

SANDESH, SMRITI, & RISHI

The one-year mark was just a few days away, and all week there had been a growing pit in Sandesh’s stomach. It was still there that morning, as he finished his puja and daintily put away the idols in a plastic tupperware box that went under the bed, so that Ramchandran would not see it.

The weather was strange in Missouri. The air was humid and musty, though it hadn’t rained. Sandesh had been most afraid of tornados, which he’d seen footage of on a newscast talking about the *devastation* done to a farm house. Each time the wind picked up, or a cloud gathered on the edge of the horizon, he wondered if one of those towering whirlwinds was waiting in the clouds, ready to descend and do away with the Spartan Inn. All the better, he thought.

Smriti called from inside the lobby. There was a call from a Mehulbhai. He wanted to meet that night. Sandesh said he didn’t have a car.

Ramchandran was not coming until Saturday, but still when his visits were coming close, Sandesh began the ritual after the ritual, putting away all of the trinkets and baubles of Indianism away in boxes and tupperwares and bundles into the closets, under beds and tables, into corners where they would not easily be seen. He’d told Smriti to prepare a good feast, something filling and complete, but would work for both lunch or dinner as Ramchandran never made it clear when he would arrive. This he knew, she chuffed at, because this too was also part of the pre-visit ritual, but still reminded her everytime to make sure that he’d done his part. He got off the floor and took off his dhoti, standing naked before the long mirror that hung by adhesives before their bed. He was growing a phand, something he hadn’t had before they arrived to Missouri, but it was a fitting rite of passage for any Indian family man, a good sign of health and wealth.

Of wealth, what did they have? Last night, he’d counted his savings, which were stashed in the safe next to the bedside table in the corner of the bedroom. They amounted to \$27,451, hardly enough to buy the motel off of Ramchandran, which was always the point he’d known, but a year ago he’d hoped that he would have a lot more to put down as principal so save on the interest. Ramchandran had not said a concrete number the entire year, insisting that he would for sure offer a better interest rate than what any of the banks would give him. He’d also said not to leave money in the bank, but now as the day arrived, Sandesh realized that might have been the wiser move. He’d recently been put onto the idea of credit by a guest who worked in real estate and frequently handled such deals of transferring property. The man was a frequent visitor, a Sam Powell from Western Kentucky who liked to poke his head into the lobby and share a whisky with Sandesh on his stops to close deals on tracts of farmland and ranches that were being turned over to developers for large developments of single-family houses.

“The old man, see, he never liked to drink,” he’d said the first time, wiggling a flask between his fingers. He was the only guest that night and he said he always needed his nightcap. Can’t go to bed without it. There you are, nice pour. I like you, Sandesh. Is there something against that in your religion?”

“No, no rules. Hinduism is the freest religion. Only eat vegetarian and pray.”

“That’s it?”

“I think so.”

The next time, Sandesh was prepared, with a bottle of his own. He’d gone to the liquor store looking for Johnny Walker Black Label, only to find that even in America, the damn thing cost nearly forty dollars, so he asked the man at the register what was a good substitute for a lower price. He handed him a smaller bottle of the Black. “If ye know what ye want, why settle?” When Sam showed up, that bottle barely lasted them the night, and they went back to the store for more. Sam treated, instead going for an Old Forester. “Kentucky Bourbon, this is how we do whisky down in these parts.”

When Sam had a few in him, he tended to boast about his recent sales. It was a simple hustle, he’d said. “It takes a bit of money to put down first, but you find the right plots, man shit, I tell you -- this world is building and building big. The old ways of farming and grazing on long pastures is gone. Everybody just wants a house with a garage. Place for their kids to play Nintendo and grill some dogs on the patio. You just need a bank that’ll loan you the credit.” *Credit*. Sandesh did not even have a credit card. Cards, accounts, financials, these were things Ramchandran told him were cautious things to have when one was new to the country. It made you liable, kept you in their clutches while you were still finding your feet. *These people, once they get their hooks in you, bhai tamne khabar na pade kya thi khechi lithu.*

Now here was Sam, who’d fed him the exact opposite advice. The year before, he’d turned over properties totaling in \$700,000, more than three times what Sandesh knew that Ramchandran would want for the Spartacus Inn.

Spartacus Inn. What a name. Deep down, he knew, that was the only real thing that kept him glued to the property. Everytime when he looked out the window at dusk, and watched the bulbs on the sign flicker to life as he flipped the switch from the lobby, his mind flashed with images of the Kirk Douglas film, which he’d seen in a repertory cinema as a boy, where it had played intermittently since its release ten years earlier. The scenes of the strong bare-chested men, matching swords in the arena and the battlefield, glistening and shining, crusaders for their freedom.

This was a body he’d never have, not now, perhaps never. His wife too had put on more weight. When they’d got married, she was hardly slim, but she carried herself well, and when he’d pointed this out, his family had told him some weight was good, strong body for having children. Now, she’d grown almost double. Few of her clothes fit her anymore, and they’d had to buy new jean pants, which thankfully were made with elastic waists. She heaved walking into room and rolled around on the bed, the entire wooden frame creaking all through the night, so much so that even sex began to disinterest him, the work required to climb over her, rolling off one of her sides. And for what? To have another child? Any new kid would eat up what was sitting in the safe.

He dressed and lathered his face with aftershave, and went into the kitchen, where Smriti had left a plate of cold kichdi from the night before, with a glass of buttermilk covered by a saucer. He ate and drank, both items tasteless from the lack of any spices to be found. Thankfully

at least, there was a health food store in St Louis where they found the proper daals. The buttermilk she made at home. He put the dish and glass into the sink, went to brush his teeth, and out to the lobby.

He checked the guest book to see if there were any checkouts possible today. Most people stayed either a night or a full week, salesmen passing through town. Every now and then, the philandering couple would take a room for the afternoon at half rate, a staple established by Ramchandran that they'd had to continue. What can you do, he'd said. It makes up a huge part of the income.

He kneeled and parted the curtain under the front desk, revealing the safe that collected the cash payments until Ramchandran made his bi-monthly visits to collect. They had no credit card machine, they didn't take checks. He counted the money each morning just to make sure, in case someone may have come in during the night, some intrepid safe cracker, and cleaned out the house. Still there, \$2,926. The numbers varied month to month, which upset him, as a year in he still had no idea what a good haul was supposed to be. The old man rarely said either way, never concerned nor elated to pack the rolled wads of bills into his satchel and drive away in his Mercury Sable, leaving Sandesh's customary cut of \$500.

Back in the apartment, he heard the warming hum of the television. Rishi must be up by now, ready to start his daily diet of sitcoms and cartoons that kept him busy until lunchtime, while Smriti was off cleaning the rooms. Sandesh wondered, if he did take on the motel, what exactly he could depend on to support his family. The boy would enter school next year, which even in America cost money -- he would need clothes, notebooks, lunchboxes. They would need a car to drive him to the school, and inevitably once he went radkhadwa with other boys, they would need bandages and more clothes to make up for the scrapes and tears. Smriti was not keen on him staying all day with the television, but as far as his father was concerned, it was a more affordable way to grow up than the alternative.

But the guests would always stand there and *ding*. They had to, because this was the only motel on this small stretch of highway 70, halfway between St. Louis and Kansas City, the absolute middle of the middle of middle America, the place where his parents had decided to come when given the wide choices of the entire of America. There, somewhere between Booneville and Rocheport, there was a blue sign on the highway that pointed to lodgings. A typical family station wagon would probably push on until they made the big city in either direction, but a certain small frame of clientele knew to veer off at the sign. They would drive deep into the flat lands of Missouri, just past where the commercial strip with the Burger King and the Wal-Mart and the Amaco gas station, away from the clusters of houses that collected behind them, until the road became barren save for one brightly lit sign of the Spartacus Inn.

They were salesmen of many types -- computer parts, insurance, large pleasure boats, exotic jungle cats -- usually on their way to either St. Louis or Kansas City to meet a client, make a sale, or attend a conference. But it was worth blocking in the extra hour of driving time the next day, rather than spend the money for a pricey room in the big city downtown, where who knew what kinds of rates they'd rob of with, or if you went for the budget motel a little on the outskirts, what kinds of robbery would happen in the parking lot? The Spartacus Inn was known

for being impeccably clean, and you had to pass a Waffle House to get to it. Best of all, they loved the Indian family that ran it, a dash of color to add to the local life. The clientele were consistent and they came back because they felt a deep, warm trust in the Indians that owned it, who were not his parents actually, but Ramchandran, the old man who'd brought Rishi and his parents out to Missouri.

The first year, the deal had been simple: Rishi's father Sandesh sits at the front desk, checking in new guests. He is to be nice, courteous, not say too much, and please try to work on your English. It's okay if you must do puja in the morning but please do not wear a chandlo. Hide any threads on your wrist or across your body. No gold either, please. I know you think it will make you seem like a more upscale man, a man deserving of respect, but it will only attract some no-gooders to come and rob the place later. His mother, Smrti, cleans the rooms in the morning, readying them for anyone coming to check in. This must be done by noon, all twenty-two rooms because check-out time is one o'clock. Yes, it is possible that some of them may not check out until one o'clock, but you must knock and ask to clean anyway. They may get angry and yell at you for disturbing them in their sleep, this is unavoidable. In America, the customer is always right, and we must be ready to be wrong. You understand this of course?

And the boy: he stays in the room. Yes, all day. We can't be having a child running around everywhere, causing a fuss. He is still young, what has he to worry about? I have given you a television, and he can play his games and toys. There is a Wal-Mart down the road, and they have every kind of toy he could want. That is also where you will find where to buy everything else -- shoes, shampoo, clothes, deodorant. Please, please remember to buy deodorant, and a perfume if you can. Don't use Pond's, it makes everything dirty, and it is so hot here, you will start looking like a melting snowman. Yes, we get snow sometimes, in the winter. The boy will enjoy it. There is a field in the school where you can take him to play, but only later in the day, after your duties are done. I hope the kitchen is to your liking. Please keep the cooking to a minimum. I've installed a door so the smell does not go out into the lobby.

If they stuck to these agreements for a year, Ramchandran would then explore the possibility of selling them the motel. He would give them a good deal, with a lower interest rate than what any bank would offer them, if they would. Of course, that was not likely. Not after only a year in America. One has to build credit. This would be better, keep it between us, aapde vache. Jema koi confusion na pade. Bank ma paisa naa rakhai.

Rishi learned all of this later on. His only real memory of Ramchandran was watching his father sign some papers, after which the two men shook hands and Ramchandran got into his car, a 1990 Mercury Sable, a sleek silver that Rishi found an alluring color, and drove away. The old man would come in from time to time, checking in on them and making sure all was good. These days, his mother would cook a full multiple course Gujarati meal early in the morning before the sunrise, unsure if he would be staying for lunch or dinner, or she hoped, not at all, so then they would be able to eat the food for a few more days.

That first year went by slowly in his memory, and later on only a few details would remain in his mind: His mother, sitting at the edge of the bed after her morning cleaning, rubbing Vicks Vaporub into the small of her back, the folds of her round belly collecting in front as she arched over, wincing. She'd see Rishi watching her, and say "not now," to whatever she thought his eyes beckoned, because he was hungry or bored, or wanted to hear a story, or tell her what

happened on the television, in a life so much more interesting that kept him occupied while she scrubbed toilets and bathroom tiles and folded bed sheets that, even when they came freshly out of the industrial laundromat in the back of the motel, still carried a stale odor. It was something she couldn't quite place. She'd smelled the smells of industrial India, the burning trash in the street, the cow feces collecting at the edge of the road, the dirty motor oil let out from the piping of a Bajaj scooter. But this was something like the wet fur of a dying rodent, something natural and yet not.

She'd chosen to blame the smell for the back problems that had developed. She refused to think that this cleaning work on its own could be the culprit, after all, had they still been in India, would she not be doing the same? Running the home, preparing breakfast-lunch-dinner, cleaning the home in between, that dreaded Ahmedabad dhool wafting in from the street and coating the tables, the sofas, the counters. Staying clean in India was a round-the-clock affair. These were not new burdens for her. No, something in that smell had seeped into her nostrils, floated through her bloodstream, and collected at the muscles above her buttocks, which hung inches from the floor as she swept behind the toilet bowl and hunched into the small tubs, which were left with sticky film of the chalky soap bars they left in every room. These soaps. Ramchandran had told explicitly not to use them, as if she would consider cleaning her and her child from this. For everyone there was a giant bulk bottle of Johnson and Johnson's, which provided for both the body and the scalp, and for the boy, a monthly turmeric bath to stave off the radiation from the television screen and make up for skin the nutrients he was missing from being cooped up in the dark room all day.

The cool of the Vicks finally seemed to catch on, numbing the impression in her back, and she pulled her feet onto the bed and rested against the headboard. The boy approached her, still not saying anything, and she had decided that until he would she would not look toward him. It had become a concern of hers in recent months, why this boy would remain too quiet, unable to voice his thoughts. When he did, they came out in fits and stammers. Just last night, while eating dinner, his father asked him where the remote for the television was, and the boy didn't answer. Upon a second ask, he winced and blinked and pointed behind him, which was just the thin drywall separating the kitchen from the small living space, and when asked a third time, which was forceful and louder, Rishi only could manage, "remote mane--mane remote nathi -- remote kya mane nathi khabar."

"Su? Nathi khabar? Su kare che akho divas, baki teevee seevai? Kya mukyu, ke mane."

"I don't..."

"No I-Don't-Know. Tell me where now." He slapped the table. "Now. Hamna, samaj padi?"

The boy winced and blinked again, and shook his head. At this, Sandesh smack him in the head, sending him crying. Smriti had to hold him well past midnight to get the sobs to stop.

But it wasn't the sobs that plagued her last night, rather it was his atrocious Gujarati. The broken, misshapen sentences. The words were out of order, like a tub of alphabet blocks dumped on the floor. Her son was not picking up their language, despite being around no one but them all day, meanwhile his only friend was the television, a perfect friend for a lonely child, one that

spoke all the time but never required any response in return. Earlier in the year, she'd started taking him to that field in the school, but he just sat in the grass. When she told him to go make friends with the boys playing baseball on the diamond at the far end of the field, he came back saying they told him no, can they go back home? "No," she said. "Stay a little while longer. Play or don't, but you need the fresh air." And anyways, the field was a half-hour walk away, and she was going to rest her legs for a good bit longer.

She made rules for him. Spend an hour at the field every evening. Only speak in Gujarati to her and his father. She wondered if they could disconnect the TV, but that seemed cruel, and she had no other distractions to keep him busy in the meantime. At the Wal-Mart, she bought a few puzzle books, word searches and logical problems, the kind she enjoyed as a young girl, especially the logical problems in maths class: *Train A leaves Allahbad at 1500 going 135 kph and arrives in Bairelly at 2100, but then Train B leaves Allahbad at 1400 going 100 mph and is express and makes no stops, cutting the trip down to Bairelly for five hours. When does Train B pass Train A?* But these bored him. When she would ask him to just try, he would stare at the page for a few moments, then get frustrated and toss the book across the room. She was thankful that Sandesh wasn't there in those moments, off chatting away with the guests who were too bored alone in their rooms. Perhaps they were too hard, but the child was five. How hard could they be? How hard would it be when he entered school the next year? Would he be prepared?

Rishi picked up her hand and shook it. "Field, mama."

"Hamna?"

"Maare field javu che."

"Pachi chokra, thodu araam karva de."

He shook it again, up and down, trying to make her arm flop up and off the bed, but it lay there, limp and tired. Today had been a hard day. The pains had become worse over time. Her back was bad enough, but now her fingers would prickle when she pinched the small sponges and towels to wipe into small corners of the rooms, when she would loop up the cord on the vacuum, even when she would try to turn the key in the doorknobs, old and rusted. Her body, at 34, was turning old and rusted already. Sandesh had lost interest in her, she could tell. Not that he had ever had much, but before coming to Missouri he had at least been insatiate, trying to instigate sex mutiple nights a week. Now when the days ended, she sank into the bed, feeling the mattress depress underneath her growing body. When she first noticed it she wondered if she was pregnant again, but slowly time and a bloody patch made it clear it was not so. She wanted another child, someone for Rishi to have to play with, or even more, an excuse to stop cleaning damn bathrooms for a few months.

Sandesh would never go for it.

What he would go for, though he hadn't told her, was pulling out of the motel takeover altogether. While he did not have any bank accounts, he had found a new alternative way of building credit. With Smriti's growing pains, last month he had started looking into industrial laundry services to take off the load of the piles of bedsheets. He'd received a call one day from

a man named Mehul, someone Ramchandran knew in St. Louis, who time-to-time would call him for business opportunities -- new brands of soap, new consignments of Bibles for each room's bedside table, new keycard locks on every door -- scheme upon scheme that he seemed indispensable of. Mehul had never shown his face, but over the year they had developed a passing friendship. At first, Sandesh was happy to have someone to talk to in Gujarati who wasn't his wife, but as the calls went on, he put altruism aside and tried to keep the man on the line as long as possible, prying into his schemes and learning as much as he could about American business, and how a godly man like Mehul was able to keep enterprising himself into newer industries, waiting for the right one to go in on. Finally, one day it came:

“Su kevai, bhai?” Mehul said. “Kaam to chaltu hoi.”

“Navi kaam lagi?”

“Su navi kaam? Ghare betha che, hai ne?”

“Arey, betha-betha bhi kok idea to lagtu hoi ne? Kok ishara”

“Ishara to cho hu, biwi to nakli baar kethar ma.”

“Su vaat che?”

“Arey, hun kevu -- tamater, gajar, marcha, badhu'j ooghe che baar. Chal bolo, kayu shaak gaame? Parcel karidevu tamne.”

“Biwi ne kevo ne parcel aape, pachi vaat karishu.”

“Su kariye, bhi. Aame to budha thai gaya, taal par vaal padigaya. No function.”

“No function?”

“Nothing doing.”

Mehul was building a new industrial laundry facility, enough to handle daily washes for up to two-hundred rooms of linen. With a few months of operation, he could easily expand and add more machines. All he needed was some investment money.

The Mercury Sable parked outside the lobby at 3 PM that day, too late for lunch, too early to tell if he was staying for dinner. Ramchandran heaved himself out of the driver's seat like a turtle squirming out of a bucket; Smriti liked to joke that the man's feet could never reach the pedals. Sandesh met him outside the lobby, fell to his feet, to which Ramchandran immediately grabbed him and said “Nai nai, not here.” They went behind the lobby desk and reviewed the books, as Ramchandran licked a finger between turning each page: “Yes, yes, check-ins good, revenue good, maintenance bill low...hmm, electric is high, is it? Oh, summer? Yes, it gets like that. These people hate sweating, even inside. They crank the bloody AC down so far. It's okay, understandable. First year, these things happen. You are making sure they're turned off when no one is in there? Oh? Oh yes, I'm sure she is checking out fully.” As usual Sandesh offered to

open the safe and hand the money, and as usual Ramachandran denied him doing so, saying “Let’s wait till later. I trust you, I trust you.”

They walked the grounds of the property. It was less than an acre of paved asphalt upon which sat three rows of rooms: two in an L shape, with the lobby where the ends met, and the third across the parking lot on the other end. The philanderers would usually request those, which Sandesh was okay with letting them have, despite knowing that lately Smriti was skipping those on her cleaning routines. Ramchandran had said from the beginning he would like to check every room, but it usually amounted to two or three before he gave up and said, “looks like you’re doing a fine job,” after which they went around to the back where the electricity and water pump meters were. Ramchandran would lower his glasses and stare into the glass orbs, reading the numbers, though he would never remark on it, except saying, everytime, “you know I was an electrical engineer? Hard work. Not as hard as this, but hard work.”

They didn’t know much about Ramchandran. He was a man who spoke little about himself, save for a few notes of trivia: engineer, came here in the early 80s, had a wife and son, now grown and in Nashville. They knew that, after handing the motel over, he had migrated to another, larger Holiday Inn in Louisville, in the home of Kentucky Fried Chicken. He’d shown it to them on the map he’d pinned behind the lobby desk: “see, it even looks like a chicken!” Sandesh, unsure of the map’s purpose, took it down immediately, folded it, and put it in a drawer. He put it up this morning. Ramchandran pointed again:

“See, Louisville is here. And Aalap, my boy, he is there – Nashville. So close. Just two hours drive and touch! He comes every weekend, sometimes we go see him, but you know, he is still not married. When he gets a wife, I will look for a hotel there.”

“Is he looking?”

“We are looking for him. You know boys, always no no no...”

“Aren’t we all like that?”

He sniggered. “But for your boy, what you’re doing is very smart. This motel business is a good investment. In a few years time, you can also buy a bigger one, and give this off, like I did. Like me, find a nice Indian fellow, maybe Gujarati if possible, up to you, to watch it. Then sell it off to him when he is ready. Keep moving up. That is the American game. Move up. By the time he gets big, he won’t need to look after this motel. You and your wife will be proud.”

“We hope so.”

“How is she doing, your wife?”

“Doing fine.”

“Not too much trouble, I hope? All by herself?”

“Of course not.”

“She is strong. Strong woman.”

“Yes.”

“You know, you can always hire another person. To me, I don’t recommend it. But I want her to be happy, you know?”

“Did bhabhi also do this work?”

“Oh, of course. As it should be, you know.”

They’d never met his wife. She had never been there during the first month while Sandesh was in his “training” period. Ramchandran said she had been staying with their son, a short break until the deal was closed for the new hotel in Louisville. He’d said her name at some point, but Sandesh couldn’t remember it now and didn’t want to be impolite. He called her bhabhi, intimate, relational, to show he cared.

Whether the bhabhi there was a wife or not, Ramchandran never did say much about her. His interests seemed to be elsewhere.

One night, late last year, Sandesh had been jerked out of a sleep as the front door to the lobby opened. It was Ramchandran himself, unannounced, dripping wet from the rain outside. Sandesh collected himself and cleared his throat, moving to flip the counter lift, but the turtle had strode up to the desk and thrown both palms down. He stood silently, his eyes drooping, and through slurred speech, spoke:

“Forty-two...key....forty-two.”

Sandesh pulled the key from the drawer and handed it, looking past him, outside. In the Mercury Sable passenger seat, was a woman. Blonde, white, one arm stretched out of the window, holding a cigarette.

“Boss, come in. Tea, water?”

He lifted a hand and waved, tossing droplets across the register book. “No, no. Key.” he reached out and took his arm. “Wife...paase che?”

“Suva gai.”

“Ha ha suva. Uthad, masti karo, hehe.”

“Boss, su vaat karo cho...”

“Karo masti, heh? Night off, heh?”

Smriti never slept until he’d changed and finally laid down next to her. Sandesh looked back into the apartment. Ramchandran snatched the key. “Nah chale to forty-two aavo, baarwali masti batav se,” he said, and went out the door. Sandesh watched the Mercury Sable swerve

around and drive to the third row, the one for philanderers, and stood by the door, watching the turtle man and his banoo walk into the room.

He cleaned up, turned the lobby light off and put up the NOT HERE sign, and went back into the apartment. He checked the boy's room to see if he was asleep, which he was, having his usual toss that turned him all the way around, so that his head was at the foot of the bed. Sandesh left him be. He was a light sleeper they'd learned early. Any motion or noise would jerk him awake. Their first years in Ahmedabad, sharing a bed in the tiny second room of his parent's flat, had passed with carefully coordinated nights of quiet missionary, locked eyes daring each other not to excite too loudly.

In their bedroom, Smriti was sitting up on the bed against the wall, one arm draped across her eyes. She breathed restfully. She asked who came. Sandesh went into the bathroom and changed his clothes, squeezed toothpaste into his toothbrush, and began scrubbing. He turned to look at her, waiting for her to lower her hand and look at him. "Huh." she said, and lowered herself into the bed. Sandesh spat and gargled, went to the frame of Ganesh at the wall and took a blessing, and turned the light off.

He'd lain there for several minutes, thinking of what could be going on in room forty-two. He tried to picture the white woman, though she was hard to make out in the screen of raindrops, and his mind placed a blonde woman he'd seen in an exercise video once a long time ago, doing squats against the photo of a clear lake on a sunny day. He thought of Ramchandran, approaching her, and let it go.

Smriti lay there, turned on her side away from him, sinking into the mattress. She'd thought that beds were supposed to be softer than the ones back home, those two-inch thick purses of wool packed in so tight like a block of frozen butter, and here, she was expecting a luxurious pillow of malai. But this hotel was cruel, with creaky springs she felt twist and turn under her. Her hand was still in this same place, now cradling her head against the pillow. Her arm smelled now, and did always, of those cleaning products, at once fresh and fruity, and yet stale and acrid, certainly what gave her arthritis.

In the dark, he took her other hand from her side and rubbed it, but she pulled it away. "Nah, bo thak lagi che." She'd heard Ramchandran, and his teasing of masti. Sandesh was, for the most part, so simple and humble, which also made him pliable to even the barest hints when they were presented to him. He took the hand again, gripping it firmly, and moved close, nestling his face into her neck. She pulled again, this time adding a slap to his thigh, but she left her hand there, squeezing it gently. This was how their nights went, a hint of rapture, a slow deescalation.

She was tickled knowing he still desired her, and wondered how much of it was simply because she was there. For her it didn't matter either way. The boy was usually a good excuse, the creaking springs, but Sandesh's hands passed under hers and got to work on his lengha. He and moved her body over, smothering his body with kisses, which for once did not taste of his usual liquid aphrodisiac. How differently was the mind tempered by whisky against its own intoxicants? She reached under to untie herself, and rested back fully as he got to work, first slow, and then with quickened pace, the springs churning underneath. She shushed, and gripped his waist to slow him, so he reverted back to deep kisses. Then he stopped. "Chi chi," he said. He got off and rolled to his side. "Take a shower before bed, I hate smelling you like this."

Their first time, two days after their wedding, in the beach resort in Daman, she'd been wary of his excitement over the shameless open drinking, but both took it in stride, she was inexperienced and he slowed down by his first night of hard whisky. That night they only thought of how this was a brief respite before returning back to his family's home, where the work of building a life would begin, the open and undefined rapture to come. She'd slept soundly, wondering what hangover cures she could treat him to the next morning.

Now, they were both thinking the same thing: passion against the bottom of a toilet bowl. Ramchandran's naughty laughs. The philanderers' stink of cigarettes, clawing each other's dirty trailer park clothes. This was the only lust to find veering off of highway 70.

She dug her face back into her arm, biting down into the flesh to stave off a cry wallowing in her throat.

He bit his tongue, trying to scrape off the taste of cleaner, listening to Smriti's breathing get slower and slower. Soon it would be in full snore. They were quietest he'd ever heard, growing up in a house full of snorers, he liked to think she had trained herself to quiet them for the boy.

Over dinner, he went on about the troubles. which Smriti had had to reheat on the stove. Though they lived off of it, Sandesh was never fan of re-warmed food, and normally would have never dreamt of letting her serve Ramchandran such things. His discussion with Mehul had poked holes in his resolve however, now second guessing all of the turtle man's instincts that he'd taken for granted.

"Blasted thing, last time we went to go meet Aalap, it just stopped on the highway, like that. Cars kept going left and right around us, no one would stop. I could not even get out to move the car to the side. Finally a police car arrived and halted the traffic until we could get it to the side of the road. Kyun, Sandeshbhai? Not like India, where people would immediately come to help you push while the cops, too busy chewing paan, would never even look up from the side of the road."

"What, you can't? Just cancel. We have a guest."

"You can't call that saslou a guest. He's taking advantage of us. I have to see Mehul's operation, if it's worth going for. Then I can tell him no tomorrow."

"Tell him no, tell him anything. But why do you have to go? Just leave me and the boy with him?"

"What do you mean? He will be in his room, by himself."

She dropped the dishes into the sink, and turned to him. The kitchen was converted from a small access hallway that led to the boiler room, which made it the hottest part of the converted apartment. A vapor hung always, whether from the pots or from seeping through the cracked drywall, sticking one's clothes to their body. Smriti wiped her forehead with the back of her arm, hands dripping with soap, then joined both of them.

“I don’t like him, Sandesh. I don’t want him here.”

Sandesh saw the analog clock on the stove read nearly seven. He had an hour before Mehul would arrive, and Ramchandran had no interest to go to his room yet.

Outside, Ramchandran flipped through the channels on the television. Still after all of these years, there was nothing on the television he’d gotten a handle for. Every now and then there might be an old sitcom, one he’d seen before, but the actors were pretty and a laugh track let him know it would be a joyous way to pass the night before he could nod off. Most often, he would watch action movies on cable, but as he flipped, those channels kept coming up snowy.

Sandesh sat down with two glasses and a bottle of Kentucky Bourbon.

“Eh, what’s this Sandeshbhai? How come none of the channels are coming?”

“I cut the service. We don’t really watch it, and no one seems to complain. It saves some money each month.”

Ramchandran’s head whipped hard. “Cut the service? Just because they don’t complain doesn’t mean they have a problem.”

“People still come. You saw the books for yourself. Business is going fine, isn’t it?”

Ramchandran sighed. “Yes, yes I guess so.”

“Maybe you can buy a new car, then?”

“Who has the money, bhai?”

“Not even for a car?”

“Chal chal, do you?”

“No, but...we’ve only been here a year.”

“That’s true. It takes time to get money, right? So.”

Sandesh saw the glasses were empty. He poured another peg each. “So?”

“So?”

“So, hoon kevu chu, you’ve been working here for a year, and the same I’ve also only had the motel for a year. Yes, it is bigger, nicer, but that also means more money.”

“What if you buy it on credit?”

“I told you about credit. Don’t trust it. That first car, I got as a loan from my brother. He knew someone who sold cars on in a small lot. This model was just about to go, they gave it to me for cheap. It worked fine. It still works fine. Just have to keep at it for a while.”

“I’ve been thinking about buying a car. We’ll need to take the boy to school. It is too far to walk. And, it will help with groceries and such. We can drive to St. Louis for Indian groceries once a month.”

“Yes, it would be a big help.”

“Can you help? Maybe give me the number of that man...”

“Who? Him? He is in Chicago. How are you going to get all the way there? Hehe. Anyway, that was years ago. Who knows if he is still working there? You know how things are in this country. We jump from job to job like a deer through the forest, every now and then we’re caught in the middle of the road with an incoming car, and BAM! You never hear from them again. This is why the motel is good work. One place, all. Home, work, never have to leave. You made a good decision coming here, bhai. Good decision.”

It had not been a decision at all. Ramchandran had been a reference from a friend in the same society, a Jain family who’d owned the Mahavir, a smaller building of flats across from them. When Sandesh had been fourteen, the patriarch had decided to retire and evicted his tenants, and tore the whole thing down for a lavish bungalow that rested in the shade of his towering neighbors. How Ramchandran was related to them he didn’t know, or if he was related at all, but when it had come time to pack the bags for America, his offer was the only one on the table.

Sandesh kept pouring, Ramchandran kept swigging. He tried to sip slowly. No reason to make a bad impression on Mehul, or to be too drunk to get a good sense of the laundry operation. Had to keep his mind sharp. But a few wouldn’t hurt. Nothing he hadn’t imbibed with Sam from Kentucky.

At quarter-to-eight, Ramchandran got up to use the bathroom, heading directly for the bedroom.

“Ai!” Sandesh called. “Begum suva gai che.”

“Hehehe,” the turtle man went. ““Habits, boss. Habits.”

“Let’s get you into your room.”

“No, no, I’m not sleepy yet..”

But he slipped against the couch, which Sandesh utilized as his moment. He took Ramchandran by the arm and led him to the lobby, protesting through his protests. As he got the key, Ramchandran began rambling

“Begum khas dhyan rakhe che badhu, eh...Have tamaro mahal ban se, ek biji chokri rakho kaam maate. Begum ne aaram aapo, begum ne ke...hehehehe”

He took him straight to forty-two, put him on the bed, and turned the TV on, to a cable channel showing a movie with Charles Bronson, a man so old and withered it confused Sandesh how people saw him as a desirable man of action, who shot bad guys and bedded ladies while drooling lines through his fuzzy mustache. The kind of men who used this room imagined

themselves to be Charles Bronson, quiet and stalwart on the surface, reminiscing about their humble working class upbringings, but content only to be fantasy crusaders.

END