JOURNEY

by Mita Bordoloi, Bachelor of Science

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The F2 Friends

We were the spouses of the F1 students, the visa type holders, who were the numerous foreign born scholars ubiquitous on campuses all over the United States. It amounted to this. When we filled out any form, our status was that of an alien's, the F2s, who were not allowed to earn a living, but welcomed to live with their student spouses on their generous fellowships which turned meager when we joined them. This by no means alienated us from having some kind of life; it pushed us to help our husbands in their quest to make a mark in any given academic or intellectual field. It gave us motivation to help them earn a green card, and then, citizenship in the land of the brave and free.

We made a living in the cramped one or two-bedroom apartments reserved for the families of the F1 students, confident in the knowledge that our fate as spouses of PhD or MBA students was a temporary matter. The married apartment complex was rambling and ranch-type. The Bell Tower lay in the north-east side of it and the university's own golf course just across from the road. Picnic benches and barbecue grills dotted the greenery that spread out like a rambling meadow.

Our apartments were furnished or unfurnished depending on our preferences and financial situations, and they were larger or smaller according to our needs. If we needed, we were allowed to borrow pots and pans and other household items from the International House. We also bought stuff found through the for-sale signs in the notice boards of the housing complex. We abided by the rules pasted on the walls of our apartments. It listed all the dos and don'ts to help the newly arrived international students in the campus. We, the F2 friends, were in awe of the details of the list. We were intrigued by the instruction for the

egg-shells, for instance, that when deposited in the sink disposer also sharpened the blades and eased its maintenance.

During Thanksgiving or other holidays our husbands' professors or host families invited us to share meals with their families, and the International House also held periodically tea mix-and-mingles for us. Moreover, after our husbands left for their university departments, we tended to gather for tea and chats at each other's apartments. At one such gathering, bringing a hot plate of cheese toasts to the coffee table, Meenu said, "I am not going to stay like this. This is ridiculous."

It was obvious that the woman was becoming restless with ample time in hand. Two or five years were turning out to be a big chunk with optimism flailing at the seam.

"What will you do?" said Sadhana taking a bite off the toast.

"Anything, but not just sit around and be a servant to Veer."

We gave each other knowing smiles. We seemed to be doing nothing but cooking, cleaning, and making the lives easier for our husbands. It soon got into our ears that most American women did not do half the things we did for our husbands. Some of us even deliberately spoiled them, maybe, to keep the power of the home front in our own hands.

"I have a perfect idea," said Sadhana." I just completed a culinary diploma before coming here, and you're already an accomplished chef, so,"

"I know, I know, you and I will start a restaurant!" said Meenu.

"As F2s, no, we won't," said Sadhana. "But you and I can start a catering business."

Meenu came from a business family and had a marketing degree from New Delhi. So, it didn't take any more coaxing to convince her of the possibilities it carried. They knew the

dorms didn't serve dinner on a Sunday, so they might be able to attract a segment of student population.

If nothing else, they would at least be able to showcase their talent and feed some souls deprived of home cooked meals. Engrossing themselves in the new project the enterprising women soon started a Sunday supper buffet table for a nominal donation in the courtyard of the family housing. The women launched it from Meenu's kitchen.

"Sadhana, let's make our paneer the night before," said Meenu.

"Alright, you make the paneer and I'll marinade the tandoori Chicken," said Sadhana not estimating off-hand how much work it involved.

Sadhana later said, "Oh, the hardest job was to pull the stockings off the drumsticks!" She marinated the chicken in yogurt, lime juice and *tandoori masala* before poking the bird pieces with a fork. "I would trade that job any day."

Meenu told the others how she had to boil two gallons of whole milk in two steel utensils and squeeze a lime each into it to make the paneer. She had to drain them through a muslin cloth and then squeeze them tight in a rectangular bundle and put a weight of cinder block on top over night. She fried them in the morning after cutting into cubes, and before tossing in the spinach curry sauce.

The two women made rice, lentil, vegetables and a salad besides the main vegetarian and non-vegetarian entrees at first. They also served hot store-bought *Nan* bread and warm homemade *gulab jamun* dessert. They just called a few people on the phone, and the words went around so rapidly that single students from the tall dorm buildings started coming in with their friends, and friends of friends joined in. At times it got so crowded that the rest of

the F2 friends had to help out in the tiny kitchen as sous chefs and stand-ins. The menu sometimes changed as people from different nationalities started coming in. They experimented with cuisines from different countries and even tried fusion recipes. In no time the international food court caught the eyes of the campus cops, who brought it to a standstill. The women were thinking of winding up the short-lived business anyway as it was getting out of hand and they told the cops so, and then added, "Wouldn't you like to try something?" Business and hospitality merged seamlessly in their traditions but the two cops were taken aback, and said with politeness,

"Thank you, ladies, we would love to, but we're wearing the badge."

Instead, we, the F2 friends, started hosting potluck dinners in the weekends. We made our best dishes and brought them to share with our friends and husbands over beer and conversation. We loved trying out recipes from the books and giving each other tips on cooking, ingredients, and their availability in our vicinity. We improved our culinary skills and some of us even published our recipes in the local newspaper compilation of Thanksgiving fares. Meenu took pity on my inexperience and the honeymoon phase of my marriage and passed on food leftovers. The praise from my husband encouraged her to share more of her creations and the newlyweds happily accepted the blessed intervention.

We dressed up in these occasions, mostly to please ourselves and to make use of our ethnic clothes lying deep down in our suitcases. It made us feel luxurious and special in them unlike our arrested lives and constraints of our F2 situations that restricted movements, necessitated the husbands to spend long hours away from homes, and made us homesick having come to a new country for the first time.

As we thought of different ways to make money over tea and snacks we gossiped about lives around us.

"Have you heard Tim and Joanne are no longer together?" said Padma.

"No, it can't be. They went to Shanghai together, for Tim's China stint," said Laxmi.

"It can be very much in this country. Joanne doesn't have to live on Tim's fellowship money. Never mind if they were high-school sweethearts. She has a good job," said Padma.

"But they went to China together, they surely had a blast over there?" Laxmi was stuck on the couple's supposed China romance.

"Yes, and separated one week after their return. Wake up, this is America. You can't dwell on some romantic notions and not think about yourself," said Padma.

"No wonder everyone got divorced in my husband's department, even his Chairman, save for a Canadian couple and us. I am not going to wait till my husband finishes his PhD. I am going for the GRE next month and becoming an F1 myself," said Laxmi.

"What are you going to study? Soft subjects have no room for us. I mean, you will be competing against hundreds and thousands of Americans for the scholarship money. Go for the hard technical ones and your competition will narrow down to fellow Asians," said Sadhana.

"Yeah, you're right. That is why MIT is called Made in Taiwan!" said Padma.

"As you know, I was a doctor in India," said Gultan. "To practice here, you need to pass tough tests. Not in the seventies when there was a dearth of doctors in America. I personally know some professionals who were literally lured with free plane tickets to come here and practice medicine. It was the gold rush."

"I would say, we should learn programming languages. There is a great demand for programmers now and you don't need a degree for that," said Sadhana.

"I already know COBOL and I think I am going to teach myself FORTRAN to be more competitive," said Padma.

I said, "Yeah, you do that and I am going to read *The Soul of a New Machine*. Do you know Tracy Kidder got the National Book Award and also the Pulitzer for it?"

"You and your damn books, Deepali, what will you do?" said Laxmi.

"I'll spend my husband's money and read more books!" I quipped with annoyance. "Don't be so condescending Laxmi, aren't we free to do what we want?"

There was a loud knock on my door some days later. I opened the latch to find Laxmi and rolled my eyes. Laxmi didn't care. She was being practical.

"Get ready as soon as you can. We have an opportunity to earn $25.00 each if we show up for an educational project," she said.

"What?"

"Arre, Ms. Tube Light, we will be taken to some local school by bus for some experiment or study and be paid for it!"

"Is that so?" I said in disbelief.

"Yes, madam, so, come out soon, we'll be waiting for you," said Laxmi.

I emerged from our apartment wearing a pencil skirt and a blouse that folded at my elbows. I was enthusiastic about anything as everything was a new experience for me, even the first porn movies I watched with my husband and our friends at a dorm down the road at midnight, on a weekend. The Kinsey Institute's tasteful events were no exceptions.

We, the F2 friends, took a campus bus to the Union building where we met the leader of the delegation and about 30 international F2s. The leader guided the anxious student spouses into a bus that took us on a rural journey to an elementary school. We were paraded and displayed in different classrooms. “Boys and Girls, meet these ladies! They have come from far-flung countries!” The students looked at us with astonishment and it was time to be heralded to the next room. The children perhaps saw an assembled group of different races and countries for the first time, and if that was the study, most F2s did not know. We were herded back into the bus again and dropped at the Union building where we were released after the rewards of $25.00 each.

With some time in hand, we ambled into a McDonald’s nearby and carried on our teatime chats over cups of coffee and French fries.

“Umm, $25.00 for parading in front of imbeciles, not bad,” said Meenu.

“I am flustered,” said Sadhana.

“Why, Ms. Sensitive?” said Gultan. “It’s better than your catering business. It wasn’t as if we paraded naked in front of some perverts.”

Sadhana said, “Still, why should we arouse such curiosity?”

“I must agree. It seemed as if we were zoo animals, or what an animal might feel when gawked at by humans,” I said.

“Don’t be so hard on them. Many of these people perhaps haven’t even stepped out of Indiana, and we have come in droves from all over the world to these excellent universities in their backyards. It’s not their fault that they haven’t seen people of other races,” Meenu said in her usual, all-knowing way.

"I don't know about you all, but I would love to teach at a school like that one day," I said, wistfully, imagining myself as a teacher.

After coffee the *mahaulla* ladies, as we had started calling our group, meaning ladies from the neighborhood in Hindi, left for their homes in the campus bus. I stayed back. I walked to the public library to borrow some books, my favorite routine, and then walked down to The Runcible Spoon for some more coffee and atmosphere, to delve into them. Out of ennui and being alone in the apartment, sometimes I joined my F1 husband at the computer lab till the wee hours in the morning. I would take lessons on different subjects on the Plato program, and he would work as the lab consultant, and also on his dissertation as one of world's first batches of operations and management information systems scholars.

While many of the F2 wives had been married for a while and had small children, I was a new bride who had married her groom in a short duration, it seemed as if instantly, over a casual cup of tea, to escape to the land where dreams came alive and true. There had been considerable attraction between the newlyweds: our love of adventure, age, and common background were traits that we counted on, which led to our eventual attraction and destined decision. Love, only came afterwards to us, and easily, both being in our early twenties and without serious attachments.

When I entered his cubicle I found him stretched out on his chair, laughing. He said, "I just broke into a filthy song out of boredom, and enters a student who excuses and apologizes for disturbing my prayer!" That and the song gave him a double-whammy of comic relief, his first in a long time. I, on the flip side, became fascinated by cultural clashes and how things often got lost in translation.

I had a slightly different idea about coming to America than my husband or the others. It had to do with intellectual stimulation and cultural exploration more than just economic prosperity. I easily formed friendship within the international community, and we, the young married spouses in the dorms, started exercising together in the green surrounding of our apartment building. We also met over tea, coffee, food, or just for plain chats.

With this group I was more comfortable trying out recipes that would not go through strict scrutiny as from the *Mahaulla* ladies. The latter, the F2 friends would not leave me alone if I replaced an ingredient or made do with a substitute as most followed strict traditions. Once when I came up with a successful experiment, my friends smothered me with praise. All I did was cover the boiled eggs with mashed potatoes, and then, dipping in an egg-bath and rolling in the breadcrumbs, I deep-fried them. After draining them on paper towel I placed them on a platter of lettuce leaves, then, I transformed the ordinary eggs into ducks. I inserted a red narrow chili pepper into one end to make a beak, stuck cloves to make the eyes and fixed ends of sliced onions to make the wings. I even placed three boiled eggs in the corner, as if those were laid by the ducks, like an artist's signature.

Galit said, "Become a subject in my research and I will personally train you at the gym." She studied kinesiology for her PhD. I gladly agreed. After workout, we would bike down to the Union grounds to sit by the stream to rest and to eat the juicy mulberries strewn under its trees. We would chuckle with amusement passing the student apartment building named 'The Roach Motel' and picture quirky, zany, creepy scenes in the interior of the building.

Irene, on the other hand, educated me on the Big-Ten ball games and the profanity spitting, irate, legendary coach. She and her sisters also took me to the city for the Shakespeare festival. Carrying a picnic basket with food and wine we laid it out on tender blades of grass and watched the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Not long after, on a muggy afternoon Galit showed up at my door. She appeared to have a conspiratorial air about her. She whispered to me, "If you want to have the adventure of your life come join me and my friends."

"Where are we going?" I said closing the door behind me.

"You'll see. First let's take the bus. My friends are going to hop in too."

The thrill of the unknown gripped me. I tried to keep pace with lithe and athletic Galit who grew up by the Sea of Galilee.

When we caught the bus down the hill Galit's friends were already inside, their cheerful faces trying to contain pleasure as they waved. My heart started beating fast. We got off at the outskirt of the main campus and started walking. We reached a wooded area interspersed with mossy rocks. Andrea and Jim lead the way and the stillness was disturbed only by the sound of the walking feet. All of a sudden we came upon a cliff and stopped to look down. About 25 feet below stood a huge rectangular green pond surrounded by lime stones.

Andrea said, "This is it. This is our secret swimming hole."

"Then why wait, shall we?" said Galit, unzipping her jeans.

Andrea and Jim were already in their shorts. They just took off their shirts and shoes.

The rush of the moment enveloped all, including me. I followed the others. We stood at the edge of the cliff.

"Four," said Galit.

"Three," said Jim.

"Two," said Andrea.

"One," said I.

We leaped into the air, and then, jumped. Surfacing with ecstatic faces we swam for hours in the fresh forbidden rainwater.

I soon made the F2 friends watch the movie *Breaking Away* which had immortalized the same quarry pond nicknamed as Rooftop. We even went to the spot for a picnic afterwards and lay down under the sun.

As the F2 friends became restless again, One or two became Avon ladies and others Tupperware hostesses. Some even started preparing for GRE, GMAT and other tests. Almost all opted for a career path in a demanding field or a technical one. They knew where the weight lay. I began bartering my typing skills in exchange for driving lessons from Kathy who pursued a PhD in Library Science. I typed Kathy's dissertation in the mornings and in the afternoons Kathy took me to the lakeside drive for driving lessons. On weekends Kathy's boyfriend joined in. While the duo took their ward's pedagogy seriously and with good intention, the student suffered their relentless instructions on parallel parking in a downtown curb-side. The diners in the restaurant patios took pity with airs of nonchalance.

But when my husband bought a yellow Impala station wagon from a departing Japanese student, I was ready to chauffeur anyone around. It didn't matter that the roof on the passenger side seat leaked when it rained.

The F2 friends suddenly found mobility. Now, besides just having tea in each other's houses we rode the leaky Impala on long drives to diverse destinations: the largest manmade lake, the picturesque countryside, the verdant state park, the quaint artist's village.

I had told them about the Shakespeare festival, so, one day we headed off to the city. We passed the horse ranches, the farms, the villages. Just before entering a small town, Padma pointed to a long ranch type motel on the right. She said, "I bet that's the motel from *Psycho*. I am already getting the eerie feeling."

"That's not because of the movie. The fact that we're in the KKK land that's what giving you the creepiness," said Laxmi. "Look at that house on the left. It has a Confederate flag!"

"You silly women, calm down, you're not acting like adults," said Meenu.

Just then, I said, "need to take some gas, guys, I am getting off."

"For God's sake, Deepali, Are you out of your mind? Not here in Martinsville!"

I took the exit, anyway. "Don't be ridiculous. Nobody's going to be lynched. We're buying gas here. We're giving them business, for Christ's sake!"

"Don't bring Him into it, alright, hurry up," said Sadhana.

There was a grave silence as I filled up the station wagon. When I asked the

F2 friends if they needed anything from the gas-station they shrieked again, pleading to take up the steering and leave. They became their chirpy, normal selves only after driving some distance away from the notorious place.

On a balmy spring day we, the F2 friends, drove off to the big lake. After spending sometime on the beach we rode on a side road enjoying the scenery and singing our favorite Mumbai movie songs. *Ajib dastaan hai ye, kahan shuru kahan khatam.* We spotted several deer in the heavenly landscape and marveled at the beauty of the place. The fragrances from the natural spring surroundings made us delirious. We stopped the car and got off. We walked a path and saw lakeside cottages hidden from the road but adorned with gardens and creepers overlooking the waterfront. Suddenly a majestic deer appeared. It had magnificent antlers and an aura that seemed out of this world. We were awestruck. The deer stopped, looked alarmed, and immediately took off. We followed as if in a spell. We kept going, invigorated by the fantastic vision.

A log cabin stood at a distance. It was dilapidated but plunked in the middle of a large compound. Creepers clung to the fencing of the property. As we got closer, suddenly an army of dogs flung out of the cabin, like an avalanche, barking and stopping short only at the barricade of fencing that divided us. An old woman emerged at the door with a harried look on her face. She shouted out names at the trespassers even though we did not cross the line. Jolted by the unexpected turn of event, we ran, screaming, as fast as we could all the way back to the car. None of us had any idea about the invisible fence that stopped the dogs also from crossing the line.

Once we were able to catch our breath and talk normally we took stock of the unexpected incident.

"We're not going to tell anyone what happened, okay?" said Meenu.

"It's a secret. My husband will kill me. He has no idea that I go on these drives with Deepali as the chauffeur," said Padma.

I said, "What do you mean, does he have any problem with my driving?"

"No I didn't mean that way. He doesn't know that we're such juveniles," said Padma.

"So, when he finds out he'll kill you?" said Gultan.

"Come on, stop pulling her leg," said Laxmi.

Back at the university town we, the F2 friends, veiled ourselves in the secrecy of the ridiculous for a while. At our pot-luck parties we would laugh recalling the crazy incident and when someone outside our clandestine circle came probing in we would change the subject. It gave us a semblance of power and sisterly spirit when we found ourselves in the company of larger discordant groups. It made us form our own inner circle of comfort until the day when our husbands graduated and took up employment far and near, in corporations and at universities.

At last we, the F2 friends, breathed easy as we braced ourselves to conquer the world of the brave and free. Once our statuses changed from F2 to Green Card and then, to citizenship, Padma became a programmer, and eventually found employment at the U.S. Government. Laxmi perused accountancy at a local company and rose to become a VP. Meenu transformed into a hot-shot realtor in New York. Gultan who attempted the ECFMG several times, a certification required of foreign medical graduates lately, passed it eventually

and started practicing medicine. Sadhana became a banker handling waste management. And I didn't stray away from building bridges or books, only now, as a media specialist, at a library of an elementary school.

Journey

When I walked to my neighbor's house to give the letter erroneously placed in our mailbox, and rang the bell, I noticed through the glass panel a young boy in shorts and short hair descending the stairs, to open the door. I was mistaken. A lady instead opened the door and introduced herself to me when I handed her the letter and explained about the mishap.

"I am Michiko Mizutani," she said.

"I am Reena," I said. "Reena Bora, your next door neighbor."

"*Hajime Mashte* pleased to meet you. Come in, please, I'll make some tea?" she said, making an inquiry of a statement, in the way sometimes Asians seem to speak.

I, delighted in the chance meeting with my gracious Japanese neighbor, followed her inside the house and stopped to take off the shoes spotting the guest slippers lined neatly at the hallway. She led me to her formal living room and we sat down to talk. I had an urgent feeling that this was going to be an incredible journey only gut and instinct were capable of ensuring. It was no secret that I was steeped in *Japonisme* for a while.

"Are you from America?" said Michiko.

"Yes, I am," I said. "But I came from India to be an American. My husband is a professor here."

"Good. Very good. I come from Japan. I join my husband here. He works for Sony."

I knew about her husband as one of the guys who lived in that house for almost five or six months before the arrival of the wife from Japan a month ago. I could see from my

kitchen sink the men drinking beer on the deck, chatting and laughing as if the house were a chummery for the company employees.

Suddenly Michiko remembered the tea and, apologizing, almost ran in small steps to put the kettle on the stove. My gaze scanned the surroundings. The room was sparsely decorated with plants, and groupings of a Native American ceramic collection. Michiko said she collected them. A golf bag stood at the corner of the hallway in readiness.

Michiko brought tea and cookies for both of us and I suddenly realized that even though I mistook her for a young boy at first she could have been an older woman, much older than me, for her two sons, she told me, had already got admitted to Adams High School that morning, alma mater of Madonna. I had no children.

"Do you work, Reena?"

"Only part-time, at the university. I am pursuing a PhD in Asian Art History. Japanese Art fascinates me."

"Then you must know more about Japan than me."

"I know only a little about your art, but I love your gardens too, and Zen aesthetics enthrall me."

"We'll be good friends, then. I'll show you Japan when you visit, and be your guide."

"Thank you. I'll appreciate that very much. But now let me introduce you to our city."

After tea I took leave of my new neighbor and offered to take her to the library the next day, so that she could get familiar with our town, the community, and any volunteer

opportunities. Of course she knew many Japanese people in that northern Michigan suburb but when I offered to drive her to the library she gasped with visible delight.

I drove to Michiko's driveway the next day. She came out immediately, as if she had been waiting for me for a long time. She wore a dress in a blue and burnt orange flowery print that matched the fall colors of the Michigan autumn. A navy blue cardigan completed the ensemble over her supple body.

"Let's go to the library first, and then to the old cider mill park and enjoy some fall colors and hot cider."

"I'd love that, Reena. *Arigato*, thank you."

Michiko loved the vibrant atmosphere of the library. She said, "Do you come here often, Reena?"

"For my course work I usually go to the university one, but I love the hustle and bustle of this place, and love the different kinds of people making use of this lovely space, the old, the very young and the people in between," I said.

"That's wonderful. I will come here many, many times," she said.

"Let's get you registered so that you may borrow some books today."

"You're so kind, Reena. *Domo Arigato. Arigato gozaimas*. Thank you, thank you."

"No problem, Michiko."

"No problem?"

"Oh, that's an American expression. It's like when the English say, no mention, when you say thank you."

"Umm. I think I'll just take only American English class, eh? I am also volunteering at the hospital. I make good origami. I can teach origami to children too."

"You may be able to teach them here at the library itself. Let's go find out from the lady at the desk."

Loaded with books afterwards, Michiko and I drove down to the Cider Mill Park. We walked and admired the colors of the leaves that Michiko's outfit mimicked so well. When we drank the freshly pressed hot cider she thanked me again and again for giving her the rare experience.

Soon Michiko got busy with volunteering at the hospital and teaching origami at the library. At other times she went out with her Japanese friends. Sometimes she and I got together at each other's houses for tea and conversation.

One spring afternoon Michiko came not with her usual bubbly self but with a face that revealed multiple emotions. Detecting something serious, I hurried to brew up her favorite Assam orthodox tea and sat down beside her while the water boiled in the kettle atop the stove.

Michiko sat crossing and cradling her arms in front of her. Her eyes stared at the ceiling above. Her legs stretched out, crossing at the ankles.

"My husband is again leaving for the golf meet in Tennessee. My sons are busy with their baseball games and school events. And I have nothing to do and nowhere to go."

"You know what? My husband also took off for India. I have to work on my research, but not all of the time."

"Then, let's go somewhere. But where?"

”Mackinac Island? Toronto? Niagara Falls?”

“No. Let’s make a long journey. How about Las Vegas?”

“Are you serious?”

“Why not? You give me the guts to try,” said Michiko.

I couldn’t let my friend’s faith on me waste away. So I said, “When do you want to go?”

“Tomorrow,” said Michiko.

Excited by the prospect, it took me no time to make the reservations for a four day trip to Las Vegas. We had the frequent flier miles that my husband always accumulated and used for his summer trips to India. I decided to steal those miles for my own getaway with Michiko. We would share our expenses and resolved to give ourselves a good time.

As our plane descended Michiko cooed looking down at the strip of the Sin City, from her window seat. “Domo. Domo arigato! Thank you so very much!”

We saw landmarks of different parts of the world congregate right underneath, as if a child’s diorama project shifted on the board to the desert section. We saw the Eiffel Tower, the Sphinx, and I imagined being serenaded in the Venetian’s canal later in the evening.

We rented a car and arrived at our hotel just before four o’clock. The clerk said, “The only good room we have left has a king size bed, do you mind”? Michiko and I looked at each other and said in unison, “We don’t.”

As soon as we arrived at our posh room I made myself some coffee and pored through the brochures, but Michiko just made a phone call and started speaking rapidly and happily in Japanese. Putting down the phone she said, “Want to see the Elvis Impersonators’

Show? My school friend from Japan is one of the performers and he'll be happy to arrange for the best seats for us."

"Really? Why not?" I said, impressed with Michiko's resourcefulness. "I have never been to such a show in my life."

"I haven't either. But my friend said he'd be honored if we go to his show."

"Let's go honor him then," I said.

Michiko and I changed into our Las Vegas clothes, what we thought would be appropriate for Las Vegas. She wore a black dress that Yoko Ono would wear and I put on my black skinny pants with a silver top. We strutted out of our room in our stiletto heels.

When we arrived at the venue of the show, a gentleman came forward and ushered us in. He said Mr. Nieshio had instructed him to spot the two Asian ladies and seat them in the VIP section. Feeling like princesses, we sank down in our opulent chairs.

As the show began one by one the multiple impersonators of the King of the Rock serenaded and swept us off our feet. The audience cheered and clapped and tapped their feet at the rhythm of the oldies. Even though that was not my thing, I enjoyed it all the same because I knew it was a rare experience which I wouldn't opt for ever again in my lifetime.

And, then, came Mr. Johnny Nieshio, flamboyantly, crooning *My Boy* in white Elvis regalia, the side-burn and sun-glasses in place. During the rendition we easily forgot that the man behind the fake Elvis once sat on the same bench as Michiko in school and had bento box lunch of sashimi and sushi wrapped in seaweeds.

Mr. Nieshio was a sensation that night and to our surprise he won the prize as the best impersonator of the year. People cheered all around and I could see that Michiko was ecstatic

as she jumped up and down and clapped constantly in sheer delight. Nobody would've guessed that she had two high school boys back in Michigan, or a husband practicing in the picturesque golf-links of Tennessee. Nor, for that matter, that I had a hubby too tending to my aging mother-in-law, in India.

Michiko and I went to congratulate Mr. Nieshio. Michiko shook hands and spoke swift Japanese during which the former classmates bowed to each other it seemed endless times and then she said in English, "This is my friend Reena. We're neighbors in Michigan." I noticed that even though Mr. Nieshio impersonated Elvis flawlessly, he hesitated to speak English.

Feeling like a bone in the kebab at the reunion of old friends, I excused myself and said, "If you want to catch up I'll take a cab and go back to the hotel."

"You stay, Reena, please?" said Michiko.

I knew Michiko wouldn't need me and I wanted to go back and relax on our first day of our spur-of-the-moment getaway at our own hotel.

"No, you two have a lot to talk about. I'll wait for you at the hotel," I said.

At the hotel I went to the restaurant instead and sat outside by the garden water fall. I ordered a glass of Chianti and took stock of the last two days, since the time we decided to take the trip to Vegas. Did Michiko know all along that Mr. Nieshio would be here performing? Was this going to be an affair? Were we going to let our respective spouses know about it?

Just then when my dinner arrived, Michiko came trailing behind.

She said, "I knew where to find you. I am starving. What did you order?"

"Just some seafood. I thought you would dine with your friend?" I said.

Michiko sat down opposite me with a thud and gestured the waiter to bring her the menu.

"No, just talking was enough. You have to know when to stop. Dinner is risky. It will mean giving hope which is not what I want," she said.

After her glass of wine arrived we clicked our glasses.

"To our friendship and our secret trip," she said.

"Certainly, to our friendship, but a secret from whom?" I said.

"From our husbands," she said. "We don't ask what they do in their trips."

I saw a flicker of bitterness surface on Michiko's lips as she said this but soon she masked a smile over it. It convinced me that my friend was not ready, yet, to take our friendship to the next level. She said in Japan husbands always combined business and pleasure with their colleagues and the wives took care of themselves too if they found the right opportunity.

Geishas and Comfort Women of the Second World War came to my mind. I said, "Michiko, what do you think of the Comfort Women?"

"You mean from the World War?"

"Yes!"

"What do you want to know?"

"Do you approve of it? Is it right?"

"No, it's not right. How can it be right? But in Japan the male is very powerful. The woman is a servant. You know that don't you?"

"How do the women feel?"

"They learn to make adjustments. I don't know about other Japanese women but I can tell you with confidence that my husband will not find a comfort woman."

She then told me how glad she was that I was her friend and bold enough to undertake the journey. Flattery won me over and I became her facilitator of entertainment in the city of temptation for the next three days. It became clear to me what Michiko meant by making adjustments.

"After we finish let's go dancing before we go to bed," she said.

"You don't want to gamble?"

"I don't like casinos and gambling and I know from knowing you for a year, Reena, you don't like them too," she said.

Michiko was certain about that. I was least the gambling type and enjoyed more the shows and the architectural ambiance of the city. We shook our legs with nonchalance at a night club and returned to our hotel room exhausted.

I changed immediately into my pajamas and browsed through the brochures for our next day's adventure. Michiko went inside the bathroom. When she came out she had a mask on her face and just a robe on her body. She slipped out of it, naked, and then got under the duvet cover. "I am used to sleeping like this. I hope you don't mind," she said turning toward the wall and revealing her back to me. I was stunned. "Michiko, you never told me!" I slipped into the bed, beside her, to admire closely the exquisite piece of art covering the back side of her body. Blooms of pink camellia and magenta peony filled the small back of her

waist, just above the swell of her shapely hips, interspersed with green foliage. A pair of grey herons leapt diagonally toward her left shoulder.

"I have read that some of the *ukiyo-e* woodblock artists were also *horoshi* or tattoo artists in the Edo period, but this is modern and so lovely, Michiko."

She got up to face me. "Thanks, I knew you'd like it," she said, covering her breasts with the sheet.

"Please lie down. I want to see it again. This is so cool," I said.

My fingers hovered the *horimon*o's outlines like a dragonfly. Michiko said, "The *horoshi*, the artist was getting old and not keeping well. So, we flocked to his studio, before he took his art away with him. My husband wears a *Hokusai* on his back."

"I must get one when I come to Japan," I said.

"Really?"

"Why not?"

"You surprise me, Reena, what will your people say?"

"What did your people say?"

"They don't know."

"Well, my people don't have to know either, but instead, I would like to shock them and see the expressions on their faces," I said, and we both laughed.

When we slept with our backs to each other in our own designated spaces I was reminded of a time from our childhood. One summer our aunt made us sleep with our uncle in the afternoons in the pretext of taking advantage of his outstanding story-telling skills. Slowly the story time with our uncle became a dreaded prospect among the children, and

each ran to hide before getting trapped in his net. The uncle's fingers would scratch our back at first, and then, while cajoling us into the story, linger in spots where it didn't feel appropriate even at a young age. Another realization saddened us when we grew up. Our aunt was seeking respite from the groping fingers herself by sharing their assault with us. The gust from the remote past surprised me which was nothing beyond tactility; yet, the detachment on the hotel bed further heightened our own sexuality.

In the remaining days we took in shows, spa treatments, fine-dining and even slot machine gambling, but Michiko insisted that I should not pay, not even for my hotel stay or anything at the sin city. I ended up getting my only free plane ticket from free accumulated miles.

When we returned to Michigan I was guilt-ridden and crammed with the weight of the surreptitious trip. But when my husband returned I could not find the right opportunity. Our memorable journey stayed inside me.

One day Michiko called me and said if I could join her for tea in the afternoon. I enjoyed afternoon tea with my neighbor especially on my way back from the university. I bought some croissant on my way.

As we sat down with our steeping cups she said, "We're going back to Japan in two months. I am going to miss our friendship, Reena."

"Me too, this is such a surprise, Michiko."

"I know. My husband is wanted back in Japan. I am so grateful to you Reena, for coming with me to Las Vegas."

"Don't be, I enjoyed the trip just the same."

"Still, I have to tell you something. Remember, the Hokusai horimono that I had said my husband had on his back? It was not true. When I went to get my horimono I didn't go with my husband but with Nieshio. It's him who wears the Hokusai and is the father of my son Yasujiro."

"I don't know what to say, Michiko." I felt somewhat betrayed that the Las Vegas trip had much to do with Nieshio than our friendly getaway.

"Don't say anything. Life is a journey. You choose what your think is right for you at that moment."

Then, abruptly changing the subject she said that Yasujiro would stay back and join the University of Michigan and Kenji would finish school and try for Tokyo University next year. Before I could retain the spate of mismatched information doled out by Michiko she spoke again.

"I have a *sayonara* surprise for you, my friend. My husband's boss's wife is a tea master. We are going to honor you with a tea ceremony."

"I am speechless, Michiko, thank you so much," I said, dazed, thinking, *Is she paying me back for enabling her reunion with her ex-lover?*

The day of the tea ceremony Michiko and I went to Miyoko's house in the afternoon. Miyoko, a petite and a slender lady in a lychee-flesh colored kimono greeted us at the door. After we took off our shoes she gestured us to follow her to the formal living room. Michiko and Miyoko's friend Keiko was already waiting. Our hostess Miyoko was trained in the *Urasenke* tradition. Her tea paraphernalia was arranged in order. The *Tokonoma* or the focal

point featured a gorgeous bloom of orchid, its hue in a shade of pale pink, blades of green grass anchoring and reminding one the irises under the yatsuhashi bridge.

We sat on the floor, our legs folded on our knees, in the yoga pose of *vajrasana*. My heart felt obliged by the honor but also unnerved with Michiko's recent pronouncement. Just then Miyoko started the ceremony assisted by Keiko. She un-tucked the shrimp colored handkerchief from the waist of her kimono, folded it ceremoniously, and then, proceeded to wipe the utensil. She poured water into a bowl, swirled it and then discarded it. She wiped the bowl clean and then poured green tea into it. When she whisked it with a wooden whisker in the tranquil ambiance of harmony, purity and respect, it annoyed me momentarily that the tool reminded me of my grandfather's tattered shaving brush. Finally, she scooped boiling water from the kettle with a bamboo ladle to fill the bowls. After Miyoko passed the bowls of tea to us and Keiko placed the sweets by it, we bowed and proceeded to drink the tea. Miyoko showed us the right way. She turned the bowl thrice clockwise before drinking it. She did this so that the front of the exquisite bowl faced the guest when she drank from the back side as a sign of respect. After the ritual was over we all laughed heartily to break free from its rigidity and appreciated the ceremony with a final bow.

Michiko had about a month left in the U.S. when one evening she invited us for dinner at her house on Sunday. My husband and I were greeted by Mr. Mizutani himself at the door. He waited as we changed into house slippers and then he led us into the living room. Michiko and the boys came in greeting and smiling, Michiko wearing an apron, indicating her important culinary work in the kitchen.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bora, we welcome you to a Japanese dinner tonight. Let's start with some *Saki* and Michiko's tempura. Our big boy Yasujiro will play the guitar," said Mr. Mizutani.

While we sat down around a square coffee table with Mr. Mizutani, Michiko went back to her cooking while Yasujiro strummed the guitar. Michiko kept bringing servings of food and bowls for us. My husband and I ate with both chopsticks and forks. Kenji the younger son helped his mother, sat with us or disappeared for a time. The boys asked many questions about America and the U.S. university system and my husband satisfied them with erudite answers. Between her dishes and cooking Michiko joined us for a while and with each glass of *saki* we shed a bit more inhibition and talked like old friends.

Mr. Mizutani said, "How long are you married?"

"Five years," said my husband.

"No babies?"

"Not, yet, maybe soon, after Reena defends her dissertation," said my husband.

We're married for twenty years," he said. "How did you meet?"

"We met in college," said my husband.

"You must know this. This is interesting. I had a competitor for Michiko's heart. If Michiko had chosen him, his name was Johnny Nieshio, I would not be sitting here with you today," said Mr. Mizutani and laughed with gusto.

My husband cupped my waist and gave it a squeeze. I looked up at Michiko who smiled back at me, winking, and stir-frying still some *udon* for the last of her offerings. From six o'clock to about ten we tasted Michikos's delicious dishes of exotic food brought to us

with fresh bowls and chopsticks. We never moved from the coffee-table, and by then, like Mr. Mizutani we sat on the floor and downed cups after cups of warm *saki*.

I knew then why Michiko chose Mr. Mizutani and not the Japanese Elvis. What would she do when the singer would be touring and competing and dealing with instability? Mr. Mizutani at least gave her a home with children and only indulged in golf outings. *Was that so? Why did I glimpse a twitch in her lips then?*

We took the Mizutani family for dinner at a restaurant just a few days before their departure. Michiko came to my door before leaving for the airport.

"Reena, I come to say *sayonara*," she said.

We hugged and said we would write to each other.

"Don't forget to make your journey to Japan. Remember, I'll be your guide and take you to Kyoto you so much love," she said.

A couple months after Michiko left I became pregnant with my son. Michiko sent me packages after packages of gifts. Even after my son was born she sent me origami or other little nick-knacks for him in letters or in parcels. I finally defended my dissertation and we moved from Michigan to Texas, and still, Michiko kept in touch with me. She sent me pictures of her boys who got married to beautiful brides and kept writing every year, during the new years, and I did the same.

One day my husband and I, two foreign film buffs, were watching *Okuribito* or Departures, a Japanese movie. The movie was about an out-of-job cellist who took up work of a *Nokanshi* or an undertaker. In the movie the *Nokanshi's* boss who was a seasoned embalmer dined after his work in his courtyard garden with insouciance, a stark contrast to

the job he underwent before it. The scene transported us to the night of the dinner we had with the Mizutani family.

I said, “Do you remember the night we had dinner at the Mizutani house?”

“Yes, the food was awesome, just like in the movie.”

“Yes, it was,” I said, remembering my friend’s tasty tempura. “Remember, Mr. Mizutani said that he had a rival for Michiko’s heart?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Will you believe me if I tell you that I met him?”

“Where? How?”

In Las Vegas, with Michiko.”

“When did you go to Las Vegas?”

“The summer you went to India to see your mother.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t get a chance. Wait, actually I did want to tell you, many times, but as the time passed I enjoyed sharing this secret with Michiko.”

I filled him in with the details of our journey to the fun city and my husband just shook his head in disbelief and teased me for making-up such a grand story. I thought, *not bad, I could go on adventurous journeys of my own and the dude wouldn’t even know.* Of course I didn’t tell him about sharing the bed with Michiko and glimpsing the *horimono* on her naked body. He would have misconstrued and unnecessarily impregnated the void in the space.

The Janmashtami Festival

Today is Krishna Janmashtami, Lord Krishna's birthday. Today is also my son's birthday, through C-section, from the womb of a surrogate mother under the care of a kind OB/GYN doctor, in a small town in Gujarat, India. I arrived here only yesterday with my husband from Austin, Texas, where my job is to develop software for the local government.

This time I am in full control. I myself chose the following with care: the auspicious day for my son's birth, the surrogate Kamala from the list of women under Dr. Desai's employment who lend their wombs for a price, and my husband's healthy seed from a Russian American ancestry.

It was not so the first time I had a child, stillborn, sacrificed to Holy Ganga, gulped down and snatched up by the scavengers of Varanasi's murky water.

I had just turned eighteen when I had acquired a job as a dough kneader at the temple during the Janmashtami Festival. The other kneaders at the kitchen were all male. They were Chetan kaka, Mukesh, and a new Krishna devotee from America, Dharmananda. The dough kneaders also worked as rollers of round *rotis* wh*o* cooked them by thousands on hot *tawa* griddles. I was an exception. I was allowed only to divide the dough into balls, before the rolling process began. Malini, Bindu, and Rekha were the vegetable cutters. Sadanand Verma supervised and presided over the festival kitchen and helped around where help was needed. Rakesh Mathur was the owner and the Festival contractor. He also cooked the signature nine-jewel vegetable recipe and the lentils. When he dropped the cumin and other spices into the

hot oil for seasoning the flavors emanating from it made the sprawling kitchen and its courtyard aromatic and fragrant.

Mukesh was Rakesh Mathur's son. He and I went to the same school. I considered him childish and dreadful and not at any cost as my superior or boss. His father sided with me in this regard by withholding the title from him. The way the man screamed and berated his son in front of us, he could be lowest of low caste (even though caste never played a role at all in that Temple as all were just devotees of Krishna). The other person related to Mathur was Rekha. She was his sister-in-law that gave her some privilege and status. She worked in a delicate way, as if she were the Maharani of some make-believe kingdom. She was not friendly with Malini and Bindu, but with me, somewhat sociable. She had come to live with her sister, Mrs. Mathur, after a marriage gone badly with an older gentleman.

She was not used to this kind of work. Talking behind her back, Malini and Bindu said she had a nervous breakdown or something of the kind. They said her brother-in-law kept her engaged in the Festival food preparation team to keep her mind off from the presumed marital trauma. They also gossiped that she had taken the job because she was after a man, and that the man was Sadanand Verma.

All I could see in the days of the Festival, when I went to sleep, were swirls of dough, rotis, and shredded vegetables. They piled high in endless stories, oil dripping from them, cumin and onion seeds lodging relentlessly in their crevices and pores, hanging on to their dear lives. Those visuals in no way encouraged revulsion but reminded me of the bulk of the work involved, in feeding the benevolent fans of Krishna.

Sadanand Verma showed me the art of kneading the *roti* dough. You take three kilograms of whole wheat flour on a large steel bowl. You sprinkle a palm-full amount of *kalounji*, black onion seeds, and salt into it. The *Kalounji* comes from the cumin family. Then you make a hole in the middle and pour oil.

"Mix the oil and the flour," said Sadanand gently, adding hands-full of flaxseeds. "Know what this is for?"

"Omega-3 fatty acids and fiber?"

"You nailed it."

He made me run my hands around the mixture and over it and then to pour water in increments until the dough was ready to be kneaded.

"Slap, slap," he said reassuringly. "Now turn it around and use your palm and fingers. I did. It was big and lumpy to the touch.

"Hare Krishna." Sadanand turned the dough around. "Krishna, Krishna." He patted it down and rolled it up and then knocked it down again.

It was not easy at all. My hand was full of sticky dough, not yet smooth like an embryo.

"See, the *kalounji* and black onion seeds? They help digestion."

His dough made more tactile shapes and when I detected some suggestive ones he discreetly knocked them down before anything concrete could be deciphered.

Sadanand Verma was a tall, slender man. His dark wavy shoulder-length hair was oiled and tied neatly in a pony-tail. His white dhoti and tank top together with his slightly slanted shapely eyes, made him resemble a handsome *hatha* yogi. Whatever he did in the

festival catering venue – kneading as he was now, stirring the large cauldrons, or helping bring the supplies in – he did with smooth, quick and precise movements, efficiently and stylishly. “Notice about Sadanand – he does not just walk, he glides,” Malini said, and it was not far from the truth. Sadanand gave dancing lessons at the Temple and also worked as a Sanskrit tutor on the premises.

In all the running of the festival kitchen it seemed to be Sadanand who upheld the standard and efficiency of the catering business. Seeing him in the courtyard of the Temple, talking to Rakesh, who was a short, pot-bellied man, you would think it was Sadanand who was the boss and Rakesh the employee. But it was just the opposite.

If I had not had Sadanand to show me I don’t think I would have ever learned kneading or roti making. I would be just plain, boiling rice. On the other hand, Dharmananda, despite being a foreigner, was an expert in this matter. A quiet, tall man wearing *dhoti, kurta*, Gandhi glasses and a tuft of hair on a shaven-head, it was hard to grasp that love of Krishna alone brought these men to our land. In the past, I heard, they came as hippies for the hashish, as well.

I was not good working with my hands and had been teased for it so often that any show of irritation on the part of Sadanand could have discouraged me from the job. Especially, I could not be under the probing eyes of Malini and Bindu, two middle-aged women, who were fast, competitive and nonchalant about their vegetable cutting work. They sang and talked obscene.

“Don’t you go limp on me!”

“This brinjal will not let you down!”

That was the first time I heard women talk like that and I thought, *that, at a Temple while preparing bhog for the Lord and prasad for the devotees*? Of course the women talked in their confidential whispering manner and I shrugged it off presuming superficially that Krishna's flamboyant image with the *gopis,* and sex, went hand in hand, and, therefore, allowing for such talks.

Rekha was not fast at her work, though she completed her job. She never sang or swore like the other two women. At first I thought her to be old, being married to an older man, but later I guessed her age to be just over thirty. She plainly did not like anything that went on in that kitchen. I never tried to have any conversation with her, but she spoke to me one day when we were outside.

She asked me if my hair had always been long.

I said yes.

"You always have them in plaits?"

"Yes."

"You're lucky to have long, thick hair. Mine is thin and falling. It is a chore to pick up the clumps from the floor."

Women have odd ways of talking about their looks. Some clearly keep themselves up for sex and men. The others, like Rekha, regard it as an essential routine and pride in it. Rekha was refined in her manners. I could see her as a music teacher, pulling the strings of t*aanpura*, grouchy, but proper.

I think the idea that Malini and Bindu circulated – that Rekha was after Sadanand Verma – rooted from their belief that single people ought to be teased and paired with other

single people. They wondered about Rekha and Sadanand, and decided they were meant for each other and that it should be facilitated. They were curious about Sadanand. How can a man not have a wife, a family, a life?

Malini and Bindu did not have good opinions about marriage, in spite of their belief in the sacred bond. Malini said that not before long after her marriage she considered swallowing gamexin.

"I would have done it," she said. "But the man came from the seed company and I had to bring in tea. This was when we lived in the farm."

Her husband beat her up in those days, but later he suffered in a tractor accident so badly that he was bed-ridden. They moved to town, and Malini became the boss ever since.

"He makes a fuss the other day, says he don't want his roti. I just locked my eyes into his and say, 'What?'He was scared stiff that my eyes would kill. He says, 'I'll eat it.'"

Bindu talked about her nasty father. He was an old-fashioned man. When Bindu and her siblings got on his wrong side, he would line them up and beat their palms with a cane. Bindu, who was the youngest, would shake till she fell down. The same father had arranged her marriage to a crony of his when she was just sixteen.

"Bad tempered," Bindu said.

"Why didn't you just run away?" I said, appalled.

"He was the law," Bindu said.

The women said that was what was wrong with the world nowadays. It was the kids that ruled the roost. A father's words should be the last words. They brought their own

children with strict discipline and when Malini's son wet the bed she threatened to chop off his lingam with the kitchen knife. That cured him.

They said most of the young girls nowadays refused to help their mothers, swore, and wore plunging short, *choli* and exposed their midriffs and their tight saris fell just below their belly-buttons. "Disgraceful," they said.

I was furious. Both the women themselves swore, and what so commendable about the strong will of a father who would give you a lifetime of unhappiness? These women were not unhappy, though. It infuriated me then at the lack of logic in adult talk – the way they held on to their pronouncements even though the evidence showed something else. How could these women's hands do meticulous things – knitting, stitching, weaving, henna-painting – and yet, their thinking be sloppy.

Chetan kaka, the other dough kneader, roller and roti-maker, was our neighbor. There was nothing exceptional about him except that he was eighty-three years old and a star roller and roti-puffer. His roti breads would puff-up like balloons on the grill over open fire. He only slipped out at intervals to smoke *charas*. It was Chetan kaka, who said in our kitchen, "If you want to learn a skill, join us at the festival kitchen. They need a dough maker." My father at once retorted, "Not her, Chetan kaka. She's got ten *nakhras*," and Chetan kaka just smiled and winked at me. That made me even more determined to try it. *Nakhras* or wiles were not me. As some of the grown up men and women in Varanasi were ashamed for not being able to read or write at an appropriate level, I was leery of my ability to do manual work. People around me prided in doing their work and treated those of us who were good at academics with subtle contempt. So, it was a surprise at first and then a feeling of triumph,

when I managed to do my work day after day without getting fired. I am not sure how much credit went to Sadanand Verma for this, but he would encourage me, "good girl," or pat my waist and say, "you're getting to be a good worker – you'll do well," and his touch would electrify my whole being under my kamiz and rise up blushing my cheeks, and leaving me pining to lean back on him as he stood behind me.

I was eager to know how he talked to Rekha, or looked at her, or noticed her. This eagerness was not jealousy. I think, as with Malini and Bindu, I wanted something to happen between them, like in a movie, so that I could imagine the heroine as me in a vicarious and platonic way.

The two weeks before Janmashtami were a frenzied time at the Temple. I began to go in before and after college and also in the weekends. In the morning when I walked to work, the Ghats on the Ganga River would be vibrant with activities: Temple bells would be ringing, yogis would be performing sun-salutations, and dead would be burning. In spite of the mystery of such a universe I would experience a sense of promise that only Sadanand had brought about. In truth, such feelings came easily then. I would get them without any clue to connect them to real life.

People came in droves for the evening *aarti* as the festival got nearer. As the women entered the hall they covered their heads with their sari ends or *duppatas* and, filled with reverence, brought their hands together. The devotional bhajans sung before the *aarti* offerings to Krishna vibrated every pore of the Temple and resonated in the sinews of our skins.

Before joining the others at the main hall for *aarti*, we would wash and mop the tiled floors of the kitchen and wash our face and feet at the water-pump. The men would put on their shirts over their tank-tops and women in their cotton saris would un-tuck their pallu ends from their waists and straighten them.

One evening our culinary group decided to participate in the sunset *aarti* at the Ghat. It was Sadanand who suggested it. I wore a maroon and white cotton sari that evening and became one with the other women.

"How charming you look!" said Malini.

"You should always wear saris," said Bindu.

"Don't listen to them," said Chetan kaka before heading home.

Rekha just smiled and walked back to their family's home with Rakesh Mathur.

That left just us: Sadanand Verma, Mukesh, Dharmananda, Malini, Bindu, and me. Our odd group walked through throngs of people in August heat and reached near the steps of the Holy Ganga where marigold and earthen lamps were sold on the streets for the evening prayers. Sadanand volunteered to buy the lamps and marigolds for us and we all stood on the lowest steps of the Ghat and joined in the communal *aarti* of almost one hundred thousand people. We saw the crimson colors of the sunset reflect on the dark water; the depth of which contained the story of its three thousand year history. Blowing conches and Sanskrit chants imbued the atmosphere with spiritual elation, and as we brought our hands in prayer together from the corner of my eyes I saw Sadanand in perfect alignment with the ambiance of that moment. It disconcerted me that Mukesh also partook in that covert action, and it felt as if we were both caught admiring a forbidden sculpture.

As the chants subsided we immersed the lamps and the marigolds in the water and made our way up the stairs.

"Varanasi is beautiful, isn't it so, Dharmananda?' said Sadanand.

"Incredibly spiritual, and in that, it's beautiful, I would say," said Dharmananda.

"You're right, in the mundane sense it's not. How can the corpses, the beggars, the old, and the crippled can be beautiful, right?" said Sadanand.

"Yet, it's the presence of this mundane that enhances the spiritual experience, I think," said Dharmananda.

"Have you seen the turtles in the river, bred especially to live off the body parts of the corpses?" said Mukesh.

"Don't scare him out," said Bindu.

"He probably already knows," said Malini.

"I am sure he read everything about Varanasi before he came here," I said.

"Alright everyone, it's so muggy out here, how about some *thandai* in my house?" said Sadanand. "In the spirit of the festival I'll make my best *thandai* for you. Will you grace my house?"

We were surprised and flattered by the unexpected invitation. Of course all of us said yes and followed him. He summoned the rickshaws, just then Malini remembered something and excused herself and so did Bindu, and both the women took leave. In two rickshaws we paddled along to Sadanand Verma's house. I sat next to Sadanand while Dharmananda and Mukesh shared the other rickshaw. It was exciting and sensual sitting so close to Sadanand. I wished the journey would never end.

But we soon arrived outside Sadanand's building. As we entered his apartment, I was mesmerized by its simplicity. A low divan stood on one side, two chairs on the other, and a picture of him perched on the serpent king on the wall as a reminder of his dancing background. The seven headed serpent mask also sat on the floor below it. A bamboo mat on the side, an x-shaped wooden book holder, and a hardbound *Gita* on it established him as a yogi and a scholar of Sanskrit.

"Come, have a seat," said Sadanand.

As I sat on the divan, Dharmananda headed for the chair. Mukesh helped the host bring the stand fan from his bedroom.

"Want some water first, or shall we go straight for the *thandai*?" said Sadanand.

"Sure," I said. The fact that I was the only woman in that room did occur to me. It did when the other two women departed at the rickshaw stand also, but the way things progressed I was in a trance and welcomed it.

"I bet this is your first time," said Mukesh.

"I am sure it's yours too!" I said, irritated by his remark.

"I would like to watch you if you don't mind," said Dharmananda standing.

"Sure come along, all of you."

We followed Sadanand to his small kitchen.

"I've already soaked the buds and leaves of the cannabis along with the other ingredients," said Sadanand.

"What other ingredients?" said Dharmananda.

We were intrigued by Sadanand Verma's organization and foresight. It didn't come to mind that maybe he had planned for it.

"Oh, let's see, dried cantaloupe seeds, poppy seeds, aniseeds, almonds, peppercorns and rose petals," said Sadanand.

Sadanand ground the soaked ingredients in his large rectangular and flat stone mortar-and-pestle squatting on the floor. His muscled arms taut and sure of its back and forth movement. After grinding to a fine paste he added soaked sugar water to it and strained it on a muslin cloth squeezing the residue dry. He added milk to the extract and sprinkled some ground cardamom in the liquid.

"Now, we'll have to chill it at least for an hour," said Sadanand.

Like a chef on a cooking show, he brought out another vessel with four glasses and said,

"Meanwhile we have some already prepared. Let's go to the drawing room, shall we?"

We took our seats in the living room and Sadanand did the honor of pouring the drinks for us. Handing each a glass he made a toast, "here's to Janmashtami, to Krishna, to love."

The concoction trickled down my throat like an elixir, even though I did not know what elixir was. At the time my *thandai* was the elixir of my exhilaration.

"Even though this is Shiva's drink and more popular during *Shivaratri* and *Holi* festivals," said Mukesh. As usual he tried to be smart.

"A t*handai* is a *thandai*. You have no restriction when to enjoy it. Now go get some sizzling *pakoras* from Ramu bhai's kiosk, will you?" said Sadanand, sending Mukesh off to get the chick-pea fritters from the vendor downstairs.

Dharmananda and I were wrapped up in our new experience and rapt in Sadanand's spell.

"What's the deal with the snake?" Dharmananda said, pointing to the picture on the wall and the mask under it.

"That's from my dance of *nag daman*, meaning the conquest of the snake. Have you heard of *Nag Nathaiya Leela* that observes Krishna's birth in Tulsi Ghat?" said Sadanand. "It's a twenty-day long performance in the months of November and December."

According to a myth of the Mahabharata epic, young Krishna lost his ball while playing in the Jamuna River. When he jumped into the river to retrieve it, he confronted the serpent king Kaliya, who, realizing that Krishna was another *avatar* of Vishnu, lifted him up on his seven-headed hood to the surface.

Mukesh returned with the *pakoras* soon after. Sadanand poured a second, and a third round of *thandai* and we started to relax and laugh at anything anyone said. I lost count of the numbers by then. Sadanand proposed to perform the piece for us and went inside to get his cassette-player.

The humid atmosphere got to us. The men took their shirts off and I started wiping the sweat off my neck and face with the end of my sari. Sadanand arrived with the music and only a *dhoti* below his waist.

The sounds from tabla, sitar, and flute filled the room and Sadanand's cosmic dance swirled the world around us. We became floating stars in the galaxy of an extraordinary recital. Each of us tried to outdo the other and perform the dance of our lives in sync with the melodic instruments. It was a charged atmosphere into which we merged as one. Soon, I blacked out.

When I woke up from a fathomless sleep, all I saw was Dharmananda, sitting beside me with a deeply pensive face. I laid on the divan as if I were a doll with her clothes piled on top and the little girl or boy who played with her got tired of the game. Sadanand Verma and Mukesh had vanished from the scene, like a smoke, into the mysterious world.

Dharmananda helped me gather myself up and we left Sadanand's apartment with a deep understanding between us and a gut feeling that we would always be together. Dharmananda became my pillar who was always there only I did not see it. When I found out I was pregnant, I knew Dharmananda had nothing to do with it. I cried my heart out. It was unfair. Why it had to be me to carry the memento of that fateful incident? But Dharmananda and I had become closer since the eventful day. Its secrecy was our bond. As my swelling started to show slightly Dharmananda proposed to marry me.

My parents, faculty at the university, worried at first as Dharmananda was from a different world but relented when they realized he was more invested in the spirituality of our land than I was. Dharmananda and I became husband and wife at a small ceremony.

I never went back to work at the Temple kitchen again. I focused on my academics wholeheartedly as my belly got bigger. I was about seven months into it when I had an auto-rickshaw accident on my way to the college.

When I woke in my hospital bed, Dharmananda was again by my bedside, holding my hand. When I looked around I saw my parents and Chetan kaka standing together, at a distance.

I let my hand slip down on my belly and it felt strange. I looked at Dharmananda.

"What happened?"

"You had the baby, a boy, stillborn. I am sorry. You don't know how thankful I am to God that you survived!"

I felt worse for Dharmananda, more than losing a child that came to reside in my womb unannounced. He depended on me, on us, and I sensed its responsibility, to protect it.

I was released from the hospital two days later. The body of the baby was kept in the hospital freezer until I recovered. It was between the festivals of *Shivaratri* and *Holi*, in March. The streets were rampant with the merrymakers. The colors of *Holi* whorled all around us: magenta, green, yellow, indigo blue, vermillion red. B*hang thandai*, *ghota* and *goli* were prepared, sold and consumed. Amidst all this we headed for the Ghats at dawn. In the city of death, Varanasi, young children don't get a cremation. They are tossed into the murky water, to be gulped down by creatures under it. It is considered *moksha*, or liberation, from the cycles of life and death.

Amidst the chants of a priest and surrounded by my parents and Chetan kaka, Dharmananda and I gently immersed the wrapped bundle from a boat in the middle of Ganga. Like a little log, strewn with marigold and rose petals, the sacrificial package drifted away into its final journey until all we saw was a little dot and then nothing. Dharmananda and I stood clasping our hands, tightly, staring at the water.

The night before we left Varanasi, we walked to the River for the last time. The full-moon showered light on us and the Ghats came alive with evening prayers, Sanskrit chanting, the floating lanterns wishes, and the tapered smoke of the dead. Dharmananda said it was like a Diwali card, and so it was, as the subdued flickers from the riverside competed with the lights in the buildings and temples creating innumerable sparks, as in its celebration.

That was nearly thirteen years ago. Today we don't wear any badge of religion, organized or pretentious. Dharmananda has gone back being David again, his given name at birth. He has let his hair grow back, but he keeps a crew-cut for comfort and to tolerate the Texan heat. He is a venture capitalist now, but when we crave *roti* for dinner, he makes them in a lark, complete with the nine-jewel vegetables. We are ready to have a child of our own. After the auto-rickshaw accident I am not able to bear one in my own womb. So, we have found a surrogate in Kamala, and we are having our son today, on Janmashtami, here in Gujarat, India.

Indenture

One chore Rulie could do without was cleaning house by herself. She could cook fairly good gourmet meals, do the couple's laundry, and even plant flowers in pots when not teaching as an Elementary School teacher. But as a woman of Indian origin married to a man who ran the Midwest branch of a technology services company in St. Louis, she couldn't come to terms with cleaning the commode in the bathroom, scrubbing the shower enclosure, or mopping the floors of her modest house. Deepankar corroborated validity to such pickiness by genially giving that job to himself. He had seen her father's sprawling tea garden bungalow atop the green Assam tea-bushes slope where a retinue of *khansama*, *paniwala*, *jamadar, chowkidar*, *mali* and bearers kept the property in pristine order. He certainly knew that in such a set-up neither Rulie nor her family had lifted hands for any task and that is why he whistled a joyful tune when he chanced upon the house-cleaning services of Pancetta in their gated community.

The young couple had heard that Pancetta had been staying for several years with the family who owned the house a few blocks away in the neighborhood. She came to take care of Laura and Kevin when they were toddlers, and now the grown children did not need her except to do their laundry or occasionally to cook their favorite food.

Word went around that Pancetta, after finishing the chores in the house, would take up house-cleaning or baby-sitting jobs in the neighborhood. Rulie and Depankar had seen the work ethics of Philippina housekeepers before at the houses of their friends in Singapore and Hong Kong and felt blessed to find a person from the same community in their own vicinity.

Rulie had often noticed Pancetta taking care of the garden when passing by the house. She saw her planting at different times eggplants, tomatoes, okras, cucumbers, cantaloupes, and herbs. She saw her growing annual flowers: petunia, portulaca, and impatience, and tending to the perennials: iris, estilbe, lupine, hydrangea, delphinium and daisy. She stood bent, digging and weeding on these occasions, upright only when she mowed the lawn. The frail-looking, petite woman whose silvery hair slipped out of the French chignon under the hat astounded her onlookers with her prolonged manual work. Along with Teddy, the golden retriever, with whom she played Frisbee, Pancetta became a fixture of the house's yard in summer.

Rulie learned from the mother of one of her students who also lived in the same subdivision that Pancetta usually took sewing and mending orders in the neighborhood in winter. Once a girl had brought her a picture of Audrey Hepburn from the movie *Sabrina*, and asked if she could duplicate the dress for her to wear to the school prom. Pancetta suggested the girl to borrow the movie from the library and bring it to her. Putting the movie on pause, she studied the dress, and then she cut the pattern from a newspaper after taking the measurements, and produced a teal blue silk replica of the outfit down to the three diamond-like buttons on the backside of the dress.

So when Rulie saw Pancetta through the storm door walking toward her house for her first day of cleaning she waited with the door half open to usher her in.

"Good morning, please come in," she said, extending her hand to Pancetta.

"Good morning, Ms. Rulie," said Pancetta shaking Rulie's hand and following her inside.

"I am so happy you could come. Let's go to the kitchen and talk. Do you want some tea, Pancetta?"

"No, thank you, I just had my breakfast." Pancetta sat down on the chair opposite Rulie at the round breakfast table.

"Okay, tell me about you, how busy are you, could you help us with cleaning every other Saturday?" said Rulie.

The woman opposite played with beaded bracelets on her wrists, as if weighing in its consequences in her schedule.

"I'll try if I don't get baby-sitting jobs, otherwise, I'll try coming on Sundays sometimes," said Pancetta.

Rulie had heard of Pancetta's whims and moods and her instant likes and dislikes about people. One had to go through her scrutiny before she conferred her services, the rumor said. "That's fine, whatever suits you," said Rulie. She did not want to lose the services of this vivacious woman of whom she heard mostly praises.

She showed Pancetta the cleaning supplies and let her take charge of her house. When Deepankar returned from the gym his wife was sipping tea and skimming the news on the laptop. She smiled when her husband looked up and then broke into a dance at the water-splashing noise that came from the bathroom upstairs.

Rulie knew her tea-garden lifestyle was unique in India and was rooted in the colonial tradition. The British established the tea estates in the northeast region in the nineteenth century. They thrived on laborers brought in from the tribal pockets elsewhere as the indigenous people were found unsuitable and unwilling to work. The migrant population was

also employed in the households of the rambling bungalows of the estates' managers and owners. They were given different jobs and were called by the names of the particular task performed. So, in Rulie's former home a *khansama* cooked, a *paniwala* fetched water, a *jamadar* cleaned, a *chowkidar* kept vigil as a security guard, and a *mali* tended the garden. Most of the time the only helpers allowed in the inner sanctum of the house were the bearers: the head bearer who acted as the butler, and his deputies, who performed as the servers.

Rulie and Deepankar paid bills, made long-distance phone calls and had several cups of tea before Pancetta announced from upstairs, "I cleaned the bathrooms and vacuumed the upstairs. If we switch places now I won't be in your way."

"Sure," said Rulie, closing the laptop and rising to leave. "Can we call you Auntie? We hear everyone calls you Auntie."

"Sure, I am everyone's Auntie," said Pancetta swaggering down the stairs with the bucket.

Deepankar stepped up to Pancetta to shake her hand and said, "We are so delighted that you could come and help us out." Rulie wondered for a moment if they were showing too much enthusiasm. Back in the tea-estate such behavior was unthinkable. There were layers of façade they couldn't cross.

As Rulie and Deepankar walked upstairs they found their rooms transformed. The carpets had the fresh swirls of the vacuum, beds were made, furniture dusted, even the black layer of dust had been removed from the fans. As they entered the shining master-bathroom the couple hugged each other with gratitude.

Auntie Pancetta more or less kept her promise to clean the house every alternate Saturdays. Sometimes if she found less strenuous jobs such as cuddling and singing lullabies to a newborn while the young parents went out to rejuvenate for the day, both parties agreed on the precedence of the nurturing job and adjusted accordingly.

One day Pancetta came with a camera and showed Rulie digital photographs of her basement room. In one picture she sat against a pillow on the bed. “Here I am cross-stitching a peony bouquet,” said Pancetta. “Laura clicked this one.” Patchwork quilts embellished with flamingoes, butterflies, pineapples and flowers that she had stitched herself for years surrounded her in that frame. In one picture framed needlepoint embroideries hung from the wall. Anchor thread in myriad colors cascaded down from brimming boxes and containers in another. Rulie had no idea about Pancetta’s living quarters or her life. The pictures gave her glimpse to a whole other life.

One of the walls in the windowless room was lined with a dresser with a mirror, its surface covered with framed pictures of her children. Fabrics and cut-pieces overflowed from the sewing machine that sat on a table next to it. The snapshot of the opposite wall showed another hand-me-down chest of drawers spilling even more thread and fabrics. A wardrobe stood against one wall, a TV just opposite, and a horizontally placed bed in the middle completed Auntie’s space. “From here,” she said pointing the bed, “I remote control all my children back in the Philippines. I am their banker and provider.”

“Auntie, how many children do you have?” said Rulie, fascinated with the multifaceted life of the woman.

"I have five. They are all grown now and married with kids. I helped them with my income to stand on their own feet. Now I save my money for retirement."

"When did you last see them?"

"Umm, let's see, maybe twenty-seven years ago," said Pancetta. "But I don't complain. I talk to my family all the time on Facebook. My grandkids have added me as their friend, and they have posted lots of pictures for me to see."

"That's a long time," said Rulie, shocked. She and her husband went back to see family every two years and couldn't imagine to be deprived of it for twenty-seven years.

"How small were your children when you left?"

"My oldest was 26 maybe and my youngest 13."

"They were not very young then," said Rulie with relief.

"No. but they were not doing well."

Rule did not want to pry. She said, "Do you plan to go back one day?"

"I do, in a few years. At first I waited for my green card. The lawyer took my money and didn't help. But I don't care now. My children will care for me in my old age. My wonderful American family will take me back when the time comes and have a vacation in the Philippines too," said Pancetta.

Rulie was skeptical. She had heard that her children had squeezed her dry of her savings over the years demanding money for washing machine, refrigerator, bicycle or some other materialistic thing.

Pancetta returned to cleaning, and Rulie opened her laptop to scan news across the continents. Off late, this had become her Saturday morning ritual. One story about an Indian

woman's journey from Chhapra to the plantations in Caribbean told by her great-granddaughter in America caught her eye. In the book, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of indenture*, the Yale and Columbia University educated author apparently spoke about the system of indenture that the British Empire devised after slave trade was outlawed in the 19th century. It was a veiled system of exploitation, it reported, where poor people were transported across oceans to work for a pittance in British plantations. Rulie instantly saw how it paralleled the plight of the laborers of Assam's tea industry. What about their forced mobility to tea plantations in the past? But in India the caste and the class politics embellished even more layers into this dynamic. During her years growing up in the tea estate she couldn't oppose being attended to as it was clear that each of the servants was earning his or her wages in doing so. So the system created the hierarchy and some rebelled against it on both sides. In the past stories abounded about laborers being tortured to death, though lately more news of management and executives being attacked and hacked were reported. Only a couple months back Rulie was appalled and fearful of her parents' safety because of a shocking bit of news. A couple she knew socially had been killed by an angry mob of the tea-garden laborers. She had heard the manager was a malicious man.

It did come to her mind then if Binod had garnered any pent up hatred toward them as well. Binod, a servant boy had worked at her grandparents' house. Rulie and her cousins were three, four, or five years old at the time of their visit. Instead of letting them use the outhouse and risk having accidental fall into the pit their grandmother had ordered Binod to place a row of newspaper stacks enabling her grandchildren perform their bowel movement

into it. After removing the excrement from under the squatting children on the grass Binod had to give each little bottom a thorough wash.

When Pancetta came to the house next time Rulie habitually said, "Auntie, do you want to have a cup of tea before you start cleaning?" She was conscious of offering appreciation and deference to the older woman and not treating her like a common house servant.

"No thanks. I already had my coffee," she said, and walked closer to Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* reproduction hanging on the wall.

Rulie knew Pancetta was a quilter and her penchant for patterns was not unknown in the neighborhood, and Klimt's rendition of the embracing couple's robes was quite exquisite. Rulie had recently hung it up over the hallway console. Looking at the masterpiece intently for a while, Pancetta turned back.

"He raped me! Just like the man in the picture! He raped me under the tree," she said. Her serene face transformed into an angry whirlpool in a second.

"What are you talking about?" said Rulie, aghast. A numbing sensation ran down her body.

"See, the woman in the picture? Does she look happy to you? Look at her hands, is she clutching him happily?" said Pancetta.

Rulie got closer to look at the hanging piece, and saw some truth in Pancetta's interpretation. She saw that the woman's hand was crumpled up against the man's embrace, as if she was giving in reluctantly.

"Look at her tensed and crinkly hands, she wants to get away from his embrace, doesn't she?" said Pancetta.

Rulie was horrified to see the painting as Pancetta saw it. Until then she had never heard or thought of this analysis of the famous painting.

"My husband raped me. That's how I had my Melba, my fourth child," she said. "He was a good for nothing loser. That's why I came to America."

Rulie motioned Pancetta to sit down. The shock of the confession at the cost of a harmless piece of art disconcerted her. Pancetta spitted out a volcano, and Rulie dreaded its heat.

Pancetta was only four years old when Japan attacked the Philippines. She said her only memory of her parents and siblings was when they ran out of their hut in panic and a loud blasting sound fell on them. She became unconscious, she was told, and when she was found by a stranger in the village, he and his childless wife adopted her.

Pancetta said about five years later on a Sunday her adoptive parents left for church without her. They told her to stay at home as her two older sisters who also survived the war were going to pay a visit.

"You know, Ms. Rulie, when I watched them from the window, my sisters, their husbands, and their children getting down from the jeep and coming to the house, I felt nothing for them. I mean I felt no love. They cried and hugged me, asked me to come back home with them, but I didn't say a word. I just stared at my feet and remained grumpy with anger. When my parents returned from the church I told them I never want to see my sisters again," said Pancetta.

"Why? They were your siblings?"

"Because they didn't have to wait for five years to get me!" said Pancetta. "My adoptive parents cared for me well. My father drove a taxi and my mother grew vegetables and sold them in the market. I was in middle school when I met my husband at a church gathering," said Pancetta.

It moved Rulie to see Pancetta relaxing with each unfolding of the story as if she were peeling off the petals of a lotus and showing the core. Rulie became cognizant of the responsibility and privilege this woman bestowed upon her. "Do you care for some water before you go on, Auntie?' she offered.

"No need for water, I am fine, come sit down. He was tall and handsome, my husband, and he had very good hair. He dressed well too. I fell in love," said Pancetta, beaming.

Rulie was stunned by Pancetta's roller-coaster emotions.

"I did not listen to my parents. I eloped and married him. Then, I found out he was not an engineer but a taxi driver, and that only some of the time," said Pancetta. Her face broke down into a comical animation at this point as if she were performing *Kabuki*. Each muscle on her face played tug-0-war with the one next to it, breaking into sad, funny and scary performances in seconds.

"Being young and in love, the beginning of our married life went off like a bamboo-breeze – soothing and peaceful. Soon came my daughter Maniya, my son Albert, and another son, Bernie. Boom! Boom! Boom! Slowly I realized love cannot feed you. I took jobs sowing and harvesting paddy and growing and selling vegetables for the local landlords.

Once I washed bundles of clothes with a small packet of soap in the river and in the end got paid only five cups of rice!

I learned to sew my children's clothes. I would buy a sample from the store, take it apart, cut identical pieces and sew back the sample and the replica. The women liked my clothes so much they brought me fabrics to have their own daughters' dresses made. But a friend of mine said Pancetta, don't be a fool. You charge them at least fifty pesos. Don't you see they are saving the tailor's money by taking advantage of you? I realized my mistake. I was blind and puffed up with praise and flattery from my customers. So, I started charging for the dresses.

As I started working more and more, my husband worked less and less, and took to staying home all day. I asked him at least to get the kids to school.

One day I returned home in the late afternoon and found my two younger sons sitting by packed bags of clothes ready to go. When they saw me they told me crying how their father had hit their fifteen year old sister with a broom, and how he never gave them money when they went to school. I found Maniya huddled in a corner with bruises on the face. I turned into a mad woman. I picked up the machete and ran out looking for my husband.

Where is the useless fool? I will kill him! Where is he? Where are you hiding? I said.

People stood still. Children huddled behind their mothers with fear in their eyes. My screams hit only gripping silence. I really believe if he had not hid himself at the neighbor's house that day I would have slashed his throat with the machete!

I told my boys that we were not leaving the house because it belonged to me, from the sweat of my work, and they belonged there, not their father. From that day on I took the reins

of the household in my own hands. I sent my children to school with whatever money I could spare. I took up more jobs to run the family. I saw my husband in the village, but we never spoke.

About a year later, one sultry afternoon, I was picking pummelos from the tree. I was stretching and looking up, grabbing the fruits with a slit bamboo. My husband came from behind, grabbed me from the back, and raped me under the citrus tree, just like that painting!

When Melba was born, for about five hours I was alone in my house. The village midwife came only after my children found me on the floor and ran to get her. I tied my waist tight with a cloth to stop the baby's legs from kicking my chest. My water broke. I squeezed out the belly as if I were emptying a balloon out of its air. By the time my daughter was born, I was so exhausted that I gently pushed the newborn baby to the side, dropped a blanket on top of her, and went off to sleep. When I opened my eyes, I could not hear anything for a while, and then a little whimper from under the blanket filled my body with warmth and love."

At last Pancetta calmed down and returned looking serene from the theatrical act. She said, "Melba is my best child. She is like me, a fighter."

"What happened to your husband? Who was the father of your fifth child?" said Rulie. She was glad Pancetta came back to her normal self and for the respite it brought with it. The story of Pancetta's life fascinated and overwhelmed her by the enactment of its drama.

"You know, love makes you stupid. He came back after a while, was still a good for nothing fellow, but he was the father of my children."

"And so, you had another child?" said Rulie, unhappy with Pancetta's decision.

"Yes, Bobby came last," said Pancetta.

She took off with the yarn again where she'd left off.

"Many years passed. I got a better job in the city government. The Mayor's wife spotted me. I became the propagator of seeds and plants. When a very important person was about to visit, I was given the job of planting in the public areas and my team did an impressive job.

Then, an opportunity came my way. One of my husband's relatives came from California. She offered to take me to Oakland for a short visit. She paid for my one-way fare and said I could earn back my round-trip ticket by working for her daughter as a baby-sitter who was married to a wealthy American gentleman. The Mayor's office helped me with the papers at the Embassy. They were happy for me. They said, go to America do not worry about leaving work for a few months. I thought I would earn lots of money and also see the country where my hero John Wayne lived.

I came to the U.S. in 1987, to Oakland, where I took care of the woman's grandchildren for very little money as a percentage of my salary went toward my plane ticket. Slowly I realized that I had been tricked into coming to the U.S. A few months in California became a year, and then, one day my employer took me by air to Washington D.C. There she told me that I was going to work for an Arab couple instead, and was not returning to California with her. My passport was left behind with her mother. Promise of a better salary kept my hopes up to go back to Philippines soon. I was stupid.

Things went well with the Arab couple at the beginning. I took care of their little girl, the kitchen, and the house, and was paid well. I ran the household smoothly, so much so that

the wife started feeling jealous of me. They fought at night and I could hear my name. I could not sleep. In the morning the wife told me to leave. I told her I needed to talk to her husband who paid me my salary.

When the husband came home he asked for his coffee as usual and saw my packed suitcase. He managed to keep me for a few days, but through a contact at a park, I landed my present job that took me with the family to several cities, finally settling here in St. Louis. I met this family twenty years ago."

At this point in the meandering tale, Rulie started getting a gut feeling, as if the perceptive old lady had made some deliberate adjustment to the narrative. It was not hard to imagine a younger and sexy Pancetta, even one vying for the Arab master's attention, alongside his wife.

"Do you know, Ms. Rulie, how much money I have sent to my family? They ask me anything and I give them. I do not need anything. I sent them money to make my house strong, to build a sanitary bathroom, and a nice kitchen," she said.

"What does your husband do?" said Rulie.

"Oh, he died six years ago."

"What about your children?" said Rulie.

"They are all married and have children of their own. They call me. They send e-mails. Laura helped me get an e-mail address. She helps me with the computer," said Pancetta.

"I have been waiting for my papers for a long time now. Probably, in two years I will be able to make my journey back. My daughter Maniya and her family found a home in the

far side of the town. My three sons added rooms to my house and live there with their families. They run a successful business making wind chimes. Melba studied nursing with the money I sent, married a loser like her father, and then she left him after serious counseling from me on the phone. She, her son, and her boyfriend now live in Qatar where she has a good nursing job.

The only valuable gift that I gave myself was a laptop computer where I learned to connect with my family on Facebook. I carried the laptop to my garden to take pictures and learned to click my own photos and post them to my grandkids. My children understand their mother's sacrifice from the remote basement room."

Pancetta said, "By the way, Ms. Rulie, I already feel light in my body. You are the only one who knows the deep secrets of my life."

Rulie sat transfixed. She looked at the amazing woman who had endured so much in her arduous and long journey though life. She rose to give Pancetta a hug. She wanted to put the old lady at ease. She said, "I am glad you could unload yourself, Auntie. You don't have to work today. Come, have some tea with me. A cup of robust Assam tea will do you good. I want to ask you something anyway. Where do you go walking every morning past our house?"

"Now let me tell you a funny story," said Pancetta as she sat down on the kitchen stool comfortably.

"Do you know the old people's home across the Mulberry Street?"

Rulie knew about the home as her co-worker's mother lived there.

"I go there to take care of Laura's grandma. She is 96 and broke her left hip," said Pancetta.

"Oh, I am sorry. Is she alright?"

"She is fine, but hear this. As soon as I enter the dining room pushing grandma in the wheelchair all the boys start flirting with me."

"Now you're talking, Auntie. Do you like anyone of them?"

"I am too old for that. And they are old too."

"That's good, then. You all are old. Who says old people can't have boyfriends or girlfriends?"

"One man asked me to come to their dance this evening," said Pancetta, cackling with laughter.

"Not bad, Auntie, go for it."

"Maybe I will. How do I look?" said Pancetta, waltzing from the kitchen to the hallway, then, exiting through the doorway, bowing. "Thank you for the tea."

Pancetta took three small steps, skipped, took a few more steps and stopped to twirl in a circle. Rulie laughed. She saw her emptying seeds from a delphinium here and a dianthus there, greeting a neighbor, and then reprimanding a squirrel that crossed the street. Far away, she imagined Teddy waiting behind the glass door drooling for a game of Frisbee with his old friend who would soon take him out to the yard.

Rulie closed the door behind her and took a deep breath. Pancetta's unexpected outburst had unnerved her. She barely grasped at her bearing when the phone rang. Will she take the call? She checked the caller ID. It was an overseas call from her friend Seema, from

Doomdooma Tea Estate. Why would she call now? It was past midnight there. She picked up the phone, and heard Seema say, "You would not believe what the world has come down to. Remember the Thakurs who were murdered by the mob? It was all over the news today. The mob not only killed them, they barbecued, and ate them up to pieces." Rulie let the phone go off.

She slid down the wall to rest her bottom on the floor. She sat there for a long while worrying for her parents' wellbeing. Will they be safe? It consoled her somewhat that not all revenges were gruesome. She knew that Binod's sons and daughters were educated and well placed. One son even came to Cupertino, California to do awesome work in the technology sector. Lifting herself up from the floor, she grabbed her cold cup of tea from the table with a sigh, and dumped the rest of the brew in the sink. Then she proceeded to put the crisp dollar bills into the envelope and address its recipient. She decided, then on, to clean her house by herself even down to the commode, and employ Pancetta only for light mending or planting jobs. The envelope contained remuneration, and some, toward the old lady's retirement.

Doormat

Anamika's in-laws' last visit made for a great deal of preparation and smoke-screen arrangement. They stowed the bottles away. Even the ones lining the top of the kitchen cabinets that started off as a collection of mementos from early consumption. Those had to be removed with care and kept in box in the basement. They also hid the ashtrays and cigarettes, completely transforming their space. They bought a new TV for the family room and also subscribed to Indian channels to make the guests feel at home. They added a study table with lamp and chair, and a plush recliner for the comfort of the visitors in the guestroom too.

The three months seemed like a brief period of vacation in their dreary life. Anamika was astounded to see Bipul becoming a different man. He played scrabble or chess with Ina or his dad while the family lounged together. It surprised Ina, besides Anamika, and it showed on her happy face. She spent more time at home talking to her grandparents and Anamika got busier in the kitchen, cooking meals for them from scratch as they didn't eat food with preservatives. A surge of hope engulfed her like a blanket as if things would really change forever.

But after a month Bipul became restless. Anamika noticed that he came home late and always gave excuses of having caught up at work even though residue of the rum still lingered in his breath. He avoided standing near his parents on these occasions. He called his father from the office. He said, "Our project is running on a very strict deadline. Please don't wait for me, okay? Eat dinner without me."

After their afternoon siesta Anamika's in-laws tended to lie down in bed and engage in a kind of pillow talk. She noticed this routine when she came in to ask if they were ready for afternoon tea. Sometimes she ended up having conversations with them and bringing tea to the room and chatting and drinking together. She tried hard in one such occasion, to avert her eyes, when her mother-in-law, Purnima engaged in mining her nose with her finger, lost in deep thought, and pasting each of the rolled mucus on the sage-colored emulsion-painted wall. She invariably lost track of the thread of their conversation at that time and searched frantically in her mind for the best cleaning agent that would erase the thoughtful lady's nosily waste like a swish of white-washing during Diwali in the back country, or a gentle mud-plastering of cow-dung in the wall.

One day Purnima asked her, "Does Bipul drink?"

"Yes, every day," said, Anamika.

"But he never did at home."

"Maybe not in front of you," said Anamika.

"You think he'll drink in front of you? He's not stupid not to know what will transpire if he does such a thing," said Bipul's father.

Alcoholism had ruined many families in the old country. Purnima had to know its impact first hand. Her father died from it and her two brothers suffered from it endlessly.

"But I would have some notion," she said. "He must be unhappy about something, how are you two, happy?"

"What do you mean?"

"She means how is your marital life, good?" said Bipul's father.

"Oh, that, I suppose so," said Anamika, a raw incumbent in the art of family façade.

"Why does he drink, then?" said Purnima.

"I think you should know better. Because he has been drinking since the day one of our marriage," said Anamika not caring, letting the ball roll back into their court.

She witnessed an exchange of glances between the two. Purnima was not immune to addiction either. Her vice of choice was the beetle-nut wrapped in *paan* leaves with a touch of lime and tobacco that was chewed and relished in the cavity of the mouth. It made her face red and ripe like an elephant fruit, scorching heat oozing off the round vermillion sun on the forehead. Her supply of beetle-nuts grew in tall trees in her own backyard the vines of *paan* wrapped to it clinging and mounting. For her trip to the States she substituted them with the dry kinds that didn't satisfy her as well as the raw, fresh variety she got plucked from her own kitchen garden.

The night of their marriage Bipul whom she met only once, a week prior, entered their room with a bottle of Vat 69 and two glasses. "At last I see my beautiful bride," he said opening his arms to her, the bottle in one hand and the glasses balancing crookedly in the other. "See this?" He said raising the bottle with a boisterous guffaw. "This is Pope's phone number in the Vatican." You may dial directly to him!" This was the first time they were alone in the intimacy of their bedroom. Since the length of their three-day marriage, they belonged to the public as objects of abject *tamasha* or ridicule, for others to enjoy.

They came together in life like meat sold in the market. He divorced from an American woman with a son, yet, still a prospective catch from the United States; she, not good-looking, but fair-complexioned and healthy, not wealthy, but with upper-class pedigree.

Anamika did not know the consequence of this until after the marriage when Purnima scrutinized her body parts as if she were a mule. “Her nose is ugly, but teeth are good,” she declared. She looked for the parts that would offset her own son’s fragile health which was a result of not so immaculate ancestry and social rank that grew only in increment with relations formed through marriage. They would not take dowry, unfashionable in that part of the country, also to establish good reputation. But they would subjugate and humiliate by deriding one’s standing and what they were after themselves, which was a place in the upper echelon of society still defined by the established aristocracy. They constituted the up-start, the upward mobile, the kind of people known as the new money.

Their marriage was arranged by a woman who knew both the families. She told her parents, “Your daughter Anamika will have a good life in America. The boy is bright and has a good job. There is no demand for material things. Thank the stars. He’s off the hook from the clutches of an older woman. Other than that it’s a perfect match.”

Anamika was her parents’ burden and object of worry at her peak marriageable age of twenty-five. When they told her about the match, she agreed to meet Bipul and didn’t mind that he was divorced because who knew if the single ones were any better.

When a certain man went to his native country to acquire a wife, he had special specifications in mind. She would be healthy to bear children. She would be a maid glorified into a wife who would do all the domestic work without any help from her spouse/master, unlike his American counterpart. If one wanted to test such macho husbands all one had to do was shake their soft hands that never ever wetted to wash dishes that piled up at a busy ethnic kitchen.

A few days after their marriage Purnima and her daughters instructed Anamika as if she were a nurse for hire. “Always cut his nails and toe-nails short. He likes to keep them trimmed. Look how long and beautiful fingers and toes he has?” They fussed around his hands and feet and the thirty two old prince melted languorously in their attention. They gave Anamika lessons on cooking and taught her to make bread *pakoras* in hydrogenated Dalda ghee which they served dotingly to Bipul who sat guzzling chilled beer, one after another, broadening the girth of his raunchy paunch.

Chicago’s O’Hare Airport was filled to capacity on her arrival with passengers landing and departing to various parts of the world. It was no different than New Delhi’s busy Indira Gandhi airport. Her husband was waiting to receive her as she followed him after a month, his protruding belly before his self, reminding her who needed her the most.

Her sordid, humdrum life began in a claustrophobic apartment building in the northern suburbs. The alimony to his ex-wife gave her the house and they lived in the apartment. The two-bedroom flat was stark. A sofa, a coffee table, a chair and the TV stand completed the living room. The dining area comprised of a rectangular table and four chairs and one bedroom had a king size bed and a chest of drawers and the other bedroom a desk, a bookshelf, a chair and a futon bed against the opposite wall. Anamika filled the rooms with the things she brought with her: cotton cushion covers in batik design, bamboo table mats, and woven Manipuri bedspread.

Bipul would leave for work in the morning and would return home in the evening. He worked at a small firm in the city. She settled down to make the house a home. She put the small Hawkins pressure-cooker to use straight-away. She made for herself a *khisiri* of lentils,

rice and vegetables in the cooker that she ate with a boiled egg, and started decorating the house. She borrowed a sewing machine from the neighbor and made curtains for the rooms from the fabrics she bought with her husband in the weekend. Plastic blinds did come with the apartment but she was used to curtains like Muslim women were to *burkha.* It threw a sense of security and modesty and also gave personality to the rooms. She bought cushions, covered them with hand-woven covers and tossed them over the sofa, chair and the extra futon bed in the study room. She bought plants for each room and a few carpets to define and anchor the coffee table, the beds, and the entrance.

Before Bipul returned from work she would cook rice, vegetables and a dish of chicken curry or fish for him and attempt to make his eating habits healthy by using less oil and variety of vegetables. He would tell her that before she came he ate at the restaurants or grabbed food hurriedly from the fast food places.

He would also arrive from work with a bottle of Johnny Walker, change into his pajamas and house slippers, pour himself a glass on the rocks, and go out into the balcony to smoke. She would say, "Dinner is ready."

"Dinner now? So early? Make some spinach *pakoras*, the night is young," he would say, and then proceed to put on the CD of old Bhupen Hazarika songs and eye through the Time magazine. She would make the batter with chickpeas flour, sliced onions, spinach leaves, ginger slits and a can of beer from his stock in the refrigerator, and then sprinkle salt and paprika and serve it with cilantro and mint chutney made earlier. He would shower her with praise on such occasions and encourage her to try out more new recipes and serve him to his heart's and stomach's content in the ensuing days.

One day at dinner time she said, “I could work part-time at an accountant’s office. I have a commerce degree, and it could be worth something.”

“Got your wings already, eh? Sure you can, you could use your training, socialize a bit and bring in some money too,” he said.

Soon she found bookkeeping work at a Montessori school owned by a woman from Calcutta in the morning hours, and got to know people from other walks of life. She marveled at how much this country had to offer and failed to understand why some people squandered it. She delighted in being with young children and soon she had daughter Ina who brought pure joy to her life. She quit working till her daughter was about nine months old and when she was four she accompanied her mother to the school. Bipul’s nightly rituals before dinner continued and grew longer. She didn’t eat with him anymore. She and Ina followed the American supper time at six and Bipul started eating late, first at nine, and then, at 9:30 or ten or even later in the night. His persona also changed as he increased his alcohol intake. He yelled, “You women, you think you rule the world. You put on feathers and you think you can fly, you think it’s that easy, it’s not!”

Bipul had a woman supervisor, Kim, and he resented her. He resented her because she was a woman good at her work and also happened to be his boss. It crushed his macho ego incessantly and he lashed out on Anamika at home, she taking in Kim’s quota as well, even though Kim would never tolerate such things. Liz didn’t either. She married him briefly after breaking up with her boyfriend with whom she had a two years old son. She sold the house that she got as alimony from Bipul and moved to Silicon Valley with her boy. Instead

of feeling jealous, Anamika was envious of the women for their influence on her husband, for she was suffocated by the weight of his taunting remarks, paralyzed from the inside out.

By this time they bought a house in Downers Grove and Ina started going to a public school. She would bring in flyers of smoking risks and hazards, slap it on to the refrigerator and say, "Daddy you need to quit smoking or else you'll die," or "Daddy, please don't drink tonight. You're so much nicer when you don't drink!" But Bipul would just laugh it off or deny that he ever crossed the limits. On his own, afterwards, he would try gums and nicotine patches but nothing seemed to work. Gradually, Anamika and Ina stopped staying at home in the evenings. They kept themselves busy with activities. Ina took violin, tae kwon do and swimming lessons and Anamika drove her to these places and waited with her. Still they had to return to their home and Ina took to shutting herself in her room. Bipul sat for hours in the patio drinking and smoking. He developed diabetes and hypertension and still he didn't quit. If Anamika told him to cut down he yelled, "Don't nag woman, take care of yourself!"

Many times she wanted to call her parents and pour her misery into them as a punishment for arranging a wretched match even though the actual risk-taker was herself. But each time the thought of causing them pain stopped her from doing so. They did have some inkling during their every four year Christmas vacations in the Brahmaputra valley, when they divided their time between the two sets of families, but she didn't push it as their life seemed full and happy with her two brothers and their families.

They had only a few friends whom they saw in the weekends for dinners or other occasions. Anamika became closer to Veena who was very kind and always told her not to hesitate if she ever needed any help. Of course many women talked that way but Veena's

words seemed sincere and coming from some depth of understanding. There had been many occasions when Anamika felt like running to Veena and talking to her about her frustrations but something stopped her always. Did she think that she needed to cope it alone and it was a show of weakness to confide on others? She thought this way for a long time and kept things to herself and said nothing. But Veena and others noticed in the parties that Bipul drank a little bit more than others and his tell-tale behavior didn't go unnoticed.

The day before the in-laws left, as Anamika brought the tray of afternoon tea to their bed, her father-in-law invited her to sit down with them and talk.

"We feel sorry we are leaving you with such responsibility of our son. We apologize that this couldn't be taken care of at its bud. But how could we, we didn't even know," said her father-in-law. Purnima just sat there with a grouchy face either because of her husband's show of humility to the daughter-in-law or because of the matter's direct connection to her side of the genes.

"It's too late to do anything, unless he owns it," was all Anamika said.

Later when she busied herself in the kitchen cooking their last meal, Purnima walked in, in the pretext of providing unsolicited help. She lingered, admiring the walnut bowl in the upper shelf of the see-through cabinet. "That's a beautiful bowl," she said tip-toeing to get it off the shelf for close examination when the collection of wine corks it contained spilled out helter- skelter on the floor.

"And these are Bipul's cork souvenirs from all the wines he consumed," said Anamika putting the keepsakes back into its place. Purnima scurried away to her room to pack without another word.

Once the parents were gone her husband returned to the habit of drinking in the evening and late into the night. In the morning a long shower and a quick breakfast fixed him somewhat for the day and come evening the routine continued.

Mother and daughter too carried on their various evening activities and shut themselves in their rooms the moment they were back in the house. Their situation forced Anamika to give herself a separate bedroom. Ina turned eighteen by this time and had her own growing pains to deal with. But he didn't leave them alone. He screamed at them. He demeaned them. He picked fights with them. And that made them ever determined to avoid him even more.

Veena and Anamika stopped for coffee at Panera's one day. Veena told Anamika about Nina. How she couldn't take it anymore and left her husband of twenty-five years. She told her about the organization *Sakhi* that helped women of Southeast Asia. Anamika said she contributed to that organization.

"We assist them to lend their hands to others," she said. "How can I go ask for help for myself?" "Have you tried AA?"

"Who can drag him to the meeting?" Anamika knew it would be an impossible task to convince him.

"You know Renu, don't you, Anamika?" Said Veena. "She has had enough of it and separated from her husband."

Anamika knew the couple whose grown children worked in the East and West Coasts.

"He has come to a state when he cannot keep up with his jobs any longer. Didn't he study at MIT or Harvard?"

Later Anamika came to know how Renu's husband was found unconscious on the floor and taken to the hospital for stroke where he was declared brain dead. The news spread soon after about his death. Renu came back devoid of outward emotion and with only a sense of duty and conducted the funeral and put the lavish house in the market. During the ceremony they gave each other a hug and comprehended a deep understanding that only sisters in such predicament knew.

But the news of Renu's husband's death turned their house into a live stage of angry opera. Bipul was in his baritone best. He could be He paced back and forth from the kitchen to the living room fuming, slamming doors, pushing the bills tray so hard it landed on the floor.

"I know how it's going to get analyzed. He drank too much. He started his day with the drink first thing in the morning. And that is going to come from the old matrons back in the old country who have nothing else to do but dissect people's lives," he said.

Their daughter was in her room. Anamika hurried up the stairs to see that she had her music plugged to her ears.

Looking at her Ina said with a smile, "I have already tuned it out, see!"

Then unplugging and pulling her mother to the bed she said, "He is treating you like a doormat, Mom, you have to do something. You know he doesn't behave this way with his parents."

Holding her daughter's hands and kissing them, Anamika said, "You wouldn't understand. He needs help. You go to bed. We'll talk tomorrow."

Before she closed the door Ina yelled, “He manipulates you, Mom, this is called Stockholm syndrome, don’t you know?”

“The old ladies with their high school education are going to have a field day now. They’ll find another dead cock to peck on,” said Bipul from downstairs.

Walking down the stairs Anamika imagined one of those pecking old ladies would definitely be Purnima. She would be presiding over her circle of gossip-mongers like a queen, or not, if she had the sense to know that her son’s turn might come next. Anamika remembered an enactment of a scene from her kitchen where her mother-in-law reigned as the Goddess of kitchen politics. A feast was being prepared for a certain festival, an excuse probably to bless the women with fertility or such thing. A big cauldron of rice pudding was being cooked. Women passing by or hovering around it gave it a stir in the spirit of camaraderie. A young woman, Bipul’s cousin’s wife, too did her stirring round and Purnima descended upon her with her red beetle-chewed mouth, “Oh no, our *paayox* is going to curdle now!” Swallowing the juicy chew that trickled a tiny tributary down the corner of her mouth, she said, “This is contaminated, we have to start a pure batch without the ominous shadow on it!” The women exchanged glances and smiled with incredulity. Apparently, the young wife had risen up to her rights and had spoken against the ills in the household and this was Purnima’s way of ostracizing the guilty one in full view of her kitchen constituency.

“What are you looking at?” Bipul directed his tirade at her. “I bet when I die the same kind of gossip will go around. And you’re going to add to it. I don’t care, I’ll be gone.”

“Of course, if you keep drinking like this you will be gone too,” She said.

"You are waiting. I know it, you're waiting. Why don't you leave, now? Do you have the guts? Nincompoop, parasite, a good for nothing free-loader!" He rushed to her closet, snatched her clothes and dumped them on the stairs. He pulled out wires from the phone jacks.

Writhing and shaking she said, "You drunken fool I am leaving you right now!" She stepped out of the house and took a long walk in the cold without knowing where she was going. A gusty wind swept by her but she didn't care. Her cheeks became icy cold but she kept walking in the neighborhood, and then slowly jogging, to keep warm. Several voices percolated in her mind vying to get her attention. The first one said, *dump him, he deserves it, let him run to his mama, Mother Fucker! You can make a living, you have your daughter, and you both deserve a better life, without the daily abuse and condescension*. Another teased, *your daughter will go to college soon and you can be anything you want, have anyone you want*. One crept up pushing every other one out of the way. *You love him, admit it you love him and love means you never let it go!* The practical one said, *come on, good or bad this is twenty years of your life, you're not going to let it go this way, you have to salvage the loss and make the best of it*.

But the other, the domineering one kept coaxing at the loving husband and father that Bipul was, when not drinking, when he was sober and in the brilliance of daylight. This Bipul made his daughter laugh, and wonder without reservation and put her to sleep with the confidence and security that came with the knowledge of the unconditional love of a father. This same Bipul also showed his wife the only love she knew from a man even if it was just

the saved office cookie sometimes he brought home to her because he knew about her sugar cravings.

When the cold became intolerable and she came back inside, she saw Bipul in a pathetic posture, ruminating, with droopy eyes and a sunken face leaning against the kitchen counter. In spite of everything it broke her heart to see him lining up his portioned booze in little sample bottles. It was his way of controlling and managing his addiction. It did not matter that the contents of all those tiny bottles and more from the big booze reservoir routinely got deposited into his system. But this time she knew that something drastic was in the offing as it became clear during her in-laws' last visit that the baton had indeed been placed on her hand and there was no illusion of intervention from the immediate family.

She grabbed his shoulder and looked hard into the depth of his eyes and said, "You are at my mercy, mister. You have nobody but me. Your parents have long before handed you over to me. You are not going to pull us down like this. You are my liability and you're going to listen to me, now!"

She pulled him to the stairs. They walked up the flights leaning on each other, trampling on the strewn clothes in the landing, and along the way. Tucking him into his bed she whispered into his ears, "Tomorrow is another day."