gardens. People want fruits but they don’t want to water the plant. It’s with plants as it’s with more things with life.

It wasn’t merely a distraction from grief, for Triveni, it was more like a habit. How could one grow nothing but grass on a fertile land? The only purpose grass served was cosmetic. He had always seen a vegetable patch when he was growing up as a child and it was just an extension of his childhood. The sowing and reaping, the watering and weeding.

When he and Mira got to Sunderwala, he had started with planting the basics: green chilies, coriander, tomatoes, even garlic although tubers were always hard to plant.

“A tree. Suggest me a tree that I can plant,” Triveni said. “No fruits. No edible parts.”

“And why would you not want fruits of you labor?” Mani asked.

“Just tired of expectations, my friend. Who will sit around waiting for fruits?”

“You are making it tough for me, sir,” Mani said and smiled.
Mani took Triveni to the far end of the nursery where he kept all the trees.

“Peepal, banyan, neem, sal, gulmohar, kalpataru, Ashoka, bodhi. I can give you a list, but it depends on what you want the tree to do for you.”

“What do you mean, Mani?”

“Bhai sahib, if you want brinjal, you won’t plant tomato naa?”

“Yes, but I don’t want fruit trees, like I said Mani. You are not listening to me,” Triveni said.

“Sir, Now, let’s see, Ashoka tree. Again, it is you know, associated with love and all those things people do with their wives at night. Now, you already know about mango, but you don’t want it. It is an auspicious tree to plant, nevertheless. Then there is sandalwood. It will smell wonderful all around the plant. But they say it attracts snakes, so I would not recommend. This one, this is bael. Sivadruma, you must have heard of it. Offered to Shiva during poojas. Here’s banana. But I would not recommend. It doesn’t do very well in north India. Here’s Kalpataru, brings luck joy and lots of money. Banyan tree. It represents the Trimurti. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. It does not have shade, but it looks beautiful. A-ha! And it also helps women bear children.”

If only a tree could bring a child into the world. But the truth was Mira did not want a child. She was happy with the way things were now. And a banyan tree would be too big for their backyard anyway.
“I am not taking these for the fairyland, Mani. This is for the real world. My garden, the backyard. But I appreciate the stories you told him,” Triveni laughed. “Just give me the neem tree, I will stick with the tree of my childhood,” he said.

Instead of picking the healthiest-looking plant from his collection, he picked a tiny stem that was green and healthy but with no shoots coming out of it yet. The sapling was packed with a black plastic bag, to keep the soil and the moisture in.

“Here you go, sir! Leaves are best of skin problems. If you have too many mosquitoes, just burn the leaves. It also, although it may not interest you, wards off evil spirit. And you can also eat the fruits. This will grow big and strong with a lot of shade. Just plant it away from the house.”

“Arrey, but Mani, this looks like it will die even before I plant it. What’s the matter with it?”

“Sir, it’s perfectly healthy. Just plant it as soon as you go home. I assure you. If something, please get back to me,” Mani said.

Triveni took the small plant in the black plastic bag and left. He paid fifty rupees extra to the man.

When Triveni got back home from the nursery, it was almost time for lunch and Mira and Ranu were sitting out on the porch with their cup of teas and what looked like pakoras. It was an odd time for them to be sitting out because it was Thursday. He hadn’t expected Ranu to be here at this time of the day. Suddenly, Triveni felt like he was carrying a secret in his hands. Neither
knew anything about his plans to plant a tree. It wasn’t a bad thing in itself, but he didn’t want to bring up the reasons for doing what he was doing. He didn’t want to discuss any of the truths or lies with either of them.

“My lucky day, uncle! College over early and here aunty was sitting with a plate of pakoras. I am sorry, uncle. I know it must have been for you, but I already finished it.”

“Oh, nothing like that, Ranu beta. I will get some more,” Mira said. “Also, you are not going anywhere without having lunch,” she said.

Mira had left and it seemed like Ranu didn’t think anything suspicious about a mere plant, which relieved Triveni. He took his place in the chair and picked a pakora. The pakora was delicious, although a bit soggy. But Triveni ate it just to occupy himself with something, to distract himself from the slight nervousness. He hoped that Ranu wouldn’t see the nervousness in him.

“Uncle, if you are still thinking about hunting, I have good news.” Triveni kept the plant on the floor, beside the chair he was sitting in. It wasn’t very warm, so, he was sure the plant would not dry up.

“Yes, beta?” Triveni said, although his thoughts were around how Mira would respond to the fact that along with planting new life, a tree, Triveni had suddenly taken to the game of taking lives too? He thought about that night in the store room and it was hard for him to forget the thrill he’d gotten when he had held that gun in his hands.

“There is a shooting range right next to my college. My friend told me about it. Do you want to join it?”
“It wasn’t there when I was a student.”

“Probably came up only recently. I don’t know. But we must go there. It was so cool to see those people, with that gear, to have that power in their hands and practicing wielding that power. I wasn’t sure, uncle, but after seeing that shooting range, I am sure I want to try it. It’s not killing someone. It can be a sport, or it can be an art.”

“Art? Like painting?” Triveni asked. Although, as a Brahmin and having read the vedas and some Hindu texts, Triveni understood the matters of life and death, but his thinking wasn’t up to the mark when it came to things that the younger generation thought of. He wasn’t very old. Just forty-five, and yet, he felt as though there was a chasm between him and Ranu. And yet, it was moments like these when Triveni knew exactly why he talked to this boy who was almost half his age. It wasn’t that he saw himself in him, as a lot of older people told him when he was younger. But, Ranu could say things that made him think and even jealous that he wasn’t like Ranu, when he was a young boy. And here was one of those times when Ranu was the older one, trying to explain him the matters of life.

“It can be uncle. What is art but a creative ritual, isn’t it? It’s listening to the spirit in you and listening and somehow becoming one with it. Think about the long silence that you have to observe right before you shoot something. It’s like meditation, isn’t it? That silence can be very long, depending on how far your target is. Sometimes it’s only minutes and sometimes it can be hours,” Ranu said.

“Hours?”

“Arrey, uncle! Haven’t you heard of all these ornithologists, these bird watchers, who sit in forests for months to spot a bird and sometimes bring it back with them to study?”
“But it’s not hunting,” Triveni said.

“No uncle. It is hunting. Hunting is not just killing for food, it’s exercising that power, that authority that one species has over another,” Ranu said.

“And yet, at the end of each silence there is violence,” Triveni said.

“Uncle?”

“The silence? The one before a shot is fired, it ends in violence,” Triveni said.

“But uncle what is not violence? There is no bigger violence than eating.”

“Yes, but what if you don’t eat meat?”

“Uncle, I meant not what you eat, but the act of eating itself. In the process of which, something is planted in the soil, comes out of the seed, grows and then is plucked to be cooked and then finally to be bitten off, chewed and digested.”

“But that’s no way to defend killing anyone. Killing something that has consciousness. It’s not the same thing—killing plants and killing animals. You young people can justify everything. I don’t know how you do it. But it’s not right.”

“Does that mean you don’t want to learn shooting?”

“There! You are changing the subject,” Triveni said.

“Uncle, just answer me. I will ask my friend to register you.”

“I do. But I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t want to learn hunting to kill anyone. You know. Like joining the army, where you learn to protect yourself but don’t necessarily use the gun,” Triveni said.
“Uncle, think of it as a skill. Like learning to drive, or cycling or swimming. You can learn it but you don’t have to use it,” Ranu said.

“But, then that hunter story of yours? Did that not mean anything?”

“Uncle, it is up to you to choose. I can’t do it for you. And what tree is this and why are you trying to hide it?”

“It’s a Neem tree. It’s good to plant trees, you know beta,” Triveni said. “Just thought of doing something different with the garden, you know. All I am doing all day is growing these goddamn vegetables,” he said. “I will get going, beta, plant this tree before it dries out,” Triveni said. There was no other way to get rid of Ranu.

“Okay, green uncle!” Ranu asked, the young skin of his forehead trying to gather wrinkles that weren’t there yet. Triveni had remembered Mira’s invitation for lunch, but he didn’t remind Ranu. He needed to be alone while he planted the tree.

How lifeless the tree looked, Triveni thought. But this tree would gain a new life too, when placed inside the soil, next to that dead body. He wondered if there was any life left in that dead body, not in the form of a beating heart, but those small living things that start feeding on the body the moment it dies. Was there going to be any flesh or just bones? If so, was there going to be just skull and joints or something else too?

Triveni didn’t realize he was wearing a white kurta-pajama when he paid a visit to that nursery, but he was in no mood to change it. If he was going to plant a new life into the ground, shouldn’t he avoid wearing something other than what people wear upon a death? But he had no time to change, not now. He knew, something deep down in him told him that if he didn't plant the tree soon enough, the tree might lose its life.
As he dug through the soil, knowing Ranu was nowhere close to him, nowhere as patient to witness a slow and boring process of planning a life, he imagined a string of lives climbing up the roots of this small plant, not very different from a string of ants. That’s how life moved in and out: in slow drips, so small in quantity that one could not see it.

No one loses or gains life suddenly. You may be alive one moment and dead the other, your heart maybe beating one moment and not the other, but death, like life, all builds up, second by second. Death is an accumulation and starts the moment one is born. The disintegration. The pieces of the pie that make the life had been disintegrating until so much of movement, which we call life is taken away and the body in which it is housed cannot move. That’s death. The last thing that stops moving is the heart, the power button of the machinery. Some say the brain continues to work even after death, but what use is this brain that cannot aid speech, thought or touch. What will such a brain that houses a body with no life do?

It works differently for the plants, Triveni thought. They can’t think. But it’s amazing how arrogant a man can be, reducing everything that he doesn’t understand to “unscientific fact”.

He didn’t have to dig much, and yet, it seemed like so much work. Triveni was crouched over the tiny hole he was working on. The hole needed to be a foot deep, Mani had told him. Trees needed more depth. He was planting just one tree, not an entire orchard and yet, he felt like he’d been doing it for so long and still didn’t get what he desired.

He knew what it was. That slight grave, right next to where the tree was going to be, was his daughter’s grave, that slight mound. It was probably a stone giving it that rise and a slope. It made him nervous. He was reminded of the way his hands had moved ten years ago. He didn’t
have half of the strength he had then. It had been ten years, after all. His body had grown old—what did he expect?

It was funny how while digging it was hard to tell what lay beneath the layer of soil. Sometimes, it was all too easy to get to the bottom and other times, you were hit by a stone. Then you had to dig elsewhere—with a weak implement, it was very hard to bite through the stone. He dug a little bit more and as the iron hit the hidden pebbles, he realized that he quite liked the sound. He hadn’t expected them to be there, he felt, as though he had just discovered some hidden treasure.

As he was digging next to his daughter’s grave, he wondered if life that travelled from one being to another, could make the heart of his daughter beat again. He wondered if the tree he was planting, when it was grown, would have a trace of his daughter that lay right next to it.

He thought about what life was, it was a barter. There was no original life it just took one form and then another. That’s what the Bhagavad Gita said too. He imagined life going from one body to another, like a line of ants carrying their food.

He thought about all the plants that grew around him, all the life that had no human contribution in any way. The sal trees that were always buzzing, the grass around him, the weeds that he pulled out of the vegetable patch each day—they all needed not to be saved, they could take care of themselves just fine. He thought about how humans were trying to control it all, with a gun, with a knife, with everything they could get and yet, when he looked around him, he realized all of it was there before a man or a woman ever walked the earth. That’s what the Gita had said.
When he had dug deep enough, he removed the plastic wrap from around the sapling and placed it in the space. He then covered it. Triveni should have watered it, but he was sure the tree would take care of itself even if he didn’t.
CHAPTER SEVEN

There is some arrogance only humans have, that makes them think they lay out the path of their lives the way they book their air tickets. A to B, transit time and then B to C. Life probably tires of showing them how many times it decides for them, but they never learn.

When Rajeev woke up, he was surprised. He’d had no dreams. He expected to be standing under that sal tree, with Lata within the visible distance. His body wanted to be in the place that his mind was imagining. He was surprised how funnily he’d preferred the dream world rather than the real. Around him, at the airport, near the boarding gate, life did not resemble the life of his dreams, which was still twenty hours away from him.

He wondered why if humans dreamt with the same mind that helped them interpret reality, and why they dreamt only in sleep? Or is the thing they call dream the real life and rest of it, lived in the so-called real world, all dream? After all, Rajeev knew nothing about people sitting around him and he knew nothing about them, their existence, their births, their joys, their griefs, mean nothing to him and they might as well not exist for him. But isn’t believing that you know someone a bigger trick played on your mind than not knowing? What is the truth of the other person but the events they narrate to you?

For Rajeev, Lata’s truth was what she told him and yet, she didn’t tell him enough. He never saw her disappearance coming. He could never think he could become a married man whose wife would leave him. Perhaps, things that are not told to us are also the truths, things that he probably did not know about Lata. Rajeev didn’t know why it should come as no surprise to him, given the circumstances under which they had met.
The circumstances under which they had met, could not be separated from Rajeev’s own life.

Rajeev grew up in a small village in Northern India all his life. Sunderwala it is called, roughly translated to “embodiment of the beautiful”, in English. Actually, until now, he hadn’t really thought about how the name that had seemed so banal to him had so much meaning. It was, after all, a beautiful place. Beautiful, as people are beautiful, in their physical appearance. Trees, mountains, breeze—it was all there in Sunderwala.

He wondered why people liked places like these? Places that are supposedly beautiful. It was like asking why people liked beautiful faces, beautiful bodies, beautiful buildings. It had something to do with how we were hardwired to look at beauty, something to do with what supports life: the lush greenery, not the barren fields.

But something ugly had happened to Rajeev in this beautiful place. He’d lost his parents when he was just thirteen and that incident had, in a way, shaped his life from there on. Would it have been different if he had lost them in an ugly place? Would the truth of these deaths have been any different? Could it have been uglier?

It was true that even though happiness and grief took birth inside a person, they were affected by what was on the outside. But beauty hadn’t been enough in itself, to help him handle the grief. If it wasn’t for his grandmother, it would not have mattered where he’d lived.

When his parents died, his Dadi, his grandmother came to live with him. She shielded him from the words the world spoke when they saw how a boy so young could have been the reason for their death.
He was not the reason for their death. He was just a little boy, who was home, when his parents were in Mussoorie, driving on the dangerous, narrow paths of the mountains. But that didn’t stop anyone from calling him manhoos, a bringer of bad luck. Thirteen is not an innocent age like five, when the idea of good and bad has still not formulated. Thirteen is that age when it’s okay for people to blame you, possible for people to make you whatever they wanted to make you and people made Rajeev manhoos.

The things that were said to him, not in front of him, but in the living room, in quiet voices when they assumed Rajeev was asleep. Rajeev’s grandmother tried to shield him, but she could only do so much. She could lie to him, tell him that’s not what they meant, that it was okay, but she couldn’t turn away those people who’d come to mourn.

His parents had died a bad death, the one where one doesn’t get a chance to save themselves. They had died, bodies bleeding in the valley, while Rajeev was in his bed, safe and dry. No matter how hushed the voices and no matter how thick the blanket, he could still hear them. It’s the way of the world: What’s made for you somehow finds a way to you.

Rajeev’s grandmother had taken over the responsibility of her grandson hesitantly—she was too old, too weak of the body. But her resolve was strong, and she had raised a son before and she believed raising a grandson wouldn’t be too hard. She just had to refresh her notes.

His grandmother protected him from the kind of life she did not want him to lead: a spoilt kind who’d squander all his father’s hard-earned income, who’d sell off the lands to have fun. She often sat him down to tell him how hard life was and that he had to work as hard as his father to get through it.
To inspire the young Rajeev, she told him stories about his father he didn’t know. Rajeev liked this second-hand knowledge that he got from his grandmother. It gave him the hope that his father could be something else other than what he was to him—a man who liked his shoes so much he didn’t want his son to wear them. He could remember him as something other than he thought, a different person.

Much of what Rajeev’s grandmother told him about his father weren’t questions Rajeev asked because he didn’t know what to ask. He didn’t know enough incomplete stories or truths about him that he could look to his grandmother to finish.

Dadi was wise and if she knew what kind of relationship her own son and Rajeev shared, which is why he wanted to tell Rajeev things about his own father so that if there was ever a speck of hate in his heart for not loving him as much as he would have liked, he would be replaced with the wonder.

It’s true that no one loves a child-like his mother and the stories Dadi told Rajeev, no one else would have cared about them except his own son. Sometimes, they came out organically, in their talks, as they often do when two people talk about someone they love and sometimes Dadi told them in her dead son’s remembrance.

One of those stories that Rajeev remembers was told to him on one afternoon when he had come back from school and instead of going into the room and shutting himself like he did each day, he went to his grandmother and sat with her in the front yard, where it was sunny. Whenever his grandmother found some time, she liked to be productive and her favorite thing to
do was peeling garlic. She sat on the same maroon and green rug that she had made from scarps and like each day, when Rajeev arrived from school, she asked him if he wanted lunch.

“It’s still on the gas stove. I didn’t keep it in the fridge. It doesn’t go bad in winters,” she said, always telling more than was necessary.

That day, Rajeev didn’t immediately have lunch, instead, he sat down on the rug with her and picked a clove of garlic and started to peel. Rajeev didn’t know why he did it. It was a Friday and he felt relaxed.

Rajeev didn’t have an extra knife on him, so his grandmother asked him to get one. She saw that his grandson was clearly struggling. It was a thing that no one had ever taught him—he didn’t need to learn. His grandmother was humored by the way he peeled the garlic, like sometimes grownups were about the way toddlers do things.

She told him that it took less time to peel garlic if you sliced the clove all the way in the middle. “Like this,” she said, with a tiny sharp knife in her hand which had a wood handle, that Rajeev had seen his mother use very often. The clove was sliced symmetrically, both parts perfect replicas of each other.

“How do you keep these knives sharpened, Dadi?” Rajeev asked her, genuinely curious.

“Rub it against the stone. Haven’t you seen that big round stone, next to the woodfired stove?” she said.

“I had seen Papa do it, sometimes,” Rajeev said. He didn’t intend on bringing up his father in the conversation but sometimes it’s hard not to. Especially when that was the only thing he shared with his grandmother.
“Your father could do a lot of things,” she said. “You are just like him. Curious.”

“So, tell me Dadi, what would you do if I left you too, like him?” Rajeev said. She stopped peeling the garlic, a thin membrane stuck to her index finger and looked at Rajeev like she couldn’t believe what she’d heard.

“Haan? What did you say?” she said.

“If I left you like Papa, Dadi. Like Papa.”

“Shut up, Rajeev, and do some work. Get out from here,” she said. “You know better than speak such things from your mouth,” she said, angry.

“Chill, Dadi. Just because I am saying it, doesn’t mean it’s going to happen. Okay?”

“Sometimes, it does when goddess Saraswati is listening. She listens to everything,” she said, and her voice was softer. Rajeev thought she’d believed what he said. “I had almost lost him once,” she said. “This is when your father was only a year old,” she said, not taking her eyes off of the garlic in front of her. Rajeev had taken off his shoes and sat more comfortably and pulled the bag of peanuts that my his Dadi always kept next to her, there was some jaggery in it, too.

“I was inside the house and your father, he was sitting right here where you and I are. That’s one thing about this house that hasn’t changed, Rajeev, we always sat here when the sun was out. I was inside. I may have left your father with someone else. I think there was a lady from the village, she’d come to gossip, and I had left your father believing that she would take care of him. I told her I’d be back in a minute and I’d said yes. But you won’t believe what happened, Raju. You won’t believe,” she said. She looked at Rajeev, her eyes wide open.
“When I came back in a few minutes, your father, a little baby had disappeared. I couldn’t believe it. I thought that was it. My baby was gone or someone had stolen him and I was already cursing that lady from the village who’d left your father alone. But then, I turned around and what I saw were the few most difficult seconds of my life. Your father was sitting right there,” she said, pointing at the stairs. “—and there was a hawk sitting right in front of him. The hawk was so big and your father so small that I thought for a second he was going to grab him with his beak and take my son with him.”, Rajeev could see that she wasn’t lying. Stories of big birds taking babies away were not uncommon.

“And then what happened?” I asked her.

“I ran towards the hawk and it spread its wings, one of which hit your father and he started to cry. Can you believe my horror? But thankfully, the hawk did not put up a big fight, I was sure that it was not going to hurt your father and I rested easy,” she said and then back to her garlic.

Rajeev realized he had been staring at the shoes of a man waiting right opposite him. But that man didn’t care about it because he was busy with his phone. Most people were busy on their phones or laptops.

Now that everyone always had their gazes engaged by phones, preferring screens to reality, he wondered what people thought of people who looked into the space or sat with their eyes closed, withdrawn into themselves, like he was. Remember what his grandmother had told him should not have made him sad, but it did. Why did she talk about such a grim thing? That was not the only strange tale that he’d heard from his grandmother. There were many.
As Rajeev started at the shoes of the man who was wearing some very heavy woolen socks, he was reminded of one of those winter night, when Rajeev and her Dadi were both in her room having dinner. Although, it was cold outside, inside, it was warm with a tiny sigri burning in the corner and they both had their dinner plates in their hands. His grandmother had the pickles and green chillies on her plate as did he and they ate with their fingers, relishing the taste pure ghee and the coarseness of rice and lentils.

“I think your father had a sort of premonition,” his grandmother said. Rajeev didn’t know why his grandmother always chose the meal time to tell stories. “I don’t know what it was, but whatever it was, he was beginning to get very obsessed about it,” she said.

She had asked Rajeev if he wanted some more lentils, but he said no. For once he thought Dadi was justifying his father’s apathy towards the family, but there was something in her eyes that said that it wasn’t just Rajeev, who’d lost his father, she’d lost a son, too. “It was something he’d started to believe, you know. A strange belief.”

She was quiet for a while, but Rajeev knew she needed time to gather something that she found very hard to talk about.

“He told me that you saw his death coming,” she said, and didn’t look at him. “I think that’s what made him so bitter, you know. He wasn’t always like that.” His grandmother didn’t say anything else and he didn’t push her to.

The reason Rajeev didn’t insist his grandmother say anything else was because he’d thought his father believed so because of his neurosis. What else could be the reason for him being so drawn and dejected all the time? All his life, he worked at a bank and from what Rajeev knew had some friends and led a normal work life. Rajeev never overheard his parents fight
about his career or the way he treated people around him. Then why was he ticked off by just one thing.

Rajeev had forgotten all about his grandmother had said to him that day at dinner, but then, it seemed like all the stories she would tell him had all been to say just one thing:

“You should go away from here,” she’d said, one day, sitting on the same rug, with the same paper bag of groundnuts and jaggery. “Somewhere very far, so that you don’t meet the same fate as your father,” she said.

It wasn’t without a reason that his grandmother had brought it up when he was almost seventeen, about to finish school.

“But, Dadi, you have to tell me what premonitino he had? When did he tell you that?”

She was peeling garlic and at first and nudged Rajeev to go inside, and Rajeev wouldn’t have insisted if Dadi hadn’t brought this up. Rajeev took the clove and slit it in the middle, while the skin was still on and then peeled the thin skin sticking to garlic’s slick body.

“He said you said it in your sleep.”

“In my sleep? But I must have been a little boy, Dadi?”

“You were very young, seven or so, beta and I told you father not to worry that you were just a little boy, but you said it each night for weeks on end and your mother and I asked your father to ignore it, but he didn’t.” She looked at Rajeev.

“Then why did father insist on believing it?”
“He believed that you could tell the future in some way. It all started when you were six. He said you had predicted his promotion and he was very happy. But then, you started to say things in your sleep, like the cat would die, the neighbor’s death, the mango season.”

“When did I predict their death?”

“Your father had already started to be angry with you, but your mother never did. He shifted you to the room at the far end, so he could not hear you. It was your mother who told me.”

“But how did Ma die? Did I say anything about her?”

“No. She was tied to him, wasn’t she? She was with him,” she’d said and started to cry.

The woman at the boarding gate had called on everyone to get on the plane. Rajeev stood up and stood behind a man with white, shiny hair. He took out his phone, to go back into the virtual, because the reality had become hard to handle.
CHAPTER EIGHT

“What do you think happens to a man’s soul when he dies of a gunshot?” Ranu asked Triveni.

It was another one of those days where the two needed company and readily provided it to each other. Triveni could always trust Ranu to ask questions no one else did. There was tea and some hot snacks. The newspapers said that people in Delhi were affected by a thick fog, but it was always clear in the mountains where they were. The morning had just started.

“Gunshot? Death is death,” Triveni said.

“Does it not matter how a person dies?”

“Death is the end. How does it matter how that end comes?” Triveni said.

Triveni was glad Mira wasn’t around. She didn’t appreciate conversations about living and dying so casually. For her, they weren’t topics of living-room conversations. They were definite truths of life and they happened to people, to her, and the more one talked about death, the more it could confront them. Death lurks all around us, listening in and if it hears its name, it pays a visit. Saraswati, the goddess of speech sometimes makes your wishes come true.

“Uncle, are you serious?” Ranu said. He used that phrase when there was a new insight, he had about something. It was his way of giving the other person a chance to speak, a chance to think the thought he’d already thought.

“Tell me, what you are thinking, beta.”

“Do you agree that everybody has a soul?” Ranu said. It seemed like he didn’t have anything. Sometimes, he came across as a fluke to Triveni, but he knew that wasn’t the truth.
“Yes. Everyone including animals have soul. Which is why it’s not the right thing to kill an animal.”

“Then what is the difference between humans and animals? Do they both die the same death?”

“Nothing, except that they are in different bodies. A dog’s body isn’t as able as a human’s body. A parrot isn’t as intelligent as a dolphin. A bird and the human have the same soul, but they both have to accept the limitations of their body. A human cannot fly, and a bird cannot enjoy literature.”

“But still. I think dying in sleep is better than dying with a gunshot.”

“But why?”

“Because of the pain,” Ranu said.

“But if you get shot with the gun, it’s not your fault. To have pain isn’t your fault either. In either cases, you just accept it and move on.”

“Move on?”

“Move on and accept death,” Triveni said.

Shouldn’t Mira have accepted the death of their daughter too? If she had, they wouldn’t have had to run away, wouldn’t have had to live the life of escaped convicts.

It’s not something that everyone understands, the complexities of life and death, Triveni knew. And if Mira didn’t want to understand it, if she was swayed by the wave of emotions, it wasn’t in Triveni’s hands to change it.
Ranu and Triveni talked until twelve and after that, when it was warm enough, Triveni took a walk in the garden like always. An entire year had passed, and even though the neem tree Triveni had gotten from Mani’s place had grown in size and was healthy, there were no leaves on it yet, which did bother Triveni, but not to a great degree, given that the possibility Mani would dupe him was remote.

Had the tree been eaten by some sort of a pest? But from what he knew, Neem trees never got any pests. In fact, is leaves were used as pesticide. He wanted to ask Mani why it had happened, but he decided to wait. He couldn’t help looking at the bump of their daughter’s grave that he thought had grown slightly or was he just imagining it? All that talk with Ranu about life and death was causing him to think all sorts of things.

Triveni walked closer to the tree. He had seen Neem leaves before. They were a part of his childhood. There was a tree in their backyard, his father used its twigs to clean his teeth each day. His mother kept dried Neem leaves with rice to keep it from infestation. He knew a Neem tree enough to know that this was not Neem. He could have tasted it. Scrape a bit of bark and eat it and he would know.

There was nothing that could compete with the bitterness of the neem tree. Everything from its bark to its leaves and the fruit, if one kept it on the tip of the tongue, more than likely it would spoil the palate for the next three meals. Or at least that’s how he’d remembered it when he’d first been forced by his father to use the neem twig instead of a toothbrush. People believed it was a perfect alternative to a brush, but as a child, Triveni didn’t think so. It didn’t freshen up his mouth like Colgate tooth powder did.
He didn’t want to taste the bark of the tree. It was too big a risk to take—what if it was something else? He decided not to overthink it. Not to make it the focus of his life. It was only a way to tackle a problem. There was no use making it a problem of its own. Whatever came of it, he was going to accept it.

Mira was seeming happier than usual, ever since that conversation she had with Triveni. She was a simple being. She liked to put her history behind her in order to move forward. It didn’t require making peace with it, but forgetting it and my asking Triveni to “take care of it”, she had decided her future. It was going to be removing her daughter’s death from her memory. She did not seem to appreciate the complexity of life. For her, there were memories that were bad and those that were good. And the bad memories had to be covered, overshadowed by the present that wasn’t unpleasant, just like the tree on the grave of their daughter. What could be simpler than forgetting?

Triveni did not have only one set of thoughts about it. He wondered if this was betrayal. She moving on with things, having decided that she did not want to be sad anymore, to not think about one part of her life. He wondered why it wasn’t so easy for him. Why he couldn’t decide to not look at the tree ever again, to not look at the grave? He couldn’t. Just as Mira had learned to find solace in him, he had learned to find solace in substitutes of life.

But it was important to him that she looked happy. That the tone of her voice was different, not the forced tenor that she talked with for almost a decade now. But he knew his own answers didn’t lie in her and wherever they lay, he had to find them.
Mira was in the kitchen, her figure silhouetted against the gas stove and the things on the counter that were her definition. When he saw her, Triveni knew that unless she was something more than that, unless she was more that what she already was, it would be hard for them to live together. But she looked so sorry standing there in her old cotton sari with her hair tied back carelessly that he was ashamed he’d thought of such a thing.

After dinner, Mira insisted they sit outside. It had been an unusually warm day for a November and even in the night time, all they’d needed was a shawl. Triveni didn’t want to know how that tree looked in the dim light that came from the streets neither did he want to know if the size of that bump had gotten any bigger. Triveni had agreed to sit out only because Mira never demanded anything from him. They sat on the plastic chairs that were slightly cold but not too much to spoil it for Mira at least, who was enjoying the warmth in the middle of what seemed like a cold oncoming winter.

Their chairs were close to each other and Mira had leaned on him, keeping her head on his shoulder, her eyes closed. Triveni hadn’t seen Mira so relaxed before, so calm. Whenever they sat together, she was, more than anything else, lost. As though even after having lived for so long together, she didn’t trust him. But now he had started to feel that she did. Only for her sake, he wanted to stop thinking about the tree. The tree did not matter if she was happy. He was doing all this just to make her happy.

It may have been warmer than the rest of the days but not warm enough to sit for extended periods in the night. They came in and lay in their beds. It was as though the short episode of sitting outside had somehow made sleeping together on the same bed meaningful again. She held his hand. Usually, they never came near to each other and there was always a line that both of them knew to draw. She looked at him and smiled. “It’s been so long,” she said.
Outside, the neem tree flourished, just like their love, but it was becoming something else, something the both did not see coming.
CHAPTER NINE

Rajeev slept through his journey from Memphis to New York. He didn’t have that dream again. He was at the JFK international airport, looking to get on the next leg of his journey, a step closer to finding Lata.

JFK always reminded him of a big jail with cold air and food for survival. No matter what happened in the world, people still wanted to go places, because they could, because sometimes, reducing the distance was the only way to solve a problem. What if Lata was on her way to Memphis and hadn’t told her father? Maybe she wanted to surprise him. But then he realized, it was only the day before that she had told him that her passport was in the embassy for renewal. She’d even asked him to track it down for her. That’s how she was, in great distrust of computers and internet. For the sake of his own sanity, he decided he wouldn’t expect her to be around. He wouldn’t expect her to be there.

People had started to fill up the area around the gate. People carrying food and luggage of all shapes and size. People wanting to run or fly towards different kinds of circumstances. It was possible Lata had boarded her flight from this very place, that she had sat on the very seat where he was.

He wondered what thoughts may have crossed her mind when she sat at the airport, waiting for her flight. He knew she’d have thought about her father. There was something that bothered her, something that she was unable to explain logically. Rajeev had told her to call him, but she said it wasn’t the kind of fear that could disappear by making a call. “Voice can’t confirm wellbeing,” she said. “Phones are dishonest animals. Have you ever seen their eyes?”
Rajeev didn’t know what she meant by it. Their eyes? Rajeev had cut short whatever she’d said and didn’t want to engage in another debate about phones and how they were bad for them and humanity. Talking about distrust of things he knew he couldn’t do without wasn’t what he wanted to do, and the discussion had ended there, and he had agreed to Lata’s insistence on going to Dehradun. He didn’t want to act possessive.

After Lata had left, he wanted to call his father-in-law to inform him that Lata was going to fly to India, but she’d asked him to swear not to. This had angered him a little. It was one thing to have someone let you do something but another thing to lie. He told Lata her parents would worry, but she wouldn’t listen. For her parents, Lata was still a child who could not be left unaccompanied in the world and after marriage Rajeev had quietly accepted this responsibility of protecting her.

Now that he thought about it, it was probably his mistake. He shouldn’t have coddled her so much, shouldn’t have treated her like her parents did. But what was wrong with that? He had to stop overthinking. No matter what he did, nothing was going to keep him from feeling responsible for what had happened. But as her husband, how could he not feel responsible? Now that he thought about it, the fact that she was missing didn’t seem surprising. There was something going on and he had refused to address it.

Nearly everything that he could think of had pointed toward something uncanny, something strange. Even the night before she left for India, something had happened. Lata barely ever fell sick and that night she complained of severe stomach ache. Rajeev thought this was his chance to stop her, to show her that maybe this was fate, that she wasn’t meant to fly alone to India. She was not on her period and when Rajeev had placed his hand on her belly to ask her
where she felt the pain, she couldn’t tell, but she said it felt like she’d been stabbed with a sharp piece of wood?

“Is it that bad?” Rajeev had asked her that night and moved closer to her, perhaps expecting his touch to heal her.

And then, she said a very strange thing.

“Have you ever wondered if plants feel the pain when things sprout out of them?”

Rajeev didn’t know what to say.

“I think they do. Don’t they? Everything living feels pain,” he said.

“Yes. I think you are right. The pain I feel is so immense it’s as though branches are growing inside. I feel what a seed must feel when it begins to sprout. You know, a bit injured.”

Rajeev asked her if she was pregnant, but she said no.

“You can feel it too. Some of us feel it more than others,” she said.

Lata kept her hand on Rajeev’s stomach while they were still in bed and looked him in the eyes. “It doesn’t want to harm you. Don’t confront it. Just let it be,” she said. Rajeev wasn’t sure what she’d meant, back then and had assumed that because of her pain, she was in some sort of a half-dream state. He thought it was probably out of anxiety of flying alone. It was nervousness, it had to be. But when he thought of that night after she’d left him, it seemed like there was no other way it could have turned out.

That night seemed strange to him now, but then, what was strange? It was just an unusual night. But then he looked around him, where he was sitting. Amid strangers, waiting for
something to fly him to the other side of the world. A plane that could have been mistaken for a metallic meteorite—shooting away and toward the earth. Wasn’t that strange?

Strange is nothing but unfamiliarity. Strange has no definition of its own. Strange is whatever fear or unknowable factor is associated with it. Strange is like being in transit, an in-betweenness, a state of being that’s out of the ordinary, until one reaches the next normal. Like Rajeev trying to escape his circumstances by entering into another enclosed place, that would take him to the other side of the world. But plane doesn’t escape Earth, it merely goes into an in-between space, somewhere in the middle of earth and the nothingness of space.

Everyone around Rajeev was waiting at the gate when a cabin crew member announced that boarding was going to take time. The cabin crew member was a woman with gelled, pulled back hair that were crying for help. People waiting to fly erupted in a mass sigh as though sitting in the plane a little longer would pull them away from the greatness they were all headed toward. He didn’t care.

Rajeev knew they had taken his money and were responsible for taking him where he was supposed to go and beyond that, he could not concern himself with such things. There was enough to worry about. He would do what he was required to do—wait for his turn. This was one of those times when there’s little else that can be done. The time must pass before one gets somewhere. Rajeev was at Gate 35 and in front of him was a middle-aged woman dressed for office. She was calm, unlike others around her. Air travel for her seemed like sitting in the car and going to office. The plane was her taxi. He looked down at her shoes and followed her. Boarding a plane was herd behavior. All he had to do to was go after the person before him. But there was a problem with herd behavior: What if first person in the line was a lunatic? He tried his father-in-law’s number again, but nothing.
Further ahead in the queue, he saw the white-haired man again. He wore a khaki sweater and navy pants. He was the kind of man who took care of his body. There was no bulge where the sweater ended. One often catches such figures in public places. The eye always goes to what looks good. Rajeev was still looked at him, when he turned his face towards him and looked right into his eyes and smiled as a companion on the same flight.

The aircraft crew had announced many times over that it was a full flight, as though that was supposed to make the passengers feel better. That they had chosen an airline that people wanted to fly or whatever else was the reason for it being full. On the aerobridge, the airline controllers and stewardesses lined up, eager to serve, but Rajeev did not get any hospitable vibes. It seemed to him that they were marking their territory, reiterating, “Don’t try anything funny here” or “Let us do our job and you do yours.”

He had been smiled at and “welcomed” thrice for no reason and he wasn’t even close to the airplane. It didn’t help that the businesswoman in front of him had her high heels on and they clacked as she walked on the metal floor. Weren’t high heels bad for health? As though the heels weren’t enough, there was an obligatory baby in the line too, with his crying. But he couldn’t see the man with white hair. He wasn’t too far ahead of Rajeev, but it seemed like somehow, he had made it to the inside of the plane.

The airline crew wasn’t doing a great job of boarding people fast enough because Rajeev was sure he stood at his spot for a long time. People were escaping into the virtual reality of their phones each time they got a chance, and some pretended to not be affected by this delay. He wondered if that man with white hair was as annoyed about not moving fast enough as Rajeev himself was, but he couldn’t see him again. As though out of sheer compulsion, Rajeev called his father-in-law again, but in vain.
Finally, he got to the entrance of the plane where flight stewardesses showed their bleached smile and welcomed him with trained manners. Trained isn’t always bad. Good disposition whether fake or real always comes to rescue like a warm blanket when one is exhausted from travel but when your job involves dealing with tired people, you can’t keep everyone happy even with the whitest of the smiles.

But then, what else could these people do, the so-called hospitality industry, be rude to people? To appear pleasant no matter what, was a tough job, and yet here he was not appreciating the flight stewardess’ hard work. But Rajeev did smile back at her. Not in a flirtatious way, which he couldn’t, even if he tried, but a good-natured smile. It’s not that he was always nice to airline workers, but it was the bad news he’d gotten in the morning that had triggered some sort of compassion for people he didn’t know. She smiled back at his smile like an etiquette robot. And this was the thing, no matter how much Rajeev tried to appreciate it, he could never grow over the fact that it was their job.

How many times could one think of times when a stranger returned a smile? After Lucy that morning, Rajeev was done with these fake niceties. Why not fake the urge to really care instead of faking signs of care? If you fake the symptoms of a disease, you may get caught, but faking the disease itself will at least assure genuine symptoms.

But this plastic behavior didn’t end there. It was the entire package. The makeup. Lata didn’t use any makeup and thank god for that. Maybe kajal, but that was not so much as makeup as an identity, that was surely the case with air hostesses. Rajeev knew from having taken a flight so many times that airhostesses were trained to apply make up carefully. But not this woman. He wanted to wipe a streak of putty on her chin. It ran like a scar from the bottom of her lip all the
way to the edge of her chin. Rajeev was past her now, in the queue that moved like a sedated python.

Inside the airplane, the alley was as narrow as he could remember airplane alleys to be. It didn’t feel like the cozy home it should have felt if one were to reside in it sixteen hours straight. After getting past the queue in the hatch, Rajeev was stuck in struggle number two, trying to get to his seat—73E.

The fact that this flight was run by Air India didn’t make it any better. When Rajeev stopped and looked, the seats were darkened on the edges for the lack of cleaning and at some places the fuzz from inside was peeking out, the tv screens seemed cosmetic, all of them present but a very few working (he knew this from previous experience). It was a plane with the interiors of a second-class Indian railway compartment. Rajeev’s American habits wanted to complain to someone, but he knew the moment he sat in an Air India plane, he was no longer in the United States, even though the plane was parked on the American soil.

He wondered if the aircraft would even fly, if he would even reach his destination. But this feeling lasted only a few seconds. Turning around and looking at other people gave him the confidence he needed. The herd mentality confidence. Somehow, the idea that so many people could be foolish enough all at once to board an airplane that wasn’t equipped to fly was hard to imagine. He let himself discount a very big fact: airplanes full of people crashed all the time.

There were only Indians around him. The plane was full of them. A line made of Indians wasn’t like any line in the world. They never learn to queue, they just bunched together, always in a hurry to get to the seat, fighting off each other, as though the seat would run away if they
didn’t get to it soon enough. It wasn’t just the aero plane, they queued everywhere, even where there was no need to queue. It’s the mentality of overcrowding.

India wasn’t America. There were over a billion Indians and there was a perpetual shortage of resources. Indians were afraid of missing the bus, afraid the shop would run out of ration, afraid that if each one of their acts wasn’t performed before everyone else, it would somehow become the reason for their ultimate downfall. It wasn’t their fault. Humans were settlers and dwellers, travelling, moving around, and these things were programmed to do make them anxious, even a bit aggressive.

And then there was the fact that sometimes, it was all the fault of the act of queueing. A queue was a sort of an organism in itself, rather than something made of people. The queue takes on a temperament of its own irrespective of who it’s made of.

In his early days of travelling in the plane, Rajeev often paid too much heed to this temperament. In fact, he believed that it is this temperament that could tell him if a plane could meet with an accident, a crash, fire, kidnapping. Stupid, how stupid that was of him, he thought. Anxiety made one stupid, no doubt, but he was convinced that as one grew older, one didn’t get wiser, one just got less anxious.

But it wasn’t Rajeev’s fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. The disposition to being suspended in the air didn’t come easy to bipeds, it cannot and each time we are about to go on this unknown travel in the skies, something kicks us in the stomach. It’s like the body saying that each aircraft is your flying coffin. It’s worse if this flying coffin is owned by Air India.

Rajeev was still stuck in the bureaucracy of the queue that ran from the gate to his seat. As a kid, he had once asked his mother if dinosaurs were bigger than airplanes and since then,
each time he walked inside one, he couldn’t help thinking that he was walking inside a dinosaur or walking and measuring the inside of a dinosaur with his footsteps. The aisle was littered with flight stewardesses. Overcrowding was an Indian thing. All of them were Indian and wore the cheapest saris Air India could buy—polyester. But all of them were young and slim and nothing could look bad on them.

“Good evening sir! Welcome,” one of them said. By then he had grown immune to their greetings.

This one was not like the one at the entrance. She had put her makeup cautiously and her accent was excellent for an Indian. For an Indian, excellent meant losing the sound of hard Ts that kept so many Indian men from dating American women. She spoke carefully as though her words were being passed through a fluff of clouds. The edges softened and blunted with regular practice. Rajeev put her age to around thirty, but it was hard to tell with air hostesses, they worked hard to preserve their looks. The name on her uniform said Coco. An unusual name for an Indian girl. He found himself placing her on the map of India. Goa, North-East perhaps. No, not a North-Easterner. Her skin was fair, but she lacked the mongoloid features of a girl from the North-East. From the North then? But that was not a north Indian accent. Maybe she’d spent some time outside of India. Indians caught accent like a disease, most of them ashamed of the way they sounded. Colonial hangover, not something they could do anything about.

“Coco!” he called her name almost accidently, in a bid to read it loud but not so loud that she’d turn around. But they were very close together in the aisle, so, he wasn’t surprised. He immediately became conscious of the way he spoke, even though he considered his enunciation better than most Indians. But he had been trying hard to achieve that American accent. Roll the
Rs, soften the Ts. Butter, butter, butter. She responded to someone calling her name. But now what was he to say? What?

“Excuse me”, he said, surprised at feeling enthusiastic given what had happened to him in the morning. He had to come up with something. He and the airhostess were very close on the aisle and it seemed like the right thing to say. She smiled again, squeezed herself slightly between spaces and made space for him.

“Thank you,” he smiled back and had a strange urge to keep looking at her. Not talking or saying anything but just looking. He was also struck with a strong sense of shame. His wife was gone, eloped, probably something worse and here he was flirting around? He wasn’t flirting around, he decided. She was an airhostess.

He was still a long way from his seat, and was still walking towards it like a pilgrim. 73E, that’s where he had to be. Everyone wanted to get to their seats fast. What was the hurry to strap themselves in the seat anyway? It was a kind of punishment. Him included.

The truth was, everyone was desperate to start their journeys. No matter how small, how insignificant, all journeys were important. A journey always signifies a new beginning almost like a new birth after death, where the soul removes its old clothes and wears new ones in form of a body. Walking on the aisle was one such journey, like a long gestation period before the birth.

He had finally arrived at 73E. The numbers were a little off in Air India plane, E being a aisle seat. He strapped himself and waited. The entire journey was nothing but a one big wait.

Seated, things didn’t get any better. Around him, people had started to fit themselves in what would be their home for the next sixteen hours. People around him had already started to
complain. *It’s so hot and stuffy*, and for some it was too cold. How hard was it to understand that it was not going to feel like a stay at the Four Seasons? This was economy class of arguably world’s worst airline. People were displeased with everything, hugging their hand luggage like little children, rummaging their pockets or purses for boarding passes to check their seat numbers that they were not used to memorizing. This was not home. This was jail. A place they couldn’t leave for the next sixteen hours. They were stuck.

But Lata never looked stuck. She never felt uncomfortable. Six months ago, when she travelled to the US with Rajeev, that was the first time she had ever flown out of India and he didn’t think she ever flew within and yet, there was hardly anything about her that indicated that. Unfamiliar situations barely ever made Lata uncomfortable. Her source of discomfort mostly came from the inside, like that night before she left. Otherwise, she didn’t feel fear as easily as other people. People like Lata, they knew what they see with their eyes is only a reflection of the world in their minds. She wasn’t like these people in the plane, desperate to get to their seat, and those trying to fit their luggage in the designated space, under the seats, on the laps, if it came to them, they would even fit their kids in the overhead compartments. But Rajeev wasn’t like Lata and this movement of fear around him in different forms made him afraid of what was to come in sixteen hours.

On his right, someone had already taken the aisle seat. It was the man with white hair, the same man Rajeev had seen in the waiting area. Like every Indian male, Rajeev suffered from the disease of staring and since coming to the United States, he worked hard to shed his Indian habit of staring at people. But when the elf-haired man talked to him, he couldn’t help but look at him, even though it was hard because of the way they sat, next to each other, not opposite each other, looking eye to eye. Where was he from, Rajeev wondered. It’s a strange habit to fall into, to try
and guess people’s ethnicities when one travelled. He was still trying to figure out where he was from. Since arriving in America he have been asked so many times about where he was from that he almost couldn’t do without asking that question for himself.

The man was staring ahead but Rajeev couldn’t tell where he was looking. There was no stress in his eyes. He seemed to be in a state of trance. His hair had a certain luminescence in it like the elves in the Lord of the Rings. Rajeev could smell the clean soap on him. He had an air about him that made Rajeev assume he belonged in business class. Rajeev tended to notice that kind of thing. Having travelled so much, he didn’t have to try too hard. But those hair, if he could find just one black hair in that head of white, he’d treat himself with a Denny’s chocolate lava cake when he was back. One for each hair.

“You won’t find it. Look harder. You won’t,” the man said. The man was still looking ahead, so, Rajeev wasn’t sure who he was talking to, but what he said seemed relevant to what he was doing. Or maybe, his wife’s loss was making me imagine things.

“Me?” Rajeev asked him. He looked at the man, but he was still looking ahead.

“Yes, you,” he said, turning to Rajeev but with an elegant motion. His voice was perfect and natural and came from a place that was comfortable with itself. His eyes were unremarkable but there was that comfort in them too. Something about them reminded Rajeev of Lata. It was as though it were her eyes that were talking to him in a different body. He was struck by him, the way one is in public places by strangers who one knew so little about.

The man wasn’t fazed by the couple sitting next to him that Rajeev couldn’t see properly but they seemed loud and confused about where to place their luggage. The man was healthy. Not fad-diet and gym healthy. Something that came from the inside and reflected on the face.
Rajeev wondered what his age was. He guessed it to be fifty, but then it was hard to tell. He wore a sweater, one of those expensive ones, made of real wool instead of the polyester that they used in sweaters lately. Envy came upon Rajeev. He looked like a monk. He must feel exactly how he was trying to feel but couldn’t. Rajeev wondered if he would feel something different if he sat with him, if he talked to him? These things were contagious, weren’t they? One felt quiet when it was peaceful, and the mind felt unsettled when there was commotion. The inside equals the outside.

But he wondered if anything would take his mind off what was going on in his mind, this strange commotion. He should have listened to Lata more often. She said, life must be lived moment to moment. But then, Rajeev knew the sum total mattered.

No one had come to sit with him, and Rajeev was happy he had three seats to himself. The boarding process was almost over but he allowed himself a little more time, before he celebrated the extra space. But he could start the process of ownership. He put his luggage on the middle seat. It wasn’t such a bad thing. If the two ever showed up, he could always remove it. The possibility of extra business-class space for the money of economy class excited him a little.

Six months ago, when Lata had travelled with him to the US, they were in a similar situation. She was in the middle seat, he on the aisle and in time, the third passenger came and sat next to him. She didn’t like to sit in such cramped space, but Rajeev gave her the hope that it wasn’t uncommon to receive business class upgrades. But it never happened. Hope stayed, it didn’t take him anywhere. It was like the clouds outside the airplane window seats that one could touch, but in real, could never grasp. Was he going senile before his time?
He pulled the window shutters down and insulated himself from the worries of the world. Before the plane took off, he had wanted to leave everything that belonged to this world in the world. All worried and anxieties because Rajeev couldn’t be nervous looking for Lata. This escape from the earth gave him an illusion of comfort, of being suspended from the misery that the phone call in the office had brought him.

The stable ground beneath the feet was where all the troubles started and now that he was leaving it behind, at least till the time his feet were back on the stable ground, again, he could leave his worries alone.

Rajeev had not been paying full attention because the white-haired man next to him wasn’t sitting there anymore. He looked around to see if he had moved a seat up or down. Not that either. He wasn’t expecting him to form an unbreakable bond of friendship, but his disappearance seemed slightly strange. He didn’t seem to Rajeev the kind of person who would use the washroom right after sitting in the plane. He’d come prepared, take a leak before he sat into the plane. He didn’t like being so bothered about this small fact. Rajeev didn’t want to spend time thinking about some guy he didn’t know.

But it wasn’t in his control what he thought. He thought about Lata and the man when Coco sprayed disinfectant in the cabin because of some WHO regulations and while he was listening to the soft sound of spray the warmth of the blanket on his legs and the coziness of the plane, put him to sleep. Rajeev covered his head with his jacket and for the first time since morning, his body felt at rest. He fell into one of those sleeps where the dream world and the real world seemed very close to each other and he could go in and out of the both with ease. In fact, he could even stare and one and then the other without much difficulty.
In his dream, he was asleep in his Memphis home. Next to him was his wife. He could feel the warmth and softness of her skin. Her body gave him reassurance like something concrete gives one stability in the floating abyss. His hand was in hers and both their hands were on the cotton bedsheet. There was a wound on his feet, not fresh, but healing he felt the urge to scratch it against the bedsheet. The sheet was soft and the hooks of hooks of dead skin tried to hold on to the surface of the sheet. Still in his dream, he woke up and warmth of her hand was gone. And he was searching for her body because she was gone from there.

When he woke up, the comfort and warmth that had put him to sleep was gone, too. It had nothing to do with his body. He still had all three seats to himself and the elf-haired man wasn’t back on his seat. He didn’t sleep for very long because the plane hadn’t taken off. About fifteen minutes, perhaps.

He wondered if the plane was ever going to fly or was he going to be stuck in the plane and dream about his lost wife? He was afraid to open the window, scared of what he may see. Thinking about this possibility of being stuck, he felt strange in his stomach again. He wished the elf-haired man would come back. His quiet presence would make him feel better again. But he was nowhere to be seen. Rajeev’s hands were cold and when he closed his eyes, he didn’t find the comfort of rest. Lata was gone, and he couldn’t do anything unless he got out of the enclosure he was in and made it to Sunderwala. That was the fact.

He opened his eyes and tried to stay rooted in the real world, hoping it would make him feel better. Diagonally across the aisle, in the seat in front of the grey-haired man, a woman with pitch dark hair put on a boring black sweater and tried to stuff her mammoth brown leather tote under the seat. Her knotted hair had become wobbly from wrestling the bag. Lata knotted her
hair like that sometimes. She is was great travel companion too. He knew Rajeev preferred the aisle seat and sometimes when it wasn’t possible, Lata had a way of getting it for him.

This was her trick: Instead of asking the third passenger and risking a no, Lata performed her little skit. She had her prescription bottle in the purse, which acted like her prop. At first, Rajeev was afraid of the consequences of what she may do, but she’d said: “Hold on and keep watching.” She’d pretend to pop a pill from the bottle and started to have a fake conversation with Rajeev, indicating that one of them had kidney stones or a bladder problem. She talked for a while and loud enough for the man sitting on the aisle seat. And then she asked the man to excuse her and she told Rajeev—loud enough for the man to hear—that she was going to the washroom because she was having that bladder problem again. The man in the aisle could not say no to any request Lata made.

Rajeev missed her and in this silence of a long journey. The more he thought about her, the more the emptiness of the seats felt like a punishment. Sometimes loneliness wasn’t the right thing cure. Distraction could have worked, he could have looked at his phone, but he didn’t want to meander through the zillion pictures of Lata or check the time stamp on his father-in-law’s call. By now, he knew it was twenty seconds and five milliseconds.

He hadn’t recorded the call or had no way of hearing it, but his father-in-law’s voice was like a hammer hitting his heart. He decided to play some music. He dipped his hand in his only bag to get his iPod—he still owned one. It was a metallic yellow iPod Nano, a color he chose because it was cheaper than the other colors and back then, for him, it was more important to own an iPod than own an iPod of a certain color.
It was from his first salary and it was very close to him. Not to mention, it was a good way to stay away from the phone on which, he dreaded a message from Lata’s father, something that would tell him something he didn’t want to know, something he couldn’t do anything about as long as he was in the plane.

The playlists on his iPod hadn’t changed ever since he’d bought it around nine years ago. The phone still had Indian Ocean, the band that was still new when he was in Delhi University. They were a sensation among the young kids immediately. Probably something about their tunes, a fusion of Indian and Western, a sort of a subversion of the India of the nineties which was too western. Their tunes comforted the youth—they didn’t need to give up their own culture to appreciate the West. They used Tabla and sitar with guitar and Hindustani Classical vocals. Leaving Home was Rajeev’s favorite song from them. Tum tum na na…. The song did not have any lyrics, just the sounds of the song that arose in the vocal chords of the singer and the instruments that conversed and squabbled with each other.

Those syllables still hit him as they did in 2008. November 21st. The day Rajeev heard Indian Ocean in flesh and blood. Even though he had been listening to that song for years, he still couldn’t memorize the name of that odd-sounding instrument. It wasn’t the drums, not the dholak or tabla. It was something else. Lata knew the name of that instrument and she was the one who told me. Gabudi. Gaidubi. That didn’t sound right to Rajeev. Gabgubi! It was gabgubi!

Rajeev even remembered the day Lata informed him of those few important details about his favorite song. They sat in a tiny Indian food joint called Pakora in Memphis and Lata had picked out that place only because of the name. She’d laughed so hard when she heard that
name. Rajeev had never been to this restaurant, but he liked it when he got there. Instead of the bad Bollywood music, this place played Indian alternative music. That night, his favorite Indian Ocean song had been playing and Rajeev had asked Lata what the instrument that played in the song was.

“It’s a tiny drum sort of thing,” she had said. “Bauls of West Bengal play it. You know Bauls? Baul singers, what lovely voices they have. They are like sadhus, with dreadlocks and all, banjaras, basically. Factoid: Baul is from the Sanskrit word Vātūla, meaning crazy.” After that day, Rajeev was in love with her even more.

She knew so much about music and not just Indian. In fact, he’d realized that she knew most about the kind of music Rajeev liked. Nothing more, nothing less. She loved classic rock, a bit of jazz, AR Rehman. Lata’s curiosity about everything, about the life she was going to have in the US, she wanted to know if everything was the way they showed on HBO and AXN and StarWorld?

She was especially struck by the restaurants, even the cheaper ones were better than those expensive ones in India. Rajeev had taken her to an expensive restaurant one of the nights. Noodle Bistro. They played good music Dave Brubeck, Take Five, and Lata even knew about that song.

On his Ipod, Rajeev was on to the next Indian Ocean number. Desert Rain. Rahul Ram, the band’s lead singer was quiet throughout the song, sticking to the guitar, letting the song’s drummer, Amit Kilam, the wild haired man with a hooked nose, improvise with his rustic vocals and the gabgubi. Young men fell in love not just with the songs but also felt an affinity towards
Rahul Ram, who would be at Cornell, studying Environmental Toxicology if he wasn’t playing for the Indian Ocean.

Rajeev shuffled the next song and then the next. In one of the songs, the title of which didn’t matter anymore, there were only two lines worth of words, roughly translated to “buy me a nose ring, oh beloved, or I will not speak to you.” It was a woman in rural Rajasthan talking to her lover. Rajeev was busy listening to music when he heard someone other than the sound from the earphones.

“Use me sa. Seet,” someone said.

Rajeev often closed his eyes while he listened to music so, he didn’t immediately know when he heard that voice, but words were spoken in a way that needed his attention.

It was Coco. There was already a familiarity about that voice. Not the voice itself, but the intonation, perhaps. Her voice had the friction of concrete with a dash of honey.

“Hi, Coco!” Rajeev said, putting on his best American accent, all Rs rolled and softened.

“Use me sa. Seet,” she said again.

Rajeev removed his ear phones and before she could say something, he posed a question to her.

“Has the aircraft taken off?”

“You’re on the wrong seat, sir,” she said, instead of replying to him. Her face was devoid of the smile that had been her accessory since he’d boarded the plane. Her tone snapped Rajeev out of his sleep, out of his reality in that moment. He couldn’t think about her the same way. It was a statement, not a request. But she was waiting, waiting for him to move and she was
not alone. Next to her was the elf-haired man. It took Rajeev a while to take account of the situation: He was on elf-haired man’s seat and they wanted him to make space for him? How long had they been trying to wake him from his music-induced state?

“Not very long. Please don’t worry about that,” the elf-haired man said. His coolness didn’t come as a surprise to Rajeev. He had that aura about him. He sensed Rajeev’s embarrassment. Seeing him soften, Coco’s face changed too, and she was smiled her flight-stewardess smile. If the man whose seat was occupied didn’t care, why should she?

He said he had the window seat. Rajeev was slightly relieved to hear it. He got up and got on the aisle.

“Thank you,” the man said. His voice had a kind of trained theatre-like quality to it. Back in Delhi University, he had dated a girl who was from theater. She was a few years older than he was and back then, he’d assumed that being in a theater was a good way to make friends. Anyway, the point was that he wasn’t surprised by the trained quality of this man’s voice.

“Now you have a better view of my hair,” he said.

“Thank you for giving me the aisle seat. I appreciate it.”

“No problem,” he said and smiled that smile without fail.

“I saw you earlier and then I didn’t see you at all,” he said. Of course, Rajeev didn’t frame it as a question because he did not want it to sound like he was stalking him.

The man didn’t say anything and smiled again. Rajeev thought maybe, he hadn’t paid attention to what Rajeev had said because he was still trying to settle into the seat. His actions were coordinated and there was no sense of haste. He found his seat belt easily and then the
throw that comes in a packet on each seat. Rajeev often wondered if these throws were ever washed or just shoved into a new bag after each flight.

The monk-like quality that he had first observed in him was still there. His movements had a discipline that were not common. There was no trace of frustration caused by people around him. It was as though he was the only man inside the plane and everything else a rock that existed but could not affect him in any way even if it came to life.

Was Rajeev threatened by him? Men who were too confident of themselves. The men much older than he, who had something he did not yet have, something that could only be achieved with the passage of time, the fearlessness. They weren’t afraid of anything.

It was strange how strongly Rajeev felt the elf-haired man’s fearlessness threatening him. He could feel his back straighten. An evolutionary reflex, perhaps to other males. Rajeev was also very much aware and embarrassed by the attention he gave the man. The attention that Rajeev didn’t think he deserved. He looked around to distract himself. On his right sat a petite girl with freckled skin, with her back hunched like Coco’s eyebrows. A man with a similar bag and chestnut hair sat next to her. Rajeev noticed that there was a sack of sour air around them. And maybe, if he breathed harder, he would be stronger. But the man with the elf hair was absolutely unaware of it. His eyes looked ahead, calm.

The plane had started its engines and the power of the jet propellers confirmed that it was powerful enough to carry Rajeev to the other side of the world. So, this Air India plane, that didn’t seem like it was good for anything, could really move. He was preparing for the way flying was going to make him feel. Despite having travelled in an airplane so many times, a thing that always happened when the aircraft gained height was that he felt a physical hollowing out in
his stomach that a pumpkin must feel when its flesh is scraped out. It was always the take-offs that made him nervous, not the landings, when statistically more accidents were reported.

Always the take-offs. Even after years of plane travel, he hadn’t gotten used to it. Fear, nervousness, he wasn’t sure what to call it. Bodies were hard to figure out that way, one can confuse symptoms for a malady.

“It’s a wonderful thing, isn’t it? This chunk of metal,” the elf-haired man said. It was as though the man could read Rajeev’s thought. But he liked that the man didn’t make any pretense of getting to know him, of wanting to follow a ritual to start a conversation. They would probably never meet again after this journey ended and Rajeev liked how the man accepted it.

If only Rajeev could feel one hundred per cent on-board with the way the man felt about starting a conversation. Rajeev didn’t feel at ease, but he knew one thing, he was going to have interesting company for the next sixteen hours, talking about things one wouldn’t normally stop to think seemed to be more like him.

If he had asked Rajeev a question that had anything to do with his job or salary or residence status or citizenship, he would not have been surprised and he would have been more prepared, but that question would not have been this interesting.

“And come to think of it. There was a time of pushpak vimans. You know pushpak vimans, don’t you?” He looked at Rajeev in wonder. For once Rajeev thought he was trying to be clever, but then he realized he was interested in a genuine conversation.

“It’s fascinating, don’t you think? It’s so fascinating,” he added when Rajeev didn’t say anything for a while. At least he knew how he wanted to pass his sixteen hours. It wasn’t a bad option, given that the other alternative he had was to think about Lata.
“So, you believe in all this?”

“Believe? Haven’t you read Rig Veda? The Griffith translation. Not the easiest, but some lines stick. Do you even read?”

“Well, to be honest with you, I haven’t been tuned in with what’s happening in India, you know. I really have no idea whether it’s true,” Rajeev said. He was aware of things, but now, he was just intimidated.

“Alright, my dear, let me educate you on this: What I am talking isn’t current affairs. This was millennia ago. Are you telling me, you have never heard of a pushpak viman?”

Rajeev felt slightly humiliated, so now he had to somehow package his menial knowledge of Indian mythology in an intelligent way.

“Yes, I know. Flying chariots used by gods? But they are not the same thing as the planes. There was no conceptualization of design, the viman looked nothing like the airplanes. I have seen the Wikipedia entry, shots from the mythological texts. And anyway, what proof even existed that they could fly?”

“Proof? What do you mean a proof? What, according you, is a proof?”

“A proof. When someone witnesses an event, when research and historians find sufficient evidence that some event took place. The Wright Brothers left designs and pictures. That’s proof.”

“Have you read the papers that the Wright brothers left? Have you seen them?”

“I am sorry, that’s ridiculous. How can you demand to have seen every piece of evidence before believing anything?” And when Rajeev said it, he couldn’t believe how stupid he
sounded, even to himself. How could one not see every piece of evidence before one believed anything? And yet, one always believes things at heresy.

This made Rajeev feel slightly better about Lata. The possibility that he could be reading too much into what he had heard from his father-in-law on the phone. That sometimes until one witnessed it, it may not be the truth. The man was a bit loose in his head, but he was strange. But he changed the subject. He didn’t want to pursue the topic. He didn’t want the conversation that revolved around Lata or the reason he was going to India.

“Anyway, are you headed to Delhi?” Rajeev asked. Right then, Coco came around with her cart of food.

“What would you like to have?” Coco asked Rajeev before she asked the man sitting on his right. That gave his ego a little kick. It was like winning a little beauty contest.

This was the first time Rajeev saw Coco up close. His first opportunity to stare at her with that intensity. Her teeth were lipstick stained, and eyelashes clumped like clothespins on a wire. The eyebrows—over-plucked and faint—were saying their last goodbyes. And her cheeks were a bit too red, a bit too cracked—the stress of her demanding profession. But that face—

What a waste of a clean canvas. Ruined by a splatter of mud instead of strawberries and cream. They had makeup training, didn’t they? Some crash course to look like eye candy, to lure passengers into boxed food from leftover pile. Lata once told Rajeev she’d wanted to be an air hostess. But Rajeev had also watched enough travel shows to know it was so. Every episode of Globetrekker, every travel show on TLC.

“How do you know I’d like whiskey?” Roll you Rs and soften your Ts.

“It’s my job.” She smiled again. Rajeev felt like he had won.
“Scotch. Which one do you have?”

“Well, let’s see: Johnnie Walker, Black Label, Highland Park, Cutty Sark, Monkey Shoulder. Which one would you like?”

There was none of that expensive stuff. All the names she’d just said were under fifty-dollars. Maybe good enough to impress most Indians, but not Rajeev. It wasn’t Coco’s fault, Rajeev understood that. He told her he’d like to have Cutty Sark. Rajeev had never really had Cutty Sark, but was curious about after it after he had read a book in which the main character took a peg each time he was stressed.

“On the rocks?”

“Yes.” After Coco handed Rajeev the glass of whiskey, it was time for Mr Elf. He ordered Black Label, which was strange. No well-travelled Indian man had the gall to say Black Label. It was the Scotch of the middle class in India. When you get out of that country, the first thing you learn is Black Label is not the end and be all of the liquor world.

“On the rocks?” Coco asked.

“Neat, for me,” the man said. “On the rocks is a novice way of having whiskey. Not a lot of people are aware that you must never dilute your whiskey with ice. Water is fine in small quantities but ice—the sign of a novice.” Humiliation number two. Rajeev couldn’t let this one pass.

“Everyone has a different way of drinking alcohol,” Rajeev said in his defense, but it felt feeble. Rajeev knew he had already lost the battle. What made it worse was that the old man didn’t say anything in reply to his defense and just laughed.
Coco had moved on to the next passenger, with a smile. But at this point, she didn’t look at Rajeev but the old man. Rajeev took a sip from his glass and instantly hated it. The old man definitely had the better glass on him.

“Do you know how the Earth came into being?” The man asked. Still wanting to have a conversation. Trying to, Rajeev guessed, prove his largesse. He had ignored Rajeev’s stupidity and found him qualified enough to talk.

“Excuse me?” Rajeev asked.

“Earth? Origin?” the man said, as though, he was doing him a favor by repeating the question.

“Big Bang? Supernova? Adam and Eve? I don’t know. It was always there, wasn’t it? I am not a Christian, so, I guess you are asking the wrong person.”

“Which school did you go to?”

“MS at Harvard.”

“Only those mention the grad school who never go to a good school in their undergrad.”

“I gambled my life to come to the US for an MS. Who the hell are you to judge?”

“If you are in the US, you have in no way gambled your life. You have lived a very protected life with your parents and when the time comes, and they feel like they are not getting the bang for their buck: AKA enough things to brag from their kid, they send them abroad so that the bragging value increases. You see? So, undergrad?”

“Who do you think you are talking to? I don’t have to answer that question for you. And I don’t like you that much, given how you talked down at me in front of that air hostess.”
“I am sorry I hurt your feelings. I was just trying to talk frankly, you know,” the old man said and this apology came unexpectedly because by now Rajeev was convinced the man was an asshole.

“Delhi University,” Rajeev said, and his face lit up as though.

“College?”

“St Stephen’s.”

“Subjects?” He was still not satisfied.

“You do know that St Stephen’s is the best college in India, don’t you? Hope that satisfies you.”

“Now look, I am just trying to have a conversation, you know. We need to pass the time.”

“Chemistry honors. 2008.”

“I have nothing but admiration for you. You turned out so much better than those idiots who spend their lives preparing to get into an IIT and then ambitions of doing nothing but rushing to the US. So much better.”

“I hope so.” It made Rajeev feel slightly better about himself. That the man he thought was so hard to please was talking nice things about him. But he wondered what the reason for this sudden softening could be.

“If I asked you to imagine a car in any way you could, can you imagine it for me? Can you describe in full detail what that car precisely looks like?” The man took a sip of his whiskey, without the ice, of course.
“I don’t know what the drift is here.”

“Just go with me here. What do you have to lose? Must we always look too much into a conversation? Can’t I just have a conversation with a fellow Indian that does not involve H1B visa or Green Card? No worries. We don’t have to talk. You can go back to resting up and I am fine with that.”

It wasn’t the subject matter but that this was turning into some sort of a competition which annoyed Rajeev. Annoyance is just a step away from grief, made him think about Lata. If there was anything he wanted, it was to stay away from grief and do anything that made him not think about Lata. He thought phone would provide the distraction he’d needed, so he took out his phone to see if there was Wi-Fi but there was none. In economy class, Wi-Fi was an impossibility. His only connection to anyone real was many seas away. A conversation was the only thing that could rescue him.

“So, what were you saying about the cars?”

“Oh yeah. You sure this time you want to talk?” he asked. It was good to see his human side. Rajeev nodded.

“You see those boys on our right?”

The seats on the other side of the aisle now had new passengers that Rajeev hadn’t paid attention to before. Three boys, all around eleven, blonde, dressed in red on white pattern t-shirts and factory-manufactured in their sameness. Siblings? Possibly. There was something strange about them. As though they had been picked up from a world of a different kind and planted into that of the plane. The boys struggled with their Thor backpacks and mumbled something to each other before erupting:
“Say we nosedive right after we take off.”

“Stop talking crap. No one will die. We wear life jackets. This yellow one right here, under your seat. Under your seat man. Look here.”

“But, what if we really crash? Like, crash and boom!”

“Shut Up! Just told you, no one will die!”

“Nosedive and crash and you will die, Tony. Your jackets will burn with you.”

“No, that’s not how it works. It’s…. You just don’t know a thing about aircrafts.”

“Tony just shit his pants. I can smell. I can smell it. I can smell it.”


“But you shit your pants. I know you did. I know you did. I can smell it!”

“No. One. Will. Daaaaaaie.”

“We can smell it, we can smell it!”

“Nosedive and crash. Nosedive and crash. Nosedive and crash!”

The kids were inconsolable. Rajeev thought that if something else didn’t kill me, the sound of their voices would. It didn’t help that he was sitting in the aisle seat.

“I don’t know what your point is. What are you trying to say?”

“Their anxiety is about the future. Human beings are hardwired to think about the future. The only way these kids can feel have fun is by anticipating the future. But they are kids, they
are just having fun. For adults, the future is the terror and most of the future is made up in the head. Stop thinking about the future.”

Rajeev wanted to stop the man before he started to harp about some new-age mantra of living in the present.

“Okay, okay, I get the point.” Rajeev regretted being curt. He shouldn’t have been, but . He was right about that. There was no point worrying about the future.

“No. I don’t think you do. Why don’t you imagine a car, for me? Tell me what it looks like in your head.”

“I have no idea where this is going.”

“It’s not going anywhere. What does a car mean to you?” he said, quite simply and matter-of-factly. Rajeev couldn’t get up from the seat, he had to be here for many hours and if immediate history was anything to go by, he had been disrespectful enough. Moreover, it was a trick question, he knew, but he decided to go with it.

“Wheels. Four wheels. A shiny body. Four seats, six maybe. Enclosed compartment with a roof. What’s your point?”

“An airplane has four wheels too, so does a truck.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. Tell me what you want me to say and I will say it.”

“Something that sticks to the ground.”

“Right.”
“Not fly?”

“Right.” I decided to let him indulge.

“What I am trying to say is, you can never think of a car as a motorcycle. Let me tell you a story.”

That was all. The man had tested his limits.

“I am sorry, sir. I don’t think I am in a mood for a story. I really don’t want to talk anymore.” But the old man wouldn’t stop. In Rajeev’s experience, such men rarely did. He left Rajeev with some last words, of course.

“You think that the beating of your heart is your life? Your own life?” he said, got up from the seat and left.

Rajeev didn’t like the way he had dismissed the old man. He knew he was being harsh when he asked him to leave. He must have gone on a loo break, but he never came back. In the absence of any conversation, the couple sitting in front of Rajeev stank even more. He even wanted to tie a handkerchief around his face but realized that may not go very well with the people watching him. He held his breath and waited for the stink to pass. It’s strange how smell grows on you. In a few minutes he didn’t dislike it anymore. After a few more minutes, in fact, he decided he’d miss it if it were to disappear.

The old man wasn’t back yet and he wouldn’t be surprised if he’d found a seat elsewhere. But his luggage was still here, so, Rajeev guessed he would come back. It was his fault. His Indianess never let him look at a conversation without an ulterior motive. From the way the man
had talked, anyone would think of him as a con man. Rajeev could never have guessed from his appearance.

Coco walked towards Rajeev and that made him feel slightly better. But suddenly he was overtaken by a vague familiarity. Maybe it was the name. Coco. Every other stripper was called Coco on TV these days. Or maybe there was some other similarity, a feeling that Rajeev had seen her before. That’s it! She was at the airline counter. The Perky One. The one who’d persisted after her co-worker had refused to upgrade his flight. It was their job. Maintaining the supply-demand. Keeping the consumers wanting. Clamping down, curbing availability of things, of services, of time. It was in their trained manners, in their snubs, in their Nos, and their Yes Sirs. How did Rajeev miss it? By the virtue of his expensive education, he understood and grasped why their job needed that kind of craftiness—basic economics from first semester of his business education. Shortage was the magic wand of desire. Desire created anxiety. Anxiety meant fear.

Coco was back to Rajeev’s seat and she was serving the stinky couple on number 72. They didn’t seem to have any company in the form of a third passenger. She was now in front of him.

“Here you go, sir,” Coco said, placing the food on the tray.

“Thanks, Coco.”

“Would you like something to drink?” she said. Her lips were red, stained with wine.

Coco laughed. It was loud and jarring like a static-filled radio reception or a scratched tape. Coco kept two whiskey miniatures delicately on the tray and gave me some tissues.

“Nosedive and crash! Nosedive and crash! Nosedive and crash!”

“They want dinner,” Rajeev pointed at the triplets. Coco laughed again. This time she sounded different, slightly tolerable, more in tandem with her pretty face. She handed Rajeev five miniatures of Glenlivet 18. Business class stock. One, two, three, four, five. Yes, five.

“It’s your lucky day.” She smiled, and Rajeev felt good for the first time after the old man had left.

“Hey, a quick question. Do you happen to know where the man who was sitting with me went?”

“No sir.”

“I understand it’s not your responsibility to keep track of passengers, but he’s been missing from his seat for quite some time now. Does it happen too often? Do you think something may have happened to him? Maybe in the washroom?”

“I really appreciate your concern for other passengers, sir. I will get it checked.”

Of course, she said she was going to check it. Like a battery-operated doll, Coco had to, it was her job. Maybe Rajeev was being bitter for no reason. Maybe the old man had gotten off the plane.

There was an old joke. An Indian joke. It was a train joke, from the time when it was still not very common to travel in an aircraft and people still travelled via train to get to their destination. The thing about a train is that there is more than one destination, and this is how it goes:
Person A who’d never sat in the plane: Where are you headed?

Person B who always travels in the plane: Wherever this plane is headed.

The seat belt sign was back on because of turbulence, but the pilot assured everyone there was nothing to worry about. And that three hundred passengers sitting inside a heavy metal bird should trust him with their lives because he was paid a fortune for it. Everyone around Rajeev was belted down to their seat except the women with pitch dark hair. Her seat was empty. If she was in the toilet, it must be the roughest time she’s ever had in a washing compartment. He felt strange knowing that two people around him had been missing. The three boys on his right started to scream again.

“Nosedive and crash! Nosedive and crash! Nosedive and crash!”

Rajeev hadn’t noticed this before, but they were triplets. All boys. Three identical humans, like factory-manufactured things. Soup cans and cookies. Rajeev didn’t know why this fact made him uncomfortable and a bit cold. Rajeev looked for a sweatshirt in his bag. A gust of cold air hit him from the vent over his head. He pulled up his hoodie. It never occurred to him to close the opening.

The cabin crew announced that everyone needed to fasten their seatbelts because they were crossing a zone of turbulence. The woman with dark hair was back in her seat but the elf-haired man sitting next to Rajeev wasn’t back yet. Her hair was untied now, so long that they were carefully folded and kept on her lap, like dry laundry. The movements of the plane didn’t seem to matter anymore, he was only aware of the response of his own body to the movement. A vacuum in his stomach.
Those boys, the cloned boxes from a manufacturing unit were at it again. From where Rajeev was, they looked like 3-D statues stamped on each seat, like the microwaved boxes in Coco’s trolley. Similar outside and inside. The passengers had finished lunch and she’d be back to collect the empty boxes.

The pilot mumbled something in the mic, unclearly. Gibberish, all gibberish. But must mean something somewhere on the plane. Clearly. The pilot’s words had propelled the cabin crew into action. Uniformed women hurried to either end of the plane, their tightly tied hair screaming for freedom.

Something about all this, the war on his senses and emotions made him feel even colder, even though the vent above his head was now closed. All he wanted was to go to sleep and wake up when it was all over. But he knew the sleep was a forgotten prospect and it wouldn’t come anytime soon now. No sleep yet.

Rajeev checked the screen on the seat and he still had about ten hours to go. It was funny how the screen on the seat behind the passenger’s back constantly told the passengers that they are in motion, and yet the travelers never felt a thing. The time was crawling in the airplane and the fact that Rajeev was alone wasn’t meditative anymore. If only he could sleep and not feel the passage of time. Sleep was identical to death. Apart from the bed that one slept in, there was no connection to the world outside of the one that lived in one’s head. And like the death, it was hard to control it. Just like the sleep, it came at a time when it was supposed to. At what point one falls into the deep chasm of sleep isn’t something that one could control. Was this all a dream?
Just thinking about sleep put Rajeev to sleep again. And even when he was asleep, he was very much aware of the dream he was in. The kind of bad dreams that are called nightmares and that never come true. Like poisonous snakes, they must always be shut tight in a box. But who is to say what will come true, what will happen in the future?

This time the dream was a familiar one. The last night Lata was with Rajeev, a very strange thing had happened, and he would not be able to forget it no matter how hard he tried. Lata, who was lying with him in the bed had gotten up from the bed to go to the washroom, as she often did each day. Lata did that because she would drink up a lot of water in the night and he often asked her why she did that. She said it was good for health or something. When Lata came back, her face was different. The face was in some ways hidden because of a thick layer of putty on it. And the face had a scar-like mark on it running from the corner of her mouth to the chin. Whoever this figure was, and Rajeev was quite sure it was the old man, his fingers moved, the index and the thumb stapled like a pinch. And while he was still dreaming, slowly, with the softest swab of cotton the world had seen, he wiped her face, removing the plaster from her chin. In his dream, he felt hot, so hot that if someone touched his bare skin, their fingers would be cooked like meat. He was sure the air conditioning in the plane was working because the woman on the right, the one with her hair folded on her lap was still wrapped up with a thick jacket and a throw. Rajeev remembered reading somewhere that the reason plane cabins are kept cold is because people could possibly faint if the cabin is warm. He looked for the man old man who’d disappeared and Coco who was probably in the pantry. Still in his dream, where he saw his real surrounding, he had removed his shoes and now and tried to wear them again, but they wouldn’t fit.
“You were talking in your sleep,” a familiar voice said once again, and Rajeev awoke from his sleep. It was the elf-haired man. Rajeev had not talked in sleep in a long time. It was a thing he used to do as a kid. It was a thing that had changed his life. He changed the subject.

“I am sorry if you left because of me. I didn’t mean what I said.”

“Then, why did you say it? And I hope you had a good time alone,” the man said.

“I am Rajeev,” he said, extending his hand to the man.

“Lata? Is that her name?”

“I am sorry about my behavior. I…My wife, I think I just lost my wife. I got a phone call and I am flying to India.” Rajeev realized he had over compensated for his bad behavior, but then he realized it didn’t matter now. It maybe good to talk. He was just a stranger, after all.

“Most times, we fail to understand the concept of loss. The brain can’t tell between memories and the real thing, did you know that? The want of something in its physicality is just a desire of the body. And in your case, you are not even sure you lost her.”

He wasn’t wrong. Rajeev’s father-in-law never specified anything. Could it be that Rajeev was reading too much into it?

“Yeah. I don’t know where she is. Her father said she was “gone” and nothing else.”

“You didn’t ask? What exactly did he say?”

“He used the word “gone” and hung up and I have been trying to get in touch with him since and haven’t been able to. But I am also thinking, uncertainty works in my favor for now. It’s a good thing to have.”
“Your wife, what about your wife? Did you never contact her? My bad. You must have. What does your heart say? Where do you think it is? What does the thing inside your gut say? You know that feeling that grows and grows and takes everything over. Like a weed or a seed that grows into a tree.”

“It’s funny you should say that, you know. Before my wife left for India, she said the same thing. A seed in the stomach. I made fun of her for saying that.”

“Maybe, she isn’t really gone. She is dormant like a seed and will come back again.”

“I don’t know what to believe. I am afraid to think. What if she really is dead? Or worse.”

“You think cheating in marriage is worse than death? You think she eloped, don’t you? In that case your fear is not death or living without her, but a shame about what happened.”

“We were married only for six months. How much can one know a person in six months?”

“Why don’t you do something about the way you are feeling?”

“What can I do? I left my work and booked the first flight out from India. I can’t fly faster than I already am. You won’t believe but ever since I got the news, the only thing I have been trying to do is not think about it. What can I do, sitting here, so far away from her?”

“Exactly. See, how you spoke the truth when you got defensive. The world is divided into two kinds of people, you know,” the old man said, again with no particular malevolent feeling but as a matter of fact.

“Good and bad?” This time Rajeev decided to go with him.
“Those who believe that the world started with a bang. That there was something that kicked off the way this world looks now. That someone decided it. Adam and Eve, Garden of Eden, you know. And then there are those who think there was a bird and it gave two eggs and the Earth was made and from the other egg, the sky was made.”

“And the point?”

“What category do you fall in?”

“I don’t know. I guess I believe in the Big Bang.”

“The point is not to be correct. The point is to be accurate.”

“Okay.”

“Listen to me: You know why birds are gods? Birds are gods because they fly. Humans can’t fly. The bird eats and drinks and does all the things a human can, and yet man can’t fly. The bird can walk but the man can’t fly. Remember this, you will need it.” That’s all the man said and left. With him the three white boys were gone too.

By now, Rajeev had accepted that everything that had happened to him on the plane was a result of tiredness or exhaustion, coupled with the bad news that he had received in the morning. Whatever was happening to him: his version or the version of facts people around him were saw. He could ask the elf-haired man if he was seeing what Rajeev was seeing. If the three boys had really disappeared, but he didn’t. It was enough that he was posing questions about his own insanity.
Rajeev closed his eyes for some time and realized he was afraid to go to sleep, afraid that he may not wake up again and he may forever be locked in unpleasant dreams where Lata wasn’t who he knew her to be.
CHAPTER TEN

It was three years after planting the Neem tree that Triveni noticed the first flowerings on it. Tiny white, that grow into marble-size fruits that’d be dried and oiled and used for pimples and soaps. It is said that no part of a Neem tree is ever wasted. But one only had to go near the tree to know that the tree wasn’t what it was claiming to be.

The white flowers turned into fruit and weren’t a green color but a crimson, the color of blood. There was no doubt in Triveni’s mind that the fruit changes color from a green to red and then a dark brown and then when it is a ripe black, it’s ready to be plucked.

And then those leaves. They were bigger than neem and did not have the jagged edges that Triveni was very sure the neem leaf had. Triveni had had his doubts for some time, but he knew it as a tree and how a tree grew was uncontrollable, wild. There was nothing but time that would have given him the answers. But the time, in this case, had made the answers obscure.

As a boy, Triveni had a neem tree in the backyard, but he hadn’t paid it the kind of attention that he was bound to pay now. Although he knew that a neem tree just as one should know their own child. A foot high at six months, two feet at eight—it grows fast initially—flowers at three years and then fruits at four. At around six years, the neem tree is big enough, dense enough to provide shade. Even when it’s hot outside, it’s always a few notches cooler under the tree.

But his mother sometimes pickled the Neem fruit. He could never understand the appeal. Soaking something bitter in oil, chilies and salt couldn’t make it good.

There was only one person who could give him the answers.
Mani Kumar was busy with work. There was no Sunday for him, but then again, there was no Monday either. He wore his usual slippers and socks and the same white kurta and pyjama that he usually wore. It had the stains of his day’s work on them and Triveni was almost jealous that a man could be so carefree.

“I am sorry, bhai sahib. I will give you the money back and a hundred rupees on it,” Mani said, not wanting to lose one of his regular customers. He was placing the stock of his rose plants forward. They were always in high demand during winters.

“It’s not about the money,” Triveni said. “The tree is big and now I can’t cut it. So, you tell me what that plant is,” Triveni said. His fear had been that Mira would notice.

“Sir, I am very sorry. I can come to your place and see it,” Kumar said.

“Did you sell me something from the bad batch? Or a cross? I am not blaming you, but I just want to get it checked. Will you come to my house and see what that tree is?”

“But I want to say that this is not the first time you have bought plants from me, Triveni bhai. There is nothing to hide. People have never had a complaint like that, which speaks of my integrity,” Mani joined his together and started to apologize.

“Please Mani bhai. Don’t do this. Come to my house, have lunch with us and have a look at that plant. I hope it’s not a lot to ask,” Triveni said. He knew that if there had been a mistake on Mani’s part, it had been just that: a mistake.

Mani followed inside his residence but was thinking about the meal that lay ahead of him. It need not be chicken, he thought, it had been a long time since he had any home-made food,
he’d eat just about anything. One thing he knew was that people in the villages cooked good food and he couldn’t help thinking about it.

For the last ten years, ever since his wife died, he’d eaten only from the road-side stalls, where the food tastes good only if you ignore the going ons around it: the bucket in which the plates are washed, but never changed, the sweat dripping from the person cooking your meal, the lack of any knowledge of the plants, animals and life going into what you’re eating, passing crow for chicken.

“You called me home to let me eat with you and I am grateful for that,” Mani said. It was Triveni’s kindness, sure. It was hard to argue he was not a kind man, but it would also be hard to argue he did not have any motive in mind. If Mani knew what was at stake, he would not thank Triveni as much as he did. But he couldn’t have understood it, even if Triveni had told him the truth. There is something about empathy that isn’t what it seems to be. It’s close, but not complete.

They walked into the house and on to the muddy land which had the tree on it. Mani thought of the things he was stepping on, the things he wasn’t even aware of. There was life sticking to the sole of his shoes, life on the surface of the ground, life making its way up to his socks, but he couldn’t see it, he’d never be able to see it, just as that life would never be able to know that he too, was alive.

There it was, the Neem tree. What Kumar and Triveni were looking at was the tree in its physical embodiment, which meant different things to the both of them.

“It’s amazing how these leaves, that are so small, can stir the wind like this, isn’t it,” Kumar said.
“Yes. I spent so many summer evenings sitting under one. Drinking Lassi. Did you have one in your home?”

“Who doesn’t. We had a Peepal too, but never held any appeal for me. Looked old even when it’s young. But I think it’s exactly the opposite with a Neem tree. Don’t you think?”

“You are right, Kumar. There is something about it. I think it’s the leaves. So small, never growing old, never feeling old when you grab them in your hands.”

“Yes,” Triveni said. “But do you think this is Neem tree?” he asked Mani.

Kumar closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if inhaling the bitterness of the leaves. He was a man who was supposed to know about plants. It couldn’t be argued.

“There is something strange about it, you are right,” Mani said.

“Look at these leaves. Is this normal? They are a different shape, don’t you think?” Triveni said.

“Yes. They are, but you judge a tree just as you judge a person. This smell that hangs in the air is unmistakably Neem,” he said.

“Should I be worried about something? Look at these fruits, they should not have turned red so fast,” Triveni asked.

Mani plucked the fruit, sticking tight with others in the middle of the leaves and made a slight incision in its body.

“This is a Banyan fruit,” Mani said. “But, it looks like everything else has the quality of the neem in it. No wonder these fruits have never been green. This is not neem, not fully.”
“I noticed that. The leaves are different too. Thicker with the gloss that neem doesn’t have. Isn’t it?”

Mani plucked a leaf and put it in his mouth—something Triveni had been wanting to do but couldn’t. But he was sure Mani knew what he was doing.

“It is not bitter in the least.”

“But the leaves look more like neem than banyan and still?”

“Yes. That is right.”

Mira served lunch to two men and it was perhaps because of the way Mani was dressed that Mira didn’t think to invite him inside. His clothes were muddy, and he hadn’t taken a bath in a long time. It was time for Triveni to eat, so Mani ate alone, and Mira got him hot chapatis. Mani ate fast and as though someone would take the food away from him. He insisted on sitting not the chair but on the ground, for reason that both Triveni and Mira understood. Triveni knew that with that meal he’d have Mani’s loyalty for the rest of his life.

After Mani was gone, Triveni could not help going back to the tree, hoping that he’d see something else that would bring him closer to the answer. He was right. In the evening, Triveni walked in the yard was standing by the tree and noticed the bird. It didn’t fly away because of the movement around the tree, because of him. It wasn’t afraid. It was eating on the fruits and when it was tired of the fruits, it ate the leaves. The bird was alone and for once, Triveni wondered if it was the bird that was responsible for what the tree had become. But it didn’t take him long to realize it was just a bird. The bird looked like a woodpecker with a crown and long tail. He
wasn’t good at identifying birds and he couldn’t tell what it was, but he knew it was such an ordinary-looking bird that even if he had seen it, he would not have remembered it. It was a light mud shade and did not have any other color on it. If it wasn’t significant enough to remember, Triveni decided, it wasn’t significant enough to think about. He decided to forget about the tree and the bird for the time being—although he knew it wasn’t entirely possible. What was important was that the tree hid what Mira didn’t want to see and beyond that he tried not to care about.

When things started to look more settled, Triveni began to look for jobs. Mira had seemed happier and the tree had taken care of the other problem. The financial condition was stable, but there was nothing to occupy Triveni for long hours. The only thing he perhaps looked forward to was talking with Mira or gossiping with Ranu. Mira got busy with housework as soon as she awoke each morning and even though maintaining the kitchen garden was something that would have kept him occupied, it wasn’t enough. He could make hunting a full-time hobby, but he was still not sure about it. He decided he’d talk to Mira about it.

Mira had been busier than usual in the kitchen, she appeared to be cooking something special. Triveni had seen her collect ingredients from the kitchen garden: tomatoes, peas, green chilis, onions, ginger and garlic for the curry paste. She mashed the chickpeas she’d soaked the day before, transferring them into the pressure cooker to steam. She’d been saving milk to make paneer for a while now, which was why Triveni’s early morning teas had been watered down. Triveni liked paneer. Mira kneaded the dough for rotis with curd, which made them soft and flavorful. She decided she would make some korma with cashews and saffron.
The food preparations were over by seven and Mira decked up the dining table now. She picked the most expensive china and hand-woven napkins for the night. Although no one she knew ever used napkins, she’d seen it on TV and they looked good. She put new rugs, draped the dining table with a red cotton-silk cover and got new cushions for the dining chairs. Mira did it to celebrate the day, not impress Triveni.

It was very welcoming to see the food on the table for Triveni. Mira was already there, and she was wearing a beautiful sari. It wasn’t something she wore for the weddings, but not the usual cotton saris that she wore at home. It had tiny white flowers against the purple and if Triveni knew anything about fabrics, it was silk because even in the relatively dim light of the dining room, it shined.

Mira looked beautiful too. There was something about her that had renewed itself. It was true that she had made that decision three years, but it was only now that he was beginning to see its effects. The three hours of work in the kitchen hadn’t fazed that beauty. When he thought about the time he’d seen her the first time, through an arrangement that people had made for them, her beauty had been intimidating to her. Not to say that he wasn’t handsome himself, but in the eyes of the people who thought her to be beautiful, would his handsomeness hold the same ground? He knew the answer to that, and he believed it was for this very reason that he found it hard to say no to anything that she demanded, anything that she indicated she needed. It was as though, for a very long time, her beauty had been his responsibility and everything that emerged from it, the consequences of that, had been his duty.

That was years ago when they were married, and even now as she sat on the table opposite him, he was very sure that the reason he’d agreed to sit in the cold and eat here even on
the dining table instead of their warm sofas or beds, had something to do not with his love for her, which, no doubt was immense, but her beauty, that he did not want to offend.

There had been times when Triveni had insisted on taking his dinner to the sofa where they could eat in the warmth of a throw at least, but Mira didn’t want to. For her, this was a ritual that had to be undertaken each day. It was as though, her entire day was directed toward this ritual. Sometimes, there was more work to be done, sometimes less, sometimes it was something special, sometimes not, but each day at eight in the night, he could be nowhere else but on the table.

“It’s not much, but this is all there is. Food looks better laid out on the dining table. Don’t you think?” she said and smiled.

“You look beautiful,” he said. He didn’t usually say those things to her, but there was a reason he’d said it. A reason he couldn’t sufficiently define.

“I am going to be a mother,” she said. There was nothing else to be said after that. Triveni’s plans and talks about getting back to work would have sounded insignificant, even boring.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rajeev was home and he had started to feel it the moment he stepped out of the airplane. No one threw him glances because he didn’t look like them, no one tried to smile at him politely because he was one of them. And yet, they stared at him because they sensed something that wasn’t like them. It wasn’t the clothes, the more expensive kinds, but something that couldn’t be measured by clothes alone. Something in the eyes that changes, he thought. He was like everyone around him, but not. He was still another flight away from Lata’s parents’ home, but he knew that time would pass too, in this half sleep, half wakefulness.

It was perhaps in that half-wakefulness, that Rajeev reached Dehradun and hired a taxi. The road to Sunderwala was full of familiarity: patches of trees and buildings, drivers honking on the roads, the slowness with which his taxi moved and most of all the small shops littered throughout the place. The shops, even though all of them looked like shabby cuboids, some sold groceries, others hardware, there were also the tiny shops selling school uniforms for kids. Not all of them made money, most a front for socializing.

Each evening, the men of the house sat in the shop after coming back from office where they talked about matters that didn’t concern their immediate lives. The politics, the crops, the films. Rajeev wondered why it was the man that seeks escape from their personal life? It’s probably because a man is often in a sort of a flux over what he controls. The house he pays for is the territory of the woman, the office he works in is the territory of his boss, the only place where he can exist without feeling excluded are these shops where he is not obligated to play a role except that of perhaps a friend and a smoker.
Rajeev’s car entered Sunderwala, his small village situated in the middle of sal forests that could never remove itself from his memory. It was then that he heard the bird. The bird that sang each morning and sometimes at no set times at all. As they drove, the driver didn’t say a word. This was no Lucy situation. The drivers here never spoke unless spoken to. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for home and what lay ahead, amid a pandemonium in my head, and face the things without Lata. Nothing was going to be same without her. But that wasn’t even the last of it.

Rajeev’s house in the village was built by his grandfather and that was where he lived with his grandmother after his parents passed away. As he entered the gate, it became clear to him that the place was always going to feel like home. The red brick walls of the house, the pebbles on the driveway—what was with the pebbles with the driveway that made you feel like home? It was probably the fact that they could not break. When it rained, your feet didn’t get muddy. They were just good at being when they were: pebbles. They didn’t do anything else much and they don’t need to.

Rajeev had left this home soon after he graduated from school and then went away for college at Delhi University. He had come back a few years ago when news of his grandmother’s passing reached him.

The last time he was there was eight months ago, when he’d met Lata’s father and Lata and he lived in the house for a while—a few weeks before they flew to America. They had formed a sort of a routine during those days, a comfortable, domestic routine that had seemed like a short holiday. It was strange to think of the house without her now. Where are you, Lata,
he thought. He felt strange just saying it, as though, calling her name would bring her back. Now there was no avoiding the moment he had been dreading. He had to get used to her absence. Lata, he called her name again.

Why did calling out someone’s name bring them close to you? It’s perhaps because there is a hope of an immediate answer. But not this time. But he still had to say it, quietly like a prayer when your lips move, but the sound is hardly discernible even by one that speaks.

It was a soft sound, a whisper even, not meant to serve any purpose, unlike the chirping of birds or crying of a baby. It was just a sound of a man mourning for loss. Mourning and thinking, straddling between helplessness and obligation. This sound, this whisper may even be called talking. A mad man talking to himself for the loss of his wife, perhaps, an early symptom of madness that descends on shareholders of grief.

Lata’s memories paralyzed him. Her presence that didn’t completely disappear from the house, haunted him, and lingered like last night’s food in my mouth. When he closed his eyes and ignored the fact that she was gone, he could still picture her outside, plucking green chilies to put in the sabzi for morning or making tea for me. But that couldn’t be because her sweater, was still hanging on the chair and during winters it never just hung on the chair. It was one garment she couldn’t do without in winters. The sweater meant her presence, but not this time.

The sweater was maroon in color, something she took off each night before going to bed. It was the sweater Rajeev’s mother had given her at the wedding. How many times she’d showed Rajeev the 100% pure wool logo on the inside and celebrated it, excited that it was so rare to find pure wool sweaters these days.
Rajeev felt the cold coming in from the wooden windows with thin glass veneers. They’d said that it was going to be the coldest it had ever been in North India in close to a hundred years. It wasn’t snowing—it never snowed in Dehradun. In his life time, Rajeev had seen hailstones several times, but never snow. But it was so cold it wouldn’t surprise him if snow started to fall. And all those things they had been saying about the climate changing, they might as well be happening.

There was an air vent above his bed that Lata had closed with one side of a cardboard box, but for the first time he realize it did nothing. If cardboard boxes could fight the cold, people would be living in them.

Rajeev knew he should get out this very minute to see her parents, but he felt distracted. There was a bit of brown paper hanging by the edge of that cardboard that was closing the vent, that would come off any time with the force of the wind. Usually, Lata would light a sigri before sleeping. She’d ask Rajeev to bring some coal just for that.

He went up to the roof to have a good look at Lata’s house. It was on an elevation and visible from the roof of Rajeev’s house. Upstairs, and it was cold. Nothing had changed in the village and that in some odd way assured him that maybe nothing had happened to Lata. From where he stood, he could still see the house Lata’s parents lived in. It would be hard to talk about Lata without talking about when it was the first time they met.

Rajeev did not waste any time and started to walk towards Lata’s parents’ house. He dialed all three numbers once again but there was no response.

In Sunderwala it was hard to escape the sal trees. They were everywhere, like the aroma of food in the room. It was cold, but it was clear that it won’t be for long—the sun had risen. The
soil was damp from light rains and stuck to our shoes slightly. But it wasn’t messy. The rain was welcome during this time of the year, it cleared the air and made the Himalayas more visible than they usually were.

Rajeev entered the premises of Lata’s place and it was like taking a dip in the memories. Although he hadn’t been to his in-law’s place many times before, this was a place that he couldn’t forget. Once you walked up to the house you could take a good look at the entire village. It still had the original apple green color that it earlier did. The first time Rajeev had met Triveni, his father-in-law was in the March of the year before. He had come back because Jitu uncle had informed him that a man was looking for Rajeev. Sunderwala was a small place and rumors spread like ink in water. He said the man was carrying around a bunch of laminated papers he wanted to show you, he’d said it was important. Jitu uncle had told her he’d given him his email id and he should hear from the man soon.

Initially, Rajeev had been nervous about this fact, but it was just an email id and he thought that it was probably about one of the donations that his father had made.

Rajeev had agreed to come, it was also the anniversary of his grandmother’s passing. It was March, but it was still cold and that day when he first heard from Lata’s father, he was checking his emails and which is when he saw a letter from some Dr Ravinder Triveni and it went something like this:

Dear Rajeev,

I am sorry to catch you unawares like this. I hope we were talking face to face, but I did not want to confuse you by just dropping in. I asked around and your very close friend, Jitu, gave me your email address. Although I have been to your house several times. I don’t know if you
remember me. Perhaps not. You were a very young boy. Your father and I worked together at the bank. I’ve known him since he was appointed the branch manager of the Raipur branch. This was when you were eight or nine, perhaps. Your father and my friendship started when I approached him about some trouble with a check—the time when people used to sign check and write them. It was a long time ago, as I said. Your father and I became very good friends over a period of time. I have been to your home a few times, but I have never entered the gates of that beautiful home. I am sure you have kept the color of the bricks red and the beautiful garden is still green.

I know I was not there when your father died, but the truth is I could not have been able to take it. I would not have been able to give you the solace that you required at that time and I was a coward and due to this shortcoming of mine, I decided to not see you.

Now, let me tell you why I emailed you instead of coming home. I did come home several times, but I always found a lock. In fact, I came home several times in the last few years, but did not find you there. So, I figured you probably did not live there. I looked for your name several times and even though I haven’t seen you, I do remember your face from the time you were a little boy and I am amazed to say you haven’t changed much. I don't know if it's the eyes, but some people don’t change much at all, and you haven’t changed much, beta. I hope you wouldn’t mind me calling you beta. Your father and I made a promise to each other a long time ago. We said to ourselves that we would maintain this relationship as long as we could. And your father had said that since I have a girl and he has a boy (you), it is possible to think of a longer relationship by getting the both of you married.

Of course, this had been nothing more than a joke at the time, but I wondered why it had to be a joke. Why could it not be something more than that? Nothing is stopping us. I am
probably coming too strong at this moment, but I would like you to think about it. It's a request. And I know this idea seems too wild at the moment, but please think about it.

My daughter, Lata, is twenty and she is sensible, beautiful and educated. I am not saying you must marry her, but you can think of meeting her and decide what you want to do.

Please write to me on this email.

Yours truly,

Ravinder Singh Triveni

And copied as an attachment was a picture of him and Rajeev’s father. Rajeev had never seen that picture of him before. He was with this man. The man had a mustache just like his father and both of them were dressed in formal shirts. He didn’t think it was because of some occasion. Older people just liked to be dressed up all the time. It was hard to tell where exactly the picture had been taken. It was as though the background had been tampered with while developing the picture. All he could see were smudges. But it was hard to tell if it had been done on the computer after the picture was scanned or at the time of developing the image. There was no mistaking his father. He had the thin, angular face that Rajeev had gotten from him. His eyes dark, like his.

Even with age, he hadn’t put on any weight. Rajeev didn’t remember his father being a health freak or even remotely concerned about his health, but he looked the same as he remembered him. But the longer he looked at the picture, the more certain he became that probably his father was sick at the time or that there was a kind of shock he had suffered.
Because he looked the way a person looks after a long illness, but his mother or grandmother had never told him about any illness his father had. And if he did, it wasn’t serious enough to deserve a mention. More than anything else, the memory he had of his father wasn’t that of a sick man. In the picture, he couldn’t tell if his father was happy to be there or if he was there out of happenstance. The man with his father, his father-in-law, looked more certain of being there.

At first, Rajeev was offended by that message. How could he be so certain that Rajeev would say yes? What if he had been married? Why would he get his daughter married to a stranger? In his defense, I was not a stranger. He knew my father; people had had such arrangements for generations. At first, Rajeev didn’t want to email him back. But there was this other part of him that was curious about this picture, this other part of his father’s life, that he knew so little about. It was probably this curiosity that made him consider it. His father was also a friend, capable of putting his arms around someone, smiling, waiting to take a picture with them, knowing someone would have that forever. He wasn’t such a bad man after all, even though he hadn’t been a good father.

He wondered if it was unusual to consider answering the email. He didn’t know why he didn’t dismiss that email. He didn’t know why he didn’t spam it. Same thing. Families propositioned on behalf of their daughters all the time. How was that different from newspaper ads and dating services?

Rajeev didn’t email him back immediately. He looked around a bit, on the internet, he was sure he would find something. This person could be a creep and the picture photoshopped. But in that case, the question remained: Why him?
He Googled and he found people of the same name, but none of them were possible fathers to girls of marriageable age. That picture wasn’t much to go by, but it certainly made him believe the man.

If it wasn’t for the picture, it would have been easier to dismiss all of it. But Rajeev had an intense craving to be part of his father’s life that he had not been a part of. His father had a smile on his face in that picture, it wasn’t a full smile but he looked happy with a shade of hesitation.

In those few days from the time Rajeev got the email from Lata’s father, till the time he responded, he looked at the picture several time, going over the smallest of details, thinking about the conditions under which it was taken. But there was something about the picture that wasn’t letting him into that world. It was as though his father had a deep pain, that made its way into the picture. Rajeev wondered how long after this picture he died. Would that tell him anything about it? Rajeev didn’t sleep many nights after that. He composed emails in his mind and erased them.

He decided to not think of it as an email, but an informal note to himself. He started typing on the notepad in the phone. He titled the note “mysterious email” and wrote:

Dear Mr. Singh,

Thank you for your email. (It was important to be nice, even though he had taken me by surprise. There was no reason to not thank, there was nothing to be lost from it). It’s great to hear from you. I have never seen that picture of my father and I was engulfed by a sort of a nostalgia when I saw it. I am glad you had a chance to know him in his short life. I don’t know of anyone
who wasn’t touched by his kindness. (I knew I sounded a bit sugary here, I didn’t think he would mind). I don’t remember the visits you made when my father was still alive, but then I guess I was too young to remember. (I didn’t think that was the case. I don’t think he has ever visited us here. Even if he had, probably only a few times and that wasn’t enough to establish any acquaintance).

About the marriage proposal. Honestly, you’ve taken me by surprise. But I found your tone earnest and I think it’s a good idea to meet and discuss these matters instead of carrying them on electronic medium. We can meet here, at our house. I hope you remember how to get here, if not, please let me know. As you probably know, there is no house number here in the village, so knowing the location is necessary. Does tomorrow, Saturday work for you? Say, 1pm? If you would like to meet at some other time, please let me know, or else, I will see you here at 1pm.

Best,

Rajeev Singh

Once the email was written, Rajeev sent it immediately. What was important wasn’t what he wrote, but they were going to meet and talk.

Saturday had seemed too early, but once he sent the email, he was desperate the matter resolved as quickly as possible. He practiced caution and deliberately did not give out his phone number. If he claimed to be who he is, then he should remember how to get there. That night, when he went to bed, there was no stress. He was calm and excited about the things that had laid in front of him.
On Saturday, he woke up early. He heard the bird sing, once again, just as he had as a little boy. He stepped outside in the dew-soaked soil and looked around for the bird. It sat right there on the jackfruit tree. It was such a plain-looking bird, with nothing but a dull brown and it had a crown on its head and had a long tail. He couldn’t believe that as a little boy, he had gone out into the forest to look for the bird when it had been here all this while.

Lata’s father was going to arrive at around lunch. Rajeev had given him a time just after lunch, so he didn’t have to cook any. He was sure, that he wouldn’t eat at a stranger’s house. At about eleven in the morning Rajeev ate an early lunch. He looked at the photograph again and took a picture of it in different kind of lights. His father’s smile seemed the widest when the sunlight from the window came directly on the picture instead of through the sheer curtains. Rajeev looked at that picture for a long time, as though trying to find some answers, trying to solve a puzzle, but he didn’t get any further. When the man in the picture would come to see him, Rajeev would probably get a little closer to solving its mystery but not before that, he decided.

When Rajeev’s alarm beeped, at one pm, the doorbell rang. It was as though the whoever was at the door had been waiting for the alarm to go off. The man in the picture was no doubt the same man standing in front of Rajeev. The man hadn’t aged at all from the time that picture was taken. It had been seventeen years since his father had died and it was unlikely this man had looked the same all this time. That did not do very well for the low confidence he had in this situation. His body, it was thin, like in the picture.

“Please come in,” Rajeev said.
It was winter-time and they could have sat outside in the sun, but there was a certain risk Rajeev anticipated in making this business too public. It’s true letting the stranger inside the house like that could have made the situation worse, but Rajeev trusted himself on this.

“Namaste,” the man said, his hands joined together. He bowed a little, out of respect. Rajeev answered his Namaste and called him in.

The man walked into the room, his body did not find it difficult to squeeze through the door wouldn’t open in full because of the rust. He sat down on the wooden sofa, which did not have a good support, he’d rejected comfort.

“The last time I came here, I sat here,” he said, smiling. It emerged from his faded face like a flash of light in the smoke. Rajeev smiled back.

“Would you like some water?” Rajeev asked him.

He nodded and held on to the a leather pouch right next to his thigh, the kind old men carried around with them.

“Yes, beta. Some water,” he said. His voice that had started as hard had softened a little, more comfortable.

“Tap water or warm?”

“A little warm, if you don’t mind, beta,” he said and smiled and held his leather pouch again.

Rajeev got up to get some water for him. While he was in the kitchen, he kept an eye on the old man who was sitting there without any movement. He just looked around and assessed the room. Rajeev got back with a steel tumbler of warm water. The man thanked took the steel
tumbler from Rajeev’s hand and thanked him again. The moment he put it on his lips, he stopped.

“Beta, he said. This water—I think there is some mud in it,” he said. He was right. Rajeev had been drinking bottle water and instead of heating that, he’d just heated the tap water, which was always muddy.

“I am sorry,” Rajeev said and got him another glass.

The man waited quietly, his bag now clutched in his hand, a sign of nervousness. Rajeev hoped he did not notice his hands shaking when he served him the water. The man took a sip of water and pulled a bunch of laminated papers from his bag and kept it on the table that was between them. The man moistened his throat with a few more gulps of water and started:

“Beta, first of all, I am sorry for not getting you these sooner. This is something that your father had entrusted me with. You can take your time to go through them. There are ten of these. There is no reason for it to be ten of these, you know. It’s just a coincidence. Your father bought some land and kept the papers with me, and he told me to give them to you. Like I said in the email, we both worked together, and he had opened and account and asked me to hand them over to you when you are of age. And of course, like I said, there is nothing I can do to make up for the lost time.”

Rajeev lifted the stack of laminated papers that he had filed together and looked over them. They were all typed in bad ink in Hindi and were on legal stamp papers. There were a few details, address and much that Rajeev did not understand. They were in legal Hindi. But he did understand that it had something to do with land and its ownership.

“So, how much land was this and how much is it worth?”
“I don’t know how much this is worth now, but back then, I am certain it wasn’t much because your father bought it form an investment point of view. I am just here to hand you over these papers.” This man wasn’t taking away anything from Rajeev, so he shouldn’t have been nervous, but he was.

“Why didn’t you tell me this over the message?”

“Oh, it’s not safe to talk about this sort of thing on the internet, you know that,” he said and smiled.

“But papers to my father’s property are already with me. There no land that belongs to me that I don’t already know of.”

“Beta, you will probably find it hard to believe this, but your father and I had pooled some money and bought this land. Fifty per cent of this belongs to me, but I am an old man and have enough to live for. I have a daughter, who will soon be—god willing—married off. Please keep them as a gift.”

Either the man did not understand that he was trying to buy Rajeev for his daughter, or he knew what he was doing and was hoping it worked.

“I can’t keep them until I know how much they are worth and what the story behind them is.” It was not that Rajeev couldn’t see through the deal, it was just that he did not want to believe someone was trying to play such a big one on him. He felt instantly uncomfortable and couldn’t have the man around. “I can’t give you and immediate answer, I am sorry,” Rajeev said.
The man smiled and put his hand inside his bag again and came out with something that looked like a wooden picture frame. He zipped his leather back. He was in no hurry and he wasn’t aware of the hurry inside Rajeev’s head, so, he took his time.

“This,” he said and placed the framed picture on the table, “Is my daughter,” he said. The girl in the picture was very young. Eighteen to twenty years in age, perhaps. She was wearing a sari and unlike most girls her age, seemed very comfortable in it. The picture still had the gloss of newness in it. It did strike him as strange that it was in a frame and he had got it just like that.

“I didn’t want to take the picture out of the frame, sometimes it sticks to the glass and pulling it away damages the picture, you know? I hope you don’t mind,” he said. Was that it? Did he expect him to say yes or pass a judgement about how the girl looked and agree to marry her? Was that his plan?

“It’s really nice,” he I said, trying to be courteous. “But, as you can understand, I can’t make a decision about any of this all at once. And I certainly can’t take your share of the land,” Rajeev said.

“Please don’t say that. It’s no use to me. When you marry my daughter, the land will be hers too,” he said.

“But you don’t know anything about me, Sir?”

“I know enough, beta. I am not looking for an immediate answer. I just want to be sure that you will consider it,” he said.

He finished the glass of water on the table, put the picture frame in his bag and left.
Rajeev had been sitting on the stairs for an hour now and there was no one to be seen. Dejected, he went back home and started to think a way to look for Lata.
CHAPTER TWELVE

When people knew Triveni and Mira were about to have a baby, people started to say all sorts of things. There was the good and the bad but Triveni and Mira knew whatever people knew about them couldn’t be worse than what they didn’t and so, it was easy to ignore the second-hand comments Triveni and Mira got to hear from the people around the village. They hadn’t even announced it—it was just hard to hide it.

The day the girl was born in the house, the bird came and sat in their backyard, in the morning and sang for a long time. It was as though, their newborn, who they named Lata, Hindi word for vine, responded to the calls of the birds, this one in particular.

After the birth of their child, Mira looked younger, as though she had gone to be her former self, reliving it because she could not fully live it. Lata’s birth brought a strange usualness to their lives: more waking hours, toilet breaks, chaos and a throbbing excitement of having a live toy that was derived from a union. Man, woman. Husband, wife. As if their marriage was no longer an institution handed down to them by those who had arranged it, but a decision that, for the first time, had started to appear to be their own.

After her birth, they started to derive meaning in this physical togetherness. Not to say they hadn’t been good to each other before. He was a good provider and made sure he bought her a sari every six month, while she made sure food was served on time, and that his clothes were clean—they were an entity, but with a wide, invisible separateness. It was only after Lata was born that they felt like they were needed together as husband and wife. People had told them otherwise. People had said things wouldn’t be the same. That the toy comes in the way. That time shrinks. That wrinkles cause deep rifts. Not with them. He took the baby for long walks
while she cooked. She fed their son while he cut vegetables. He never cut vegetables. It simply wasn’t a husband’s job. But now it needed to be.

The tree had started to look more and more like a Banyan tree now. Triveni still couldn’t forget what Mani had said about the Banyan tree. It brought fertility for the woman in the house. Although Triveni hadn’t read anything like that in the books he’d read, he couldn’t think of this as some sort of a design. He’d seen those birds eat the fruit of the tree—should he say Banyan or neem. He didn’t know if there was one, but what he knew was that they ate that fruit.

That evening, Mira made Ranu’s favorite pakoras and some green coriander chutney to go with, a combination that a boy living alone without his parents couldn’t resist for the sake of nostalgia.

“This is the best you have ever made, aunty,” he told Mira. “I am going to take this entire plate,” he said. Food was his wine.

“No matter what the weather, these sal trees never stop moving,” Triveni said.

“Yes. When these sal trees move, they sound like rain, don’t they?”

“Yes. Like rain and sometimes, like themselves,” he said.

“You’re talking like me, uncle,” Ranu laughed.

“You don’t think?”

“Think what?” It was then that Ranu stopped eating and paid more attention to what Triveni had said.
“That the leaves of trees have a different sound? Each one of them?”

“I don’t know. I have never paid attention.”

“The Banyan tree doesn’t sound like this, when it’s windy.” Triveni noticed that Ranu was looking at the tree.

“I think it depends on the number of trees, uncle. Don’t you think?”

“Yes. But it’s scientific. Don’t you think? The sound these leaves make when hit against the wind and each other. Don’t you think it varies depending on how big the leaves are?”

“I think you are right uncle,” Ranu said. “If every tree looks unique and probably even thinks unique then maybe it has a unique voice, too, no?” he said.

“Yes. But the sound of the trees isn’t as clear as that of humans. Don’t you think?”

“I think it’s clear, uncle. It’s just that we can’t identify it as well as we can the sound of a human. I am sure trees can’t identify the sound of a human too easily either. If that Neem tree in your garden can hear us, and assuming it doesn’t have eyes…”

“No. That’s not fair. I think if you want to make a fair argument, you have to give your tree eyes.”

“Okay. Let’s assume it has eyes and it has ears too. Do you think it would be able to tell my voice from yours?”

“I don’t know. I think you are right. But I just realized something about my that tree,” Triveni said. Triveni wanted his opinion on this strange tree and he hoped he was walking into the conversation.
“It’s a cross,” Ranu said.

Triveni was dumbfounded. He hadn’t expected Ranu to be so observant.

“Yes, I am glad you noticed. It smells like a neem tree but looks like a Banyan,” Triveni said.

“I don’t know if you have seen the bird that comes each day here. Have you? Its sound doesn’t make me very happy?” Ranu laughed and Triveni felt slightly insulted.

“Why, beta?” Triveni said.

“I think something is going on, Ranu.” Triveni said.

“Do you think it’s the tree? Something wrong with the tree?”

“Yes, but the bird too. Birds aren’t the most innocent things, uncle. Even though they may seem like it. Haven’t you heard the story of the deceitful bird?”

“Don’t tell me if it has nothing to do with it.”

“Uncle, you have to listen to this. So, once on the foothills of Himalayas, there was a king of a flock of birds and he asked the rest of the birds to gather grain and share it with everyone if they found any.”

“Let me guess, there was a bird that did not, and it died?”

“Uncle! I know you are guessing. You have never really heard the story.”

“That’s not the point. I already know the ending.”
“Uncle! You go to watch a love story to picture hall and know the hero and heroine are going to either die like Romeo and Juliet or live happily ever after. But you still watch the movie, don’t you?”

Triveni just shrugged. He knew it was one of those things that he should not even try to argue.

“The end doesn’t matter if you don’t experience the entire story,” Ranu said. “Now listen,” he said. He had a pakora in his hand that he kept back on the table. If there was any serious business in Ranu’s life, it was telling and listening to stories. Nothing excited him more than gossip. Triveni, picked the pakora and decided he’d try to understand what Ranu liked so much about stories.

“So, all the birds went in search of grains, as they had promised, and they all decided that they’d tell each other if they found any. But there was one bird, and there always is, like the one who sits on your tree all day eating all by itself. So, this bird saw several carts of grains on the road, they were being transported and they were moving and perhaps, the bird was a little scared by their speed, although, you can imagine how slow they must be moving compared to the trucks we have today. But the grains were perhaps not secured tightly on the carts and much of it spilled on the road. Even though it was a bit scary to see the carts go, but the bird couldn’t help but feel a sense of greed run through it when she saw all that grain lying on the road. She knew that if she told the king about it, she’d definitely be appreciated.

When the birds got together after the hunt, the bird told everyone about the carts passing by on the roads and a lot of grains spilling on the ground. All the birds were happy to hear that. They were happy that the king would be happy and that’d they’d have enough to eat through the
season. The birds congratulated the bird, our bird, the selfish one, about the grains she’d found. But then, even amidst all the appreciation and gratitude that she received from the birds around her, the greed took over.

When the birds asked this selfish bird about the location of this lottery of grains, she couldn’t get herself to say it. She didn’t want to share it with anyone, so she said, with faux concern: ‘The carts move so fast that it’d be hard to pick the grains. It’s dangerous out there.’ The birds thought for some time and realized that the selfish bird was right. Food was good, but at the cost of their lives, no. Uncle, you know what amazes me about this story, that the rest of the birds never question this selfish bird’s intentions and agree to not go and kill themselves.”

“You are right. I would be suspicious, if I was one of the other birds. So, then, what are you trying to say? Are birds stupid or not?” Triveni said.

“The moral is not the point of the story. Think about it, uncle. The bird is willing to let go his compatriots, is willing to do all that for what? When you listen to how it ends, you will be shocked.”

“Okay.”

“So then, the bird, who knows where the grain is, goes to feed himself each day without fail. And of course, because this is not the food that she has worked hard to earn, so she feeds herself like there is no tomorrow. And we all know what happens when we eat too much. The bird got fat and of course, when the rest of the birds were barely getting by, they thought about how this bird was able to not only eat but eat so well. The birds told the King and the King got a little suspicious too. So, one day, he followed this selfish bird and saw her feeding on the grains falling from the cart. He was very disappointed. The bird did not see the King and kept eating on
the grains. The bird had gotten greedy each day, which is why when she saw a cart coming
towards itself she assumed it was still far away. You know when you are about to cross the road
and you think the car is still far away, you take the traffic for granted and before you know it,
you are in an accident. The same thing happened with the bird. She thought the cart wasn’t
coming or it was too slow or the bird was too stupid and greedy to gauge its speed, but as the cart
kept moving towards it, she didn’t budge and thought that she’d probably eat a few more grains
before the cart reached her. But the card was faster than the bird and the it ran the bird over. The
bird saw the King, he was near him now and apologized.”

“You said the story doesn’t have a moral. But there is a moral: greed leads to death or all
birds are greedy?” Triveni said.

“I am saying birds can think like humans. They love, hate, they get jealous and exact
revenge. They are not innocent and probably that one who comes every day isn’t either,” Ranu
said.

They didn’t notice Mira was standing right beside them.

“If both of you gentlemen don’t mind, I have my own story to tell.”

Ranu and Triveni were surprised if not shocked. Mira had changed, Triveni thought.

“I have been reading some, ever since we had Lata. And you forgot that our daughter,
even though she is quiet, isn’t going to sleep forever. She is still a baby. I told you to take care of
her and you were so busy listening to Ranu’s stories that you forgot she was in the room,” Mira
said. Angry but that anger and a little playfulness to it. She sat on the third chair with Ranu and
Triveni with Lata in her hand, who was fast asleep. It was surprising how much Lata could sleep.
It was probably that babies did sleep a lot or it was probably that she was an unusually quiet baby.

“I don’t believe either of you have heard the story of the wise bird, then?”

“So, what did the wise bird do? Look in the rearview mirror to make sure no one was following her?”

“Both of you listen: There was a flock of birds that lived on a tree. One of the birds noticed a tiny creeper growing at the root of the tree—” Lata started. For once, Triveni suspected that Lata knew his secret. That this was her way of telling him to exhume the grave and put what was under the soil away forever. But it was perhaps just a fear he had, the result of a guilt. Lata wasn’t aware. In her mind, there had been no baby. Everything had been forgotten and forgiven with the birth of a new child.

“So, the old wise bird in the flock of birds said they must pluck it while it’s still small otherwise it may give them trouble—it was a road from the ground to the tree. Things could climb up the creeper when it was big enough, anything could happen, the birds could be in danger. But the birds did not listen to the old and wise, as they often don’t. Lata, I hope you always listen to the old and wise, even when you grow old, okay?” The men on the other two chairs looked up at her and the little girl in her lap and were confused if she was telling the story to her daughter for who sounds were still not language or was she telling the story to herself, as a way to remind herself of something.

“And then,” Mira continued. “One day, when the creepers, which was a tamarind tree was strong enough and while the birds were away looking for food, a hunter came and climbed up the tree where the birds lived with the help of the creeper. He laid his net and returned home,
hoping that when the birds come back home, all of them would get caught in the net. The hunter was right. When the birds came back home in the night, they walked into the net, never noticing it. When they realized they were stuck inside the net, they started to make noise, which was when the old geese came and told them why it would never have happened if they had only listened to him. But it was too late—” Mira was disturbed by Lata, who was now awake but was still not crying. She was making squeaking sounds, like, a tiny bird would. But that was probably just a coincidence. Ranu moved closer to Mira and smiled at Lata.

“Aunty, she looks just like you,” he said. Mira liked Ranu. He was probably the only one who did not judge Mira for being an old mother even though Mira wasn’t really old, just forty. He didn’t care about such things and he respected Mira like he did not respect Triveni. “And then what happened aunty?” Ranu asked, like a son would ask his mother when she was telling him a story.

“And then, Ranu, let me tell you because your uncle isn’t listening,” she said. Triveni was listening, but he was taken aback by what Mira had done. It had been a long time since he had seen her like this, without sadness, with something to say that did not involve either asking him to have dinner or something else that had something to do with their past.

“I am listening,” Triveni said and smiled and looked at their daughter.

“So, then, the old goose asked the birds to play dead when the hunter came back. The old, wise goose said ‘When the hunter would start to pluck each one of you from the net’. The birds were not convinced, but they didn’t have any other choice. So, when the hunter arrived, the birds played dead and when the hunter had thrown each one of them on the ground, he thought they were indeed, dead and was not aware of what was going on. When all the birds had been thrown
on the ground, all of them flew together and away from the hunter,” Mira stopped, and the men were quiet. “Before you ask me. Yes, there is a moral to the story. We must bring things under control before they get out of hand,” she said. Lata smiled, as though she had understood the story, and even though Ranu didn’t care about the moral, Triveni understood it and understood what he had to do with the bird.

For Triveni that night of stories wasn’t easily forgotten. There were things that Mira had said that had stayed in his mind. He wondered if that grave at the root of the Neem tree was the problem that needed to be nipped in the bud. Did Mira know about it? What did her story mean? She had seemed too happy to be in the know of things he was up to. Of what was going on with the tree, the bird or was it something that he’d made up in his mind? He sat up on the bed and looked out at the tree and even though the bird wasn’t there, he could feel its presence.

He hadn’t forgotten what Ranu had said either—birds weren’t innocent. Was Lata talking to the bird ever going to be a problem? Was that the problem that Mira indicated must be nipped in the bud? He didn’t want to be a hunter who’d throw himself in fire for the fear of what he had done. And unlike the hunter, who was the reincarnation of Yamraj, the god of death, he considered himself to be a good person. A person, who could never think ill of anyone, let alone do ill. But he knew that when it came to taking care of his family he could pick up the gun and kill the bird.

It was around two in the night and Mira was fast asleep next to him. He got up and went to the store where the gun was. The same gun that he had thought of using but gave up on Ranu’s insistence. There had to be an alternative to killing the bird, wasn’t it? But when he held the gun
in his hand and the smell of its metal made its way into his head, he felt a slight boost of power. Even though his heart rate was up from what it had been and even though he wasn’t sure whether the gun was really in the right hands, he was sure that it did make him feel a little different, just as a hunter must feel, that it was going to kill something with far less power than itself and no weapon except its flight.

But each time he pictured himself in the front yard with the gun pointed at the bird, he felt a great amount of relief which he knew would be short-lived. When the bird was gone, and the tree would still be half-eaten, sick, he would not have anyone to blame it on. And then he’d feel like that hunter who threw himself in the fire. Regretful and unable to do anything about it. It was perhaps only in his mind, things making themselves bigger than they actually were. It was only a bird after all, and it didn’t need the kind of attention he was giving it.

Triveni came back to his room on the bed, next to his wife and his daughter Lata, who was in the crib. He closed his eyes and this time decided not to look out of the window. He knew what he would see, he just didn’t want to see things that were not there.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After that visit from Lata’s father Rajeev showed the papers to a lawyer and he agreed that the land mentioned in the papers existed. There was a tiny shape on it too. It was in the shape of an L, that, the lawyer told him was not a very good thing if Vastushastra was to be believed.

“It’s inauspicious,” the lawyer had said. Jitu uncle had recommended the lawyer to Rajeev. “But, it’s not problem, if you want, I know people who can give you a solution,” the lawyer had said and handed him a card that had food patches on it. Rajeev had thrown it on his way home. It wasn’t like he was going to live there, he thought. After getting back home from seeing a lawyer, Rajeev had asked Lata’s father if they could meet and had emphasized that he would come to see them and talk to Lata.

That evening when Rajeev set off for their house, he heard the bird singing again, as though, it was telling him something. Once Rajeev was at Triveni’s place, he appreciated the pebbles on the driveway—there was something, however small, in common. He saw a girl and a man sitting in the front yard and even from a distance, he recognized the girl to be the picture he had seen. All that was happening to him was so dreamlike, that even if Rajeev said yes, he knew he could still get up from his sleep and say a no if he changed his mind. But it was all real, as real as the hardness of pebbles under his feet.

“Namaste,” Triveni said and got up from the chair. Lata did not get up but smiled at him. “Why don’t you two sit, here and I will get some tea and snacks,” Triveni said.

“Lata,” she said and extended her hand.

“Rajeev,” he said.
“Let’s go in the backyard, we have a beautiful tree there,” Lata said. Rajeev agreed. It would relax them both if they did.

That’s when Rajeev saw the bird that he had seen in his backyard.

“How do you know what it’s called?” Rajeev asked. “It’s almost everywhere in the village, but no one knows its name,” he said. “Once, when I was a kid, I almost got lost in the forest looking for the bird.”

“Really? Why did you go looking for the bird? Was it calling your name?”

“I don’t know. But I felt like I had to find it.”

“That doesn’t happen with me, but when the bird comes and sits here it talks to me,” Lata said.

“Talks? What does it say?” Rajeev asked.

“I don’t know. It’s not clear, like the language. But it makes sound, like the notes of music, you know?”

“Oh. That way, I guess we can all say we understand their language.”

“Oh no. There’s more. Sometimes, I can tell that something would happen to me the way the bird sings,” Lata said, looking away from Rajeev’s face, afraid he wouldn’t believe it.

“Yes, some things one can’t explain,” Rajeev said. Like his father, who believed Rajeev had seen his death in his sleep. But he didn’t want to think about that. “But what kind of things do you think would happen to you?”
“I don’t know. Like when the bird sings a certain way, I know I am going to have a stomach ache that way,” she said and smiled.

Rajeev laughed.

“That’s it?”

“It’s a strange feeling. It’s not in response to what the bird sings, not in response to the sound, but I know when the bird is telling me something. It’s hard to explain.”

“So, then, you can predict the future?” Rajeev said.

“I don’t think so. But I think, what do they call it, I have good intuition,” she said.

“You know, my boss says the same thing. Stephen, his name is. He says it’s a skill that I must be proud of. That not everyone has it,” he said.

“So, then, what does your intuition say about the both of us?” she asked. Rajeev had not expected her to be so forward, but it at least told him that she liked him.

“Do you mind if I have your number?” he asked. She smiled and they exchanged numbers.

“It must be so nice in America, no?” she asked. Rajeev was surprised Triveni and Mira were still getting snacks, but he didn’t mind.

“Yes. I like it.”

“When did you decided to go there?”

“I don’t know, it just happened. TV, radio, you know. Who wants to live here?” he said and made a circle with here.
“It’s not too bad,” Lata said.

“Oh, no. Your house is better than mine. You should see my house,“

“Did you hear? Did you hear it? The bird. It was a long whistle and then two short followed by a shriek,” Lata said.

“Yes, so what does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” Lata said and reproduced the same sound that the bird created. “I sang back to it in a different note. Three short whistles. Could you tell? And then she responded to me in a different one,” she said.

“Have you always been able to do this?” Rajeev asked.

What Triveni hadn’t told Rajeev was that Lata liked to spend most of her time outdoors. She went for walks and spent time with Triveni in the garden. The first time he saw Lata talk to the bird was when she was seven years old. He did not know what the bird said to his daughter, but it always sang a different kind of a song. Lata’s voice was always so melodious and sometimes she'd break into songs while in some part of the house and it would make both the parents proud.

“Yes. Ever since I was a little girl. My father says when I was an infant, I would smile every time this bird would make a sound,” she said.

“I know this is a very stupid question, but can you sing?” he asked.

“You mean, sing like a bird?” she laughed. “No. I can’t sing, but I like music. It’s not all technical, you know. It comes from a place that very few people have access to,” she said.
“What is that place?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I can’t tell you. It’s hard to say. If I try to think about it too much, the magic would disappear,” she said.

After leaving from their house, when Rajeev got back home, he thought about the same thing: if he thought about it too much, the magic would disappear.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lata was only a year old when Triveni started to work for a bank again. It was less out of the necessity to earn money and more out of getting back to an old life that included a routine. Mira was out of her old like and she had also embraced the life that did not include her past. The tree that had started as neem, was now a banyan tree. There were days when Triveni would sit all by himself thinking about what had happened. That was one of the reasons he’d hated. They were mistakes that were hard to remove. But, as time went by, Triveni had other things to think about. People don’t necessarily forget things, he realized, they are just written over by other, more immediate things.

State Bank of India branch offered him a job as a desk clerk and even though, that wasn’t a lot of work, neither was it a lot of salary, for Triveni it was enough to make that difference he wanted it to make in his life. Now, tending to the vegetable garden became his hobby instead of the first thing he did in the morning.

He was afraid if this new life would be hard on Mira, if it would remind her of the kind of life they had before the baby died, but Triveni was right. Her old memories had been replaced by the new, and not only were they replaced, they were held together with a strong glue.

It was in the bank that he’d met Sushil Bhatt. Bhatt never needed a moment from work. It was as though he was making up for something, that if he stopped to breathe, to do something else, he would lose something. If ever his stack of files got over, he would ask the teller or some other clerk to take a break and let him do his work for him. He didn’t talk to anyone much and ate his food at his desk. Probably, the only time he got up from the desk, was when he wanted to use the washroom.
However, one wanted to see it, it was Triveni’s ill or good luck that he sat next to Sushil Bhatt. There was no dearth of quiet moments sitting next to him, but there were times, when he realized the reason he came to work was not strictly to work alone. He didn’t need money much and Lata was still very young.

It’s probably that quietness gives an impression of harmlessness, that Triveni tried to talk to Bhatt a lot of times, but to no avail. The time the two became two friends was when Sushil had to deal with a very difficult customer. So much so, that the customer had alleged him of scamming him.

The news in the office was that he had sold this customer a plan that was not recognized by the government, and the customer had lost a lot of money. And funnily, Bhatt had been the only person to sell that plan in the entire office. But Triveni had remembered that customer and when the time came, he did not hesitate in telling the manager that it was the customer who had agreed to take the risk. Bhatt’s only fault was that he did not sign an agreement form. They were different days and each form had to be duly checked.

Bhatt was an excellent employee and when Triveni looked back at what had happened, he was sure that sometimes bad things happened to people for a reason. Bhatt didn’t speak much, but he had gratitude, or it was probably that it took him time to believe a person. What came of that was that at least, the two started to have their lunch together.

Triveni told him about his daughter, his wife and that he moved there ten years ago, but nothing except that. But he knew that he had won Bhatt’s trust because when the time came, he asked Triveni to take care of his account.
Triveni was surprised to see how a man like him could be so rich and he had a son.

Triveni kept that in mind and he knew that in time it would be useful for him.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rajeev was tired from flying for so many hours and the general exhaustion of what had happened to him had put him to sleep. When he woke up, it was close to afternoon, but he couldn’t hear the bird. He was still worried why there was no one at Lata’s home. Where could they have gone if she had gone missing? Surely, to find her, but why would they not pick up their call?

He looked outside the window and wasn’t surprised to find that the lime bush was the only thing remaining in the entire vegetable patch. It was as though, it had kept itself alive somehow. He knew what had kept it alive, the same thing that sang in the forest. The bird. He looked at his phone. There were several calls from Jitu uncle. Someone may have seen and informed him. He called Lata’s father, Lata and his mother again, but no one picked up. He was scared. He didn’t want to go alone, even though it meant delaying the visit a bit, he didn’t mind have Jitu uncle’s company.

Rajeev knocked at the door, it was opened immediately by a man who was about sixty. He was a caretaker and had always been. The man put his hands together and welcomed Rajeev in the house. He didn’t utter any words his expression told Rajeev that everyone who came in this house who was a friend of this master was a friend of his. There was no sign of Jitu uncle. The servant hadn’t said anything, so, he presumed he was home.

Jitu uncle’s home had changed a lot. Everything was neutral, not, more tasteful, it was not Jitu uncle. Rajeev remembered some of the furniture—it had been there. It looked old but well kept, the kind that would fetch good money in antique shops. A scene from the Bhagwat
Gita broke this rule. From what Rajeev knew, Jitu uncle wasn’t a religious person and there was no trace of him.

The caretaker was in the kitchen, and the aromas in the house indicated that there was something nice cooking. He asked Rajeev if he’d like to drink something and Rajeev settled for a glass of water. Since no one was around, he took his glass and started to walk around the house. Not hoping to find anything, but curious what the house held. There were two other rooms on the ground floor, and something told him that he was not going to find anything of much significance on the there.

The caretaker was still in the kitchen, and if he caught him—which was a strong word—he could always say he was looking around the house.

One of the rooms on the first floor had little else except luggage. It was also a room that probably doubled up as a guest room. In case someone wanted to stay, the caretaker would arrange the towels and change the sheets, he assumed. Rajeev took a sip from his glass of water. He didn’t drink all of it so, he could pretend to be busy with his drink in case someone showed up. There was some sweat between his hand and the glass. It was that intuition that feeling he got in his stomach.

“Hello?” he said, as he entered one of the rooms on the first floor. Both hoping to find someone and not. Or the Hello had probably been just a reaction. It was a study room, but a very specific type of study room. There were pictures of birds and not just for aesthetic purposes, but someone who studied it as a subject. As far as he knew, Jitu uncle had never been interested in this. There were a few books in the room too, all orinthology. There was an LP player in the
room but not a lot of discs to play. There were some old Hindi albums, the classics and a Led Zeppelin disc. Not much to make of it, really.

There were instruments related to the study of birds. Scales, binoculars, an instrument that Rajeev recognized as an spectrogram, microphones—everything was top of the line and did not belong in such a small room. Whoever, used them definitely had a bigger facility elsewhere.

“Hi there,” a voice said from the outside. It was a young man, light-skinned, soft bodied with an immense lack of self-doubt. He had rings around his eyes, a result of too many late-night study sessions. He was a sort of man who had chosen to ignore his looks. His face was now just a functional object, not a source of vanity. He didn’t need to care about how he looked, he had everything else that it took to command power in this world. “You must be the Elvis guy!” He mumbled a bit of Jailhouse Rock. Rajeev wasn’t a fan of Elvis himself. It was a reductive thing to say about the Memphis.

“Oh, Jitu uncle told you. And you are?”

“I am a son of his friend’s. From Delhi. Born and bred,” he said.

“I am sorry, I was just taking a tour. I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Oh no. All my secrets are upstairs,” he said and smiled. “I am sorry I wasn’t around. There was nothing to drink at home, I figured a whiskey would do,” he said and lifted a bottle of Glenlivet in his hand. “Uncle had something urgent come up,” he said.

Rajeev hadn’t had a drink since the airplane. “Sure,” he said. Not wanting to be rude. A drink would relax him, too.

“He never told you I was here?” he said.
“Jitu uncle? No.”

“Oh no. Ramu. He didn’t tell you.”

“No. but he made me feel comfortable, so, no issues.”

They sat on the couch in the living room and the aroma of good food wafted from the kitchen. There was nothing wrong with the place but for some reason he couldn’t completely relax. He had never met anyone who had ornithology as a hobby. The boy, put some Indian classical music on the iPod dock and sat in front of him with his glass.

“Oh, by the way, my name is Vicky,” he said. “Vikram.”

“Oh yeah. I am Rajeev.”

“I am sorry, I never asked you how you have your drink, but let me tell you this—one of my friends from Scotland, he said all that on-the-rocks things was just bullshit. Scotch should never be diluted like that.”

“Oh, no. It’s okay. I didn’t notice there was no ice in my drink. It’s so warm, perfect for this weather!” Rajeev looked around. “So, that’s what you do in your free time?” he asked.

“Yes. I am a chemistry student, but I study ornithology. Jitu uncle said you went to DU too, which college?” he said. I got a whiff that he probably didn’t want to talk about it, so I didn’t push him.

“St Stephen. So you never wanted to study ornithology full time?” As Rajeev gulped the whiskey down, the music on the dock station started to sound better. He had never before explored Indian classical music, but it sounded great.
“Oh. I am from St Stephen too. This part. I love this part,” it was the part where the singer and the tabla sang together.

“Who is the singer?” Rajeev wanted to be in the know of the music he enjoyed. He’d probably heard to him, but didn’t reply immediately.

“Pandit Jasraj, Raag Bhimpalasi,” he said. Rajeev had heart of raags and Pandit Jasraj was a very famous singer, a Bharat Ratna, perhaps, the highest civilian award in the country. He had heard about him from Lata too. Somehow, when it came to classical music, Rajeev found it hard to believe people who listened to famous names. There was something suspicious about it. To him, there was some credibility in finding the obscure.

“Nice,” he said. The man from the kitchen came out and smiled at Rajeev and then walked out of the house. He wasn’t wearing any chappals.

“You know, sometimes I wonder how my mind and my heart, and my ears are able to enjoy this and Britney Spears at the same time. Now, don’t get me wrong, I am not saying Britney Spears is at the same level as Pandit Jasraj, but I always think of music as mining the secret from thin air and I think both Britney and Jasraj do it with equal ease. The authenticity and value of their secrets may be different, you know. But they are basically trying to do the same thing, mine the obscure, the unattainable. Like infra-red rays, that are only visible with special kind of glasses.”

“So, are you saying that secrets, like infra-red rays are everywhere, we just have to wear the right glasses?”
“Yes. That’s right. But in the case of art, music in particular, it may not be as easy as wearing a particular pair of glasses. Although, I suspect that both Britney and Jasraj, make their own glasses to get to the truth. You know what I mean?”

Their whiskey glasses were empty now and Rajeev felt like he was getting used to Jasraj’s voice and the music more than he would have expected. It had something to do with the whiskey, undoubtedly, but there is also something about classical music—although he maybe generalizing here—it took some time to get to the truth, while the Britney Spears kind of truth was probably easier to get to. He was a wonderful host. He filled the glasses and brought them back. This time, he got some cashews. They were almost red in color. Spicy cashews.

“So, what kind of truths do you think Britney and Jasraj are trying to get at?” The cashew mix was remarkable. Rajeev had picked only two and was already hungry for more. He eyed the bowl of cashews.

“Well. I would say there are personal truths and then there are universal truths,” he said, not looking at Rajeev, but at rug. It looked like an expensive Kashmiri rug.

“Aren’t personal truths universal truths too?”

“Good point. You are right. Even when you read Hindu philosophy, everything really just becomes one, merges with the brahman, universe.” Rajeev felt a little smug with how well he had controlled the situation. But then he said: “You think about why even though personal truths are by default universal truths—the god in in the person, the many is one and all that—in art, how closely the truth of the artist is connected to the truth of the listener depends on how it is executed. Sometimes, the medium isn’t suited to the art or is too frivolous,” he said.

“Are you saying Britney Spears is frivolous?”
“No. All I am saying is that there are degrees of truths. A fact is a truth too, but it’s not as valued as an insight.” Rajeev was impressed by what he had said.

“If you don’t mind me asking you, what you studied, back at Stephen?”

“I am impressed that you said ‘Stephen’ and not “Stephens” as about a billion people in this country do. Well, I studied English,” Vikram said.

Rajeev wanted to steer the conversation towards what he had seen in the room. He knew it would make for some good conversation. He was beginning to feel truly relaxed and the sofa, that was probably cotton or corduroy or something of the sort, seemed like his true state.

“The things in that room seem to suggest something else,” Rajeev said. He didn’t like the way the sentence finally came out. It seemed a bit too probing.

“Well, it’s not as scandalous as you make it out to be,” he said.

“Seems like something hush hush,” Rajeev said.

“Just that, it’s hard to talk about birds, you know, in a way that doesn’t bore people,” Vikram said. He walked towards the iPod station and changed the music. The song started with a saxophone and then a smooth sound flooded the room. Rajeev couldn’t remember which song it was, but he had heard it when he was younger, growing up in the ‘90s when MTV and VH1 had just arrived in India. Of course! It was Smooth Operator by Sade. The aroma of food from the kitchen had started to make Rajeev hungry. He didn’t have a lot of breakfast and the whiskey was making him tipsy. The next song was by Carlos Santana and Rob Thomas, Smooth.

“I discovered this music when I was a teenager, in the ‘90s. Reminds me of the hostel in Delhi University. I did nothing but listen to music on the radio and read. Somehow the words did
not interfere with reading. And when I am at my best, I am in that hostel in my room that I shared with another boy. He mostly lived outside. I don’t know why he even bothered to pay the rent.”

“Same here. George Michael, Bryan Adams, Sade, Madonna. I see why you played Sade now. You are on your 90s playlist,” Rajeev said.

“But, I didn’t like Bryan Adams that much. There was a disturbance in his music, that I didn’t like. A dishonesty.” Madonna’s Don’t Tell Me started playing. “This song. Have you seen the video? On MTV back then? How old were we? When Madonna is dancing in that cowboy hat walking on that highway—is that what you call it in America—could she have imagined that a boy sitting in India, in his room would be listening to this? She may have thought Mexico, maybe Britain, but India?”

The food was already on the dining table. He hadn’t realized when the servant had come back and served the food. There were four kinds of dishes. Chicken masala, okra, aloo-matar and pulao. All of it looked great.

“This man, he never makes chapati, unless I tell him to,” Vikram said.

“North Indian obsession, haan? Can’t do without our rotis,” Rajeev said.

But the food was so good that neither of them complained after that. Neither did they speak. They finished off with a dessert. It was some sort of thick rice pudding. The iPod station played American Life by Madonna. Rajeev listened to the song and now that he had lived in America, it sort of made more sense to him. Pilates and yoga etc, the lyrics went.
“So, is it true?” Vicky said, food in his mouth. “That the majority of middle-class American families don’t even have $400 in their bank?” The song probably pushed the conversation towards that direction, naturally.

“Where did you read that?” Rajeev asked.

“Somewhere. I don’t remember,” he said. He was done with food and took his place on the sofa. Rajeev followed him there in a few minutes.

“I can’t think of reading anything like that, but I think the point is that most Americans live on debt and Americans don’t have much savings,” wanting to change the subject.

There was a painting in their drawing room that had a pair of birds sitting on a banyan tree, eating their fruit. They were the same birds Rajeev had seen in his own backyard.

“What are these birds called? I have seen them so much around here.”

“Come with me, I’ll show you something,” he said. He followed him. Rajeev thought they’d go upstairs but he took him to the room that had the cartography instruments in it. With him, the room looked very different, a bit more crowded. It didn’t have space for two people.

“The room doesn’t have space for two people,” Vicky said and smiled at him.

“I’ve had quite a safe upbringing, you know what I mean. Upper middle class, not really having to struggle for anything, my father’s car always dropped me and picked me up from wherever I had to be. For most of my life, I had seen only a part of this country’s life. Really never paid too much attention to the so called ‘real India’ and all that.”

They were both standing in the room. He was standing by the table on which most of the cartographer’s material lay and Rajeev was standing near the LP. The distance between the both
of them wasn’t much, but both of them were thinking about totally different things. “After I turned eighteen, I decided to travel to one place in the country. I made sure I gave myself a shoe-string budget, so that my explorations did not turn into luxury holidays. I went to a lot of places and lived in bad hotels with cockroaches in them, lizards on the walls and bugs in the bed. Mostly I ate from the streets, and fell sick. It wasn’t until I had to call my father or ask him for help that I would call him or come back home. My entire day would be spent in walking on foot and sometimes, even asking people to let me live in their houses. Sometimes they asked for money in return and that was okay with me, because I knew what I would learn in return would be invaluable.”

“What was the point of this knowledge? So, you would know how people live in difficult situations and then what?”

“What’s the point of anything at all, if you see? The point of this music we are listening to. The point of the food we eat? There is no point in anything. But, you have to understand, everything is a discovery of some kind. You don’t eat the same thing the same way. Each time you do something, it is differently. One of the problems of the modern world is to not pay attention to how important these small differences can be. You know?”

“I see. It’s a kind of discovery. Everything. You are looking for treasures everywhere.”

“You could say that, now that you have latched on to that train of thought. It seems that it has appealed to you.”

“Yes. I liked what you said about it. So, you were saying?”

“Looking for birds really just started as a treasure hunt. I started to sketch them, keep a diary.”
“But, what are those birds, outside?”

“These are Byangoma. And I don’t know if you can notice but they are blind.” Triveni walked out of the room and near the painting again. “Look at their eyes, they have no iris.” Vicky was right.

“So, those birds can’t see?”

“No.”

“But, I have seen these birds. I have seen them here in Sunderwala.”

“I know. I made this painting myself.”

“How do you know this tree?”

“They mostly sit on the Banyan tree.”

“But I have seen these birds move. How can they move when they are blind? I know that these birds can talk to you.”

“They have a very developed sense of proprioception. Meaning, a sixth sense. Also, the legend goes that if they drink blood, they can start to see. In fact, it is said that they can see the future and sometimes they tell the future to humans through their songs or dreams. You never know how they would communicate with you. It is said that if you hear the sound of the bird, you can receive visions. People say that you could have an intuition about what is going to happen in the future if you listen to its song. They are found on the Indian subcontinent and Bangladesh.”

“Then why are they eating the fruits here?”
“Don’t you see, they are red. It’s possible that someone either spilled blood at the root of the tree or buried a body.”

Triveni kept his glass on the table and dialed Lata’s number and then his father’s and then Lata’s mom’s but they did not answer.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lata knew if she talked to Byamgoma, her father may live. She had seen it in the dreams, the Byamgoma had said so. Since coming from America, Lata had waited for that bird on the banyan tree in their backyard, but it hadn’t happened. She had been away from home for twelve hours now and couldn’t find it.

When she was little, his father had told him that the bird often answered the calls if other birds liked it and flew to mate with them. Lata started to speak like the bird.

Lata had told her parents that she was out in the forest. She was sure he wasn’t looking for him. She thought about Rajeev and how she had held the truth back from him. She should have told him, but he wouldn’t understand, she knew. And once she found the Byamgoma, she would talk to her and tell her that instead of making her the medium of her vision, she could choose someone else. But she didn’t know if that changed the vision. But she had to try.

Lata sang the same song that she’d heard the Byamgoma sing. The same Byamgoma that had visited when Rajeev had come to see her for the first time. Two short whistles followed the long whistle and then a shrill voice. But that Byamgoma did not answer her call.

She knew that people who studied birds carried a recorder with them and reproduced the sounds of the birds. But she wondered why they could not make that sound themselves. She wondered if that was difficult to master than carrying a recording around. It had been six hours and she wasn’t carrying her phone. It was for the fear that her father would stop her.

She had never had such visions before. The only things she could predict were her stomachaches. And for once, she had decided not to come. Even Rajeev had dissuaded her. But who could take a chance with death? The sixteen hours in the airplane had felt so long and if it
 wasn't for the company of the white-haired man, she would have been so bored. When she asked him what he did, he’d said he was into social service.

He told Lata to know that the heart that beat inside her wasn’t all hers. She’d thought it to be a strange thing to say, but now as she walked into the forest which seemed to be getting deeper she realized what he had meant. There is so much life in the world if someone wore infrared glasses all day, they’d only see red. Snakes, fish, and frogs can see different levels of heat coming from the bodies. People say that there are some birds too that can do that.

When Lata had walked deep enough and she realized she couldn’t walk anymore, she decided to sit up on the tree and wait for the bird. She sang in the tunes that the birds would recognize. She hoped she would find them and ask them if she could and if she did not get an answer she could always use the gun. Walking was hard, it was difficult with a gun, but she had to do it, until she could see the Byamgoma.