

Fly Me To The Moon

We—the band—had not invited requests, but still someone decided to shout at us from the bar:

Do you do any Sinatra?

I glanced toward the voice and saw a slope-shouldered, balding middle-aged white guy in wire-rimmed glasses—a man whose entire mien screamed I AM A DEPRESSED GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONARY—sitting alone with his hands choked up around a glass of red wine. With somewhat forced enthusiasm I pulled “Fly Me To The Moon” out of my vocal fake-book. It was a simple harmonic progression, but I hadn’t gotten around to memorizing it and I wasn’t expert enough to puzzle it out on the spot. I started snapping my fingers. *Uh-one (snap), uh-two (snap), uh-one two three fo’*. I rolled a fat two-handed Fm7 into the keys and went from there. The band came in at the accidentally too-slow tempo I requested and we chugged through the intro. This had never been one of my favorite songs but that wasn’t supposed to matter. When I started to sing, I could hear myself going sharp, which made me tense, which made me go sharper. The morose gentleman listened politely but didn’t smile, clap, or acknowledge his fulfilled request in any way. After a couple more tunes he left the place without a glance toward the bandstand. I tried not to take it personally.

This is my dream. I am living my dream.

It was January 2004 and I had finally put a crazy plan into motion. In the space of a few years I’d willed myself to become a late-blooming professional pianist and singer. Now I was 38 and working at a trendy new wine bar in Bethesda for probably my thirtieth or fortieth professional gig ever. A rookie, but almost anybody would have assumed I’d been doing this

kind of thing all my life. Outside it was painfully cold and windy, but inside it was warm with wine-enhanced body heat. Drinkers to my right in cushy leather club chairs, diners ahead of me at tables in the adjoining room, and the steady gray noise of voices, ice cubes, and clattering plates all around.

Our repertoire, chosen by our bandleader/guitarist Brian, included jazz standards and the Great American Songbook: “There Will Never Be Another You,” “Ladybird,” “Sweet Georgia Brown,” “Recorda-Me.” One after another Brian called the songs from the photocopied lead sheets in our gig books. I played rhythmic bursts of chords, E minor to A seven to D major. Having practiced obsessively, I could now glance at the symbols along the top of each line and my hands would respond. What once seemed like irreducible genius had turned out to be a learnable skill.

I was the only woman on this gig, as was typical. It seemed important to display, to bandmates and casual observers, that I was just as competent and self-reliant as the guys. In this sense my performance had begun the moment I’d hoisted my 35-pound amplifier through the front door, set up my cables and mic, performed briskly all the technical tasks of my trade. Excitement had lit me up from the inside. My bandmates were all around the same age, but they were vets. They’d been playing jobs like this since they were teenagers, several a week, thousands over time. First the school jazz band and/or messy loud garage punk with friends; later, bar gigs and free performances for friends’ parties; finally, paying performances—rockabilly, pop covers, light jazz, maybe even some cool original-music acts if they were lucky. The standard career progression. One of my bandmates was a public school music teacher, one had a day job at a software company, and one had a breadwinner wife with a federal government

position, but none of that diminished their status as *real musicians* in my mind. They had earned the honor. And although I had serious catching up to do, they had treated me as a peer from the first time we'd jammed.

But there was still always the chance that I'd fail to live up to the job. Tonight our "bandstand" was exceptionally awkward—a disjointed space on the floor, half hidden by a structural column. Clearly the manager had considered it no good for patrons or tables or chairs but perfectly okay for musicians. My back was to my bandmates, who were flung out in a detached semi-circle behind me. A few songs in, Brian began tapping me on the shoulder when it was my turn to solo—a pass-off we could usually accomplish with a glance, or just by watching each other's body language and listening closely. Bassist Jim and drummer Matt may as well have been playing at a different restaurant down the block. During one song I could hear them slamming like a marching band over my attempt at a soft lyrical passage. Later Jim launched into a misplaced two-beat feel when I was doing a long run of eighth notes (for which the appropriate accompaniment would have been a traditional walking bass line, four steady beats to a measure, with a little swinging push on beats 2 and 4). It was like playing with a prerecorded backing track rather than having a musical conversation with fellow humans.

Poor feng shui was only one complicating factor. Earlier that evening as I'd driven down I-95 from Baltimore, my fingertips and toes went numb. I had always suffered poor circulation in the cold weather, but this felt like something worse. During set-up I worried aloud about it.

That's a pretty serious parka you're wearing, Brian ventured. *Maybe it's too heavy or the armholes are too tight.*

I responded *Maybe* just to be polite. I wasn't as pathetic as Brian implied—or maybe I

was, maybe there was something slightly desperate about a benumbed, exhausted woman of nearly 40 going out on an icy night to do what was still mostly a young man's job. Aches and pains had begun to compete with the joy. My lower back hurt constantly from lugging around a dozen loads of laundry and boxes of supersize Costco items during the daytime, long hours before I had to start hauling my heavy semi-weighted keyboard, bench, stand, and Carvin PA system out to gigs. (The Bethesda venue was unusual for having a working, tuned piano: a Yamaha mini-grand lacquered brilliant black, more like gorgeous furniture than an instrument of range and subtlety, but still instantly beloved because I didn't have to bring it with me.) After late weekend nights playing, I would wake up in the mornings and hobble to the bathroom on dry, cracked feet, my joints creaking and popping, my eyes swimming with exhaustion. I felt like an ancient day-laborer who slept on a grass pallet on a packed mud floor, instead of a member of the so-called creative class launching her days from a firm mattress.

My only child, a chubby but muscular little boy now 10 months old, had come to us via adoption as a nearly newborn. Having avoided the trauma of pregnancy and labor, I ought to have been in better physical shape than my fellow new moms, but sleep deprivation had neutralized any advantage. Whenever I picked up the baby, I'd experience a flaming arrow across my back and try to hide my wince from his loving gaze. A physical therapist explained that by habitually carrying him on my right hip, I had created a whopping three-inch height disparity between the opposite sides of my pelvis. This tall, muscular PT, a former college athlete, tried to rebalance me: I lay back on the table while he forcibly stretched my legs to various unnatural angles and rammed against me with his broad chest and shoulders. It might have felt sexual had it not been so ridiculous. I was feeling my age in more ways than one.

Random mid-cycle uterine cramping, low-grade headaches, intermittent insomnia. And sometimes a bizarre inability to radiate blood and heat from my center to my periphery.

By our last set, things had finally improved. My voice was warm and supple, my fingers were responding to my intentions, and the band as a whole was swinging like hell. The loudly chattering crowds had left and the room contained only avid listeners. We now chose tunes for love alone. This is when I remembered what I was doing here, at an hour when my fellow upper-middle-class, college-educated, Whole-Foods-shopping, Baby-Bjorn-wearing *stay-at-home mothers*—oh I hated the term but facts are facts—were desperately catching up on sleep. This is when it stopped being a job and became transcendent. This is why I'd fought so hard—fought my husband's skepticism, fought the lingering shadows of my parents' disapproval, fought my own deep reserves of doubt and fear. To be here, locked together in time, building a beautiful sonic machine with my fellow musical citizens.

A well-oiled jazz band was a living ideal, an embodied dream of emotional and practical rightness, like a happy modern family, or a functioning modern democracy. Pluralist by intention. United in the diversity of its members. Unthreatened by eccentricity. Celebratory of difference—in fact, dependent on difference. We members of the band were brought together under the lawful structures of a solid groove, our idiosyncrasies and individual voices entrained but intact. This endeavor I'd entered, this collaboration, was a perfect representation of the polity to which I'd always belonged in my mind, even when it was hard to recognize in the real world. In music, I trusted.

Brian and Jim and Matt and I played my bossa nova arrangement of “East of the Sun.” This one always caught people's attentions at the end when I'd scat and improvise variations on

the lyrics on my way out of the tune. We played “Tenderly” as an instrumental with lots of rich piano fills behind Brian’s simple, expressive melody. We played “Freight Train,” a jaunty bebop from Tommy Flanagan. We did some Pat Metheny, some Joe Henderson, and then, just because Brian was a big fan of her album, we played Norah Jones’ hit, “Come Away With Me.” Brian had written his arrangement as an instrumental only, but I would have refused to sing it if asked.

Covering a current radio favorite was begging your audience to hate you for not sounding exactly like the original. This was especially annoying if you didn’t love the original to begin with, if you were in fact a little baffled by the fans who had latched onto such a trifling bit of pop craftsmanship. Was it just because the singer was easy on the eyes? Because she sounded like a sleepy little girl getting over a cold? Because several million dollars worth of marketing budget and a pair of pouty lips could turn virtually any competent song into a hit? Brian claimed that the compositional simplicity of “Come Away With Me” was what made it great. There was, he said, *something righteous true* in the basic C-major-ness of it. I couldn’t agree. I yearned for more from a song. Interesting layers, infectious polyrhythms, subtle complications, unexpected turns of phrase. At the very least, a driving backbeat. I yearned for a sonic intensity and drama that matched how I felt about life in general. (Or maybe I’d been ruined by steeping my teen self in prog rock and Broadway schmaltz.)

So I’d refuse to imitate Norah Jones, and I’d only begrudgingly sing Sinatra if asked, and I’d paste on a smile at weddings and deliver a pleasant rendition of “Daddy’s Little Girl,” because that’s what the job called for. Every single occupation on the planet had its shittier aspects, right? Then, as recompense, I’d play the the songs that really lived in my head, throat, fingers. Please let me reinterpret Chet Baker on “Do It The Hard Way,” or David Bowie on

“Wild Is The Wind,” or Nancy Wilson on “The Old Country,” and I’ll stop whining about the crap bandstand and cold weather. I’ll breathe into the mic and fall right into the sound and close my eyes and live these classic, Brill Building, Tin-Pan-Alley lyrics as if they’re my real life, my story, as if I am just talking to an old friend, or writing in my journal. As if I am thinking up these words as they emerge from my lips...

We stopped around 11 pm, collected our modest \$100 each from the manager—it was the standard pay rate that hadn’t budged in two decades, I’d been told, yet it felt like a grand boon to me, a vindication against the doubters in my life—and started packing up. In the nearly empty lounge, I saw a casually dressed white couple in their early 60s watching us with beautiful grins on their faces. It reminded me that there was a public service side-effect to following the demons of musical ambition. The man called out to me from his chair. *Hey, so, what part of Memphis are you from?*

An odd non sequitur, but I assumed he was trying to compliment me. *Um...is there a neighborhood in Memphis called New Jersey?*

He laughed. His eyes were shining. *You sound so authentic, like one of the great big-band singers I used to hear when I was young...*

It was such a nice thing for him to say. I was profoundly touched and flattered by the look on his face, beatific, as if I’d converted him to a new religion. I put down the mic cable I was winding and walked forward to shake his hand. He pulled me in close to add another observation, almost whispered, almost giggled:

...but you look like you should be working in a falafel stand!

Nearby, Matt and Jim both choked out the same kind of appalled laugh and sent me looks

of sympathy. As most white people would be, they were shocked to hear weird ethnic insults coming out of nowhere. Brian, half-Japanese, had a cooler reaction. In my peripheral vision I saw him looking at his feet and shaking his head, empathetic but not surprised. I was still smiling and robotically shaking the Tennessean's hand. Something came out of my mouth, along the lines of *That's not a very nice thing to say*, although I really meant, *Are you a fucking moron?* He and his wife blithely smiled and waved as they left.

I could feel the hollowing out of my center, a palpable hole forming in my solar plexus. I could glimpse the edge of the black pit at my feet. The clueless man's comment had isolated me under a spotlight I didn't want. He had highlighted my perennial apartness, the very thing I'd just escaped on the bandstand. Inside the music I had forgotten the specifics of myself, race or sex or even time and place, forgotten I was anything other than breath, sound, movement: a conduit of joy. I'd achieved a place of visceral knowledge—however temporary or tenuous—that as long as the band kept playing and the groove was locked down, everything would be okay.

Later, back in my car, I turned on the ignition and a stream of icy air shot out of the vents. I made my way through the quiet Bethesda streets and onto the DC beltway heading back up to Baltimore. Ten minutes in, I expected the car interior to be warm, but it was still punishingly cold. I looked at my dashboard controls. They were set to defrost. In my distractedness and new-parent exhaustion, I had never turned on the heat. I had driven 40 miles with the air-conditioning blasting onto the windshield, straight at my gloved hands. No circulation problems. No terrible health news on the horizon. No indictment of my impractical ambitions. I had just flash-frozen my own fingers.

Heroes

If I let myself slip back to my teen years in the early 1980s, I can get overwhelmed with memories of music. At first it's just a hint—a few lines of lyric or an instrumental riff—but then, rushing headlong, there comes a whole synesthetic embodiment of vibe and emotion, an endless loop of colors and lights sliding by like the reflection on the inside of a windshield, car in motion, heading slowly back up the Garden State Parkway from the shore. I hear the sweet, sweet piano and harmonica opening of Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road" and I am there again, in the back seat of some friend's vehicle (American-made muscle, two long heavy doors, sticky vinyl interior—borrowed from an older brother or maybe a mother who will spend the day holding her breath until we all get home in one piece). I am gritty from hours at the beach, comfortable in my heat-soaked skin, reaffirmed for a moment in my shaky sense of belonging, as I and my girlfriends all smile and wave out the windows at some cute older guys in a Jeep stuck in traffic next to us. Under the highway lights their smooth tanned hides shine like diamond dust.

A chasm as big as the Atlantic Ocean opens up inside my skinny little ribcage.

The whole world and everything I want is right there in front of me.

David Bowie's "Heroes" pipes in from the way back. Instantly I'm happy. For a time it was my personal anthem. Whenever I visited the great island Manhattan, the mecca I intended to conquer one way or another, I'd hear its corkscrew-y synthesizer intro playing in my head. I would look down at my groovy white retro boots on the sparkling GlassCrete sidewalk and imagine my eyes were a movie camera. This was my heroine's quest, my warrior woman's journey, or so I wanted to believe. In the actual world I was insecure and unstable, a jittery

jangling thing, easily swayed from one idea of myself to another, one ambition to another, one group of friends or another, always unsettled, never committed, rarely assured that I was in the right place at the right time. But somehow I could envision a future me as reliable and solid as a union-made airliner. I believed in my eventual ascendance.

Back home in the New Jersey suburbs, my enraged mother and disconnected father lived in an entirely different time and place, a warp, a wormhole. In their distant universe my dreams of future glory didn't seem to matter. Family mattered, allegedly. Obedience mattered. Duty, God, Jesus mattered. (Unlike most of their fellow South Asian immigrants, my mother and father were Christians from generations back: a minority within a minority, displaying all the defensive arrogance that position entailed.) *Rules* mattered, especially for girls. To defy these things, to refuse to listen to your family or do your generational duty, was to be *willful and disobedient*, to invite correction. When tiny I was made to cry and told to stand in a corner; when as tall as my parents I was screamed at and had my clothes thrown down the basement stairs. My parents were from a faraway land where middle-class comfort was not to be taken for granted, where the value of a child was directly proportional to her ability to extend the family's status and fortunes. So they expected adherence to their practical visions, their paycheck-obsession and their professional snobbery. They railed against my kaleidoscopic boho daydreams.

You will do what we tell you. You will go to medical school. Become a doctor. That way you will never be out of a job! (The subtext I heard was: *You will be stressed and miserable like us!*)

I'd snap back at them: *THIS IS AMERICA!* It was a one-line instant refutation of all their misguided third-world beliefs, a useful gloss on a whole dissertation's worth of meaning. *This is*

America where the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the founding document which means I'll do whatever the hell I want with my life, and then, if I get bored or frustrated or burnt out, I'll just apply to grad school and do something else. Without this fervent belief in the endless American vista, I would be lost, enchained in my parents' unforgiving hierarchy of values, in their cramped and linear vision of life's purpose. They had no idea who I was. I was not their prissy little Indian daughter. Fuck that. I was "Free To Be You and Me." I was "Don't Dream It, Be It." I was "I Am Woman (Hear Me Roar)." Hear that? Me: roaring. I'd write in my journal: *I will succeed despite them!* I'd scream in their faces: *I'm gonna succeed despite you!* My little sister says she remembers me constantly yelling, constantly fighting to assert myself, a loud-mouthed drama queen. And yet when I look back on those years I can only recall feeling scared—quietly, subcutaneously scared all the time, shivering and small like a tiny furry mammal with a racing heart. I am sure we are both right.

My parents were presumably the protagonists in their own epic quests, but I could not see it that way. To leave the land of their birth in their mid-twenties, married, educated, yet still mere babies in terms of life experience; to arrive here in the turbulent early 60s when assassinations and uprisings and riots dominated the nightly news—I've never had to do anything as traumatic or brave. My Gujarati mother and Tamil father immigrated in 1963 via Idlewild Airport in the same year as MLK's "I Have a Dream Speech and JFK's assassination, and I was born two years later, the same year that federal immigration laws were finally changed to stop giving overt preference to white northern Europeans. We belonged here.

During the hostage crisis I received a few anonymous phone calls in the middle of the afternoon, a young man labeling us *Iranians* like it was a cuss word and threatening to bomb our

house.

Let my people go, he said.

Flummoxed, I took a beat or two to respond.

But we're Indian, I protested.

I suppose the very slight possibility that he might have an actual bomb kept me from adding, *you idiot*.

This may have been one of the only times I'd said those three words—*we* and *are* and *Indian*—in the same breath, rather than cutting my forebears lose and insisting I was just another American kid. Burgers and fries. Pop and rock. Boys and cars. *Where are you from?* people would frequently ask. *New Jersey*, I'd say, in a tone halfway between smart aleck and playing dumb. *Oh, you mean, where are my PARENTS from? That's a different question.*

I must not have taken the anonymous caller's threats seriously. Suburban New Jersey was not known for its tribal violence. I figured he was a neighbor or a kid from school or church, with access to a private phone listings, for like all doctors' households we kept our phone number out of the White Pages. My sister and I secretly mocked the caller's ethnic-geographic ignorance.

Despite moments like this, I thoroughly believed in a welcoming, progressive, metropolitan, neighborly America. The one so convincingly modeled on Sesame Street and The Electric Company, my two most influential nannies. I loved my melting-pot country and thus I *hated our President*. It only made sense. He was exclusionary and nostalgic, king of the ignorant hicks, when the America I knew was destined to be inclusive and forward-thinking. One day in tenth grade I was in rehearsal for our high school production of Cabaret when Regina Carver—a tall, narrow-waisted, always elegantly dressed black girl from the junior class who was

determined to get into Harvard—bounded into the auditorium to tell us Reagan had been shot. I was sitting on the lip of the stage, with my legs dangling and my hands tucked beneath my thighs, between the soft comforting corduroy of my pants and the solid wood of the boards. I was the precocious star of the show and I sometimes behaved accordingly. Reagan had been shot and I blurted out, *Is he dead?*

People gasped.

What did I know? I was a flat-chested fifteen-year-old virgin getting gussied up to play Sally Bowles—the comic-tragic sexpot of the impending Nazi disaster—and I had no real clue about mortality. *Is he dead?* I asked. I didn't mean to sound gleeful. Or maybe I did. Brown-skinned girl in a white-and-black world, I was not the intended audience of the President of the United States, no matter that I was every inch a loyal citizen and knew no other country except that faraway place my parents still called “home” (which I had visited with great curiosity but no magical sense of belonging).

I and my family were not the white people to whom Ronald Reagan spoke, to whom he pandered, but we were also not the black people whom he routinely maligned through code and innuendo. At many a stump speech Reagan (who chose to begin his campaign in the very town where three young civil rights activists had been murdered, famously) trotted out the case of that wildly exaggerated “Welfare queen,” with her jewels and multiple Cadillacs, and never once had to mention her race. His fans and detractors alike just *knew*. But people who looked like me or my family were beyond consideration, neither subjects nor objects, neither insiders nor outsiders, simply unseen. There was no dog-whistle frequency that signaled us, no strategy Southern or otherwise that pertained.

I hated our President—and yet for all my oppositional posturing, was I not deeply invested in the very same secular theology that he peddled so well, the belief that we lived in the greatest, freest place on earth, where our visions would come to fruition if only we dreamed big dreams and applied our talents judiciously? We were all the heroes and heroines of our own lives. Each of us alone determined our own value. A very wise-seeming man named Joseph Campbell had come on the television and told us so. *Follow your bliss*, he said, and this dictum sounded like nothing less than our birthright in this late-twentieth-century meritocracy.

Fresh off my high school star-turn, I informed my parents I wanted to become a professional performer, a Broadway diva like my idols Patti Lupone and Liza Minelli.

My father was exasperated. *Who is going to hire an Indian girl for any parts?*

In retrospect, this was a perfectly rational question circa 1981, but in the moment it felt like a crushing threat. So I was ready with my defense.

THIS IS AMERICA!

Actually, I'm not really sure I ever said those words out loud. Maybe I didn't even respond at all, so shamed was I by my father's question, by the secret knowledge that he wasn't entirely wrong to be skeptical. But it's what I wanted to scream with my entire being.

THIS IS AMERICA!

It was the one self-evident truth. It was the air I breathed, the ground I trod, the water I drank. My coming-of-age movie, the movie of my life, had already begun. I was the camera, but I was also the one in front of it: writer, director, and star all in one. *Auteur*. My soundtrack was the radio, filled with implicit battle cries. Any bittersweet, ironic, or cynical messages in the lyrics were overwhelmed by the liberation found in those driving grooves. The songs said one

thing but meant exactly the opposite. In the same way, I wore teen cynicism like a costume but beneath I was all about American Exceptionalism. I was a squealing high-pitched girl but my inner voice possessed Katherine Hepburn's gravelly, uncompromising timbre: *Go West, young woman, or wherever you daaaaaaamn well please*. I turned on the radio and heard ambitions launched and fulfilled. I heard the relentlessly kinetic synth intro on "Heroes" like a rotary engine winding up, and dreamed of lift-off. I heard Clarence Clemmons' poignant yet triumphant saxophone on "Thunder Road," that big breathing sound, and took it as a call forward. *THIS IS AMERICA!* I didn't need my parents or anyone else telling me who I was, or where I should go, or what I was worth. I was going to bash around out there in the broad world and figure things out for myself. It was my birthright, my citizen's entitlement. I was going to crank the radio full-blast and sing my Self into being.

Those Were The Days

The popular girls in the sixth grade were constantly mocking my supposed best friend, Peggy Coughlin, calling her *Chicken Coop* on account of the explosion of wiry brown curls atop her head. Peggy, the smart and gawky daughter of a humble teacher and secretary, had dared to broadcast her crush on a boy several rungs up the status ladder: Donald Smith, son of a Wall Street economist, a lanky lacrosse player who was already too good for any of our private-school classmates and had a mysterious absentee girlfriend at an institution even more refined. Once in the lunchroom Donald fished inside his wallet and pulled out her school picture—a preppy brunette with hair pulled back tight from smooth, even features. He declared her *so, so fine* while cupping one hand beneath his pectoral muscle to demonstrate. Peggy ought to have looked at that girl's picture and understood immediately that with her own spaghetti-thin body and freckled alabaster face, she was never going to compete. She and I hovered together near the low end of the middle-school pecking order. When a few of the high-status girls learned of Peggy's hapless infatuation, they started to stage-whisper *Chicken Coop, Chicken Coop* whenever she and Donald were in the same room. One afternoon a sort of spontaneous coven managed to corral Peggy into the corner of a study hall, and on a dare Donald grabbed her by the shoulders and bent her backwards to force a kiss on her mouth. I had been there, sort of, near the door of the room, not close enough to see the action and not brave enough to step in and stop it. The witch-girls whooped and cackled. Peggy escaped Donald and went rushing past me into the hallway,

her narrow, hollow cheeks now flushed crimson, her crazy hair flying. I followed her into the girls' room, but she wouldn't look me in the eye or accept my feeble attempts at comfort. Feeling unaccountably wounded I backed out of the bathroom and stood there in the hallway, paralyzed.

Beneath a layer of concern for my friend was an angry awareness of my cowardice. I could feel myself pushing and pulling at the emotions inside me, trying as hard as possible to make it Peggy's own fault she had been tormented, which would absolve me of responsibility. I loved my supposed best friend and I hated her. I felt bad for her because her parents were mean and strict; I resented her because my parents were mean and strict, too, *so get over yourself*. I wanted to help her and I wanted her to hurt even more.

In this way, I was always my own opposite. I was a walking contronym, I embodied self-contradiction. I wanted to be a part, I wanted to be apart. I wanted to cleave to people and cleave from them. In today's parlance, I had no tribe and this left me both free and bereft. I refused to join any club that would have me, yet yearned to be invited anyway.

At that early stage I knew nothing, literally almost nothing, except what I'd learned from pop songs. They were couriers of cold hard truths, of secrets and mysteries the grown-ups tried hiding. The larger world of the late 1970s was at a remove, mediated by television. The Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal had annoyed me by preempting broadcasts of *The Banana Splits* or *Lost in Space*. Anti-war protests, continued violence against black citizens—none of that registered. Even mundane realities closer to home were shrouded in a mist: stagflation, outlandish interest rates, the energy crisis. As far as I could tell, my parents were never out of work, never missed a car or mortgage payment; we never went hungry or without shoes and clothes. The troubles and turmoil right outside my door were kept hidden by the delirious

combination of childhood ignorance and doctor-parents' money.

So I knew nothing about anything and yet somehow I knew exactly what it was like to be a white forty-one year old spinster named Delta Dawn whose Daddy still called her *baby*, or a poor black boy from hard time Mississippi leaving home for New York City, or a girl begging her boyfriend Billy not to run off to war and be a hero and get himself killed.

I knew that suicide was painless.

I knew that everyone hates rainy days and Mondays.

I laughed with rueful recognition at the irony when Rupert Holmes scheduled an assignation to meet an *other woman* for Pina Colodas only to find himself reacquainted with the *same woman*.

I bristled with understanding at the hard-won cynicism of Paul Simon considering fifty ways to leave his lover.

That particular word thrilled and frightened me: *lover*. It suggested something impermanent and dirty. If that song was playing in the car with my parents, I would start chattering loudly just to drown it out, so that they wouldn't hear me hearing it, wouldn't hear me being exposed to *vulgar American culture*. Good girls from Christian Indian families weren't supposed to know about lovers and ways to leave them, of course. At least Patti Labelle in "Lady Marmalade" hid her shamelessness in a foreign tongue. *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?* At that point I knew only the basic mechanics of *coucher*-ing, which I and all the other girls in fifth grade had learned in a single cartoon film strip that raised more questions than it answered. I lacked practical knowledge yet I

recognized the deep urgency of the question. I knew it as well as my own crying face in the mirror.

At age eleven I'd found my parents' 45 of Mary Hopkins singing "Those Were the Days." I would listen to six or seven times in a row, obsessed with its danceable melancholy, its wistful look back at happier times. I was a privileged child, I had a home, a good school, books, and toys. Barbie dolls and Weebles and chemistry sets, a blue Schwinn ten-speed bicycle, thick cotton bath towels almost as tall as me, multiple pairs of clogs and Dr. Scholl's sandals in the closet, a couple of sweet huggable cats and a dumb-as-dirt puppy-mill cocker spaniel lazing around on the furniture: I had absolutely everything. Most of the time I was absorbed in the present and secretly focused on my bright shining future. And yet even as a whippet-thin schoolgirl I had this feeling of mournfulness and regret deep in my bones, as if planted there by genes or by some infant surgical procedure I'd long forgotten.

In eighth grade a transfer student named Kendra Holderman bounded into our little world with chest thrust up and toes pointed outward, her thick auburn bob encircling her head like a warrior crown. She showed up in gym class once with a plastic baggie full of Quaaludes stolen from her parents or older sibling or somebody. When she loosed her loud, sarcastic laugh through the hallways, it was like metal ball-bearings being dropped on stone floors. Feza Aslan was her sidekick, a tall, zaftig beauty with blood-red locks. Both girls had blazing white smiles and imperious upturned noses. They seemed to ionize the air around them. *Hey bitch* was how they greeted each other in the mornings. I hated them; I couldn't take my eyes off them; I grievously envied them their Teflon coatings.

For some unfathomable reason this pair of beautiful bullies took a strong dislike to a couple of our teachers. Slender, smooth-faced Mr. Geoffries tried to teach us earth science when he wasn't having to discipline one of the boys for dumping butane out of the Bunsen burner onto the marble lab countertop and lighting it with a match. Kendra and Feza tormented him. *Are you a fag, Mister Geoffries? Are you sure you're not a fag?* Smiling Kendra would ask him this right to his face, in the middle of class. He'd deign to answer *No, Kendra, I am not*, before attempting feebly to shush and discipline her. The other target was a woman named Miss Denton. I think she was a Spanish teacher, and had study hall duty. I don't have any idea why the girls hated her so. *Miss Denton, is Mister Geoffries your boyfriend? Oh wait, he's a fag, right?* Behind her back they'd call her a bitch and, for some unaccountable reason, conceptualized their feelings about her by saying they *wished she would just go sit on broken glass*. Henceforth she was known between themselves as "Glass Ass." *Glass Ass assigned extra homework tonight, what a bitch!*

One day in spring I saw Miss Denton go flying, with reddened face and wet, angry, faraway eyes, out of the study hall—the same room in which my friend Peggy had been violated in front of the coven. It seemed as if everyone else, or at least a significant portion of the kids who actually mattered in the middle-school social hierarchy, were inside that room. From it emanated laughter that sounded half shocked, half triumphant. Again I was paralyzed on the outside of the action. Later I found out that someone had gone out to the school parking lot, picked up pieces of a broken soda bottle, and put them on Miss Denton's chair. She saw the implied threat and the imminent harm just before sitting. She quit her job that very day and never came back. The girls? It's unclear to me. Maybe no one ever confessed. Maybe someone's parents gave an extra-large donation to the school to smooth things over. I think Kendra and Feza

were suspended for a couple of days before returning. Whether their attitudes upon return were victorious or humbled or nonchalant, I don't recall. In either case, the teacher was gone but they remained.

It was an early lesson in how the world really worked. Mean, charismatic people seem to hold all the cards. Bullies prosper. Assholes profit. Power corrupts, even the seemingly limited power of a snide teen girl to vanquish a beleaguered educator. There in front of my eyes was the evidence.

But the songs that taught me everything—they told such a different story. Disco was ascending, at least in some quarters. Flash and glamor, shiny sequins. Cocaine-fueled joy: a manically alive musical culture that had emerged from the rampant death-dealing of a new plague. There were many people who hated the music. There were even those who, bizarrely enough, rioted against it: in a ballpark in Chicago, a mob of mostly white rock fans, egged on by a local rock DJ, made a bonfire of vinyl records and more or less tore the place up in a frenzy of anti-black, anti-gay, anti-disco jubilation. Radio stations were beginning to self-segregate by race as much as musical style. Is it just my imagination, or was there not a brief glorious moment when you could hear The Beatles and Donna Summers, Stevie Wonder and Tito Puente, Pink Floyd and Celia Cruz and The Jackson Five and Dolly Parton, all on the same station? Was there not a time when a hit was a hit was a hit? Soon we upper-middle-class kids would drop AM radio as being uncool and babyish, and instead embrace FM, abandoning the multicultural mash-up spirit of 1970s pop for the overwhelmingly white-male hegemony of 1980s classic rock. For a brief moment, though, we had the life-affirming rainbow-orgy promise of disco.

There was to be a middle-school dance and I talked my perpetually sticker-shocked

mother into letting me buy white Gloria Vanderbilt jeans and a pair of Candies—plastic high heels, petroleum products for your feet!—so for just once I looked almost as fashionable as the popular girls. The dining hall had been turned, by our imaginations and a few gel-covered theater lights, into our own suburban Studio 54. Stupid joy brimmed out of our hormonally volatile little bodies. Bass lines thumped out of quadrophonic speakers. Strobe lights sliced reality into a thousand little photographic moments. Carried by song, a dozen crazy beautiful storylines reverberated into our shared airspace, all sex and wonderment. No time for melancholy. Men are reportedly raining down. The YMCA is welcoming young men from everywhere, without judgment. We love the night life; we have to boogie. We are staying alive. We are dancing queens.

The girls formed a big circle: all of us, ascendant and degraded, witches and losers, together as one. We are family. We are sisters. Patent untruths that feel real for the moment.

I will survive.

It was my turn to dance into the middle of the circle and show off my moves. I sashayed to the center, deadly afraid I'd fall right off my hard plastic heels and collapse in a heap. Would anyone help me up? Or just point and laugh? But I held it together just long enough to improvise some kind of wiggling thrusting gyrating hip moves, and to shimmy my not-quite-there-yet bust. I felt eyes on me and I sort of liked it. All the girls whooped in sincere appreciation. Even the Kendra and Feza types. On some faces I saw pleasant surprise, as if they'd never considered me a person who might know how to cut invisible sculptures into the air with my body. But I was and I did. It was a little like a jazz band, a circle dance—the female-centric analogue of a traditional improvisational combo. We were channeling a groove, bonding as one, stomping and

swaying to the beat together. Then we gave each one of us a brief solo moment to express ourselves under the spotlight. For the moment, our respective statuses outside the circle did not matter. The rules of engagement were generous and inviting. For the space of a thumping three-minute dance tune, we were just We.

Toward the end of the school year, the middle school awards ceremony took place in that very same discotheque/dining hall. The witchy girls, the popular girls, and the girls who got twenty dollars every month from their gorgeous stay-at-home moms so they could buy a pair of the trendiest designer jeans—all were seated at a table near the center of the room, beneath one of the large chandeliers. Peggy and I and a few other nerds sat together at the periphery. Again and again my friends and I had to stand up and walk to the front of the room to receive various certificates from the dean of middle school, Mr. Bellows. Chorus, art, drama. English, math, science, social studies. Latin, French. Again and again we had to walk back to our seats, past the desultory clapping and studied indifference of the girls who possessed the real prizes by birthright. It would have been comical if it weren't so embarrassing. Peggy probably nabbed a few more academic achievements than I did, and I tried not to let that bug me too much. At some point the painful ritual was almost over.

It was then that Mr. Bellows—a thin, wan, hook-nosed white man who seemed on the verge of retiring, or perhaps just dissolving into thin air—took hold of the microphone at the podium once more to intone some stately-sounding words about kindness, community, respect for one's fellow man, blah blah.

Then I heard my name. What? In a daze I stood up and walked again to the podium. Mr. Bellows smiled at me with something that looked like warmth as I held out my hand to receive a

thick pressed-wood plaque with a metallic blue face.

CITIZENSHIP AWARD

Sandhya Elizabeth Asirvatham

Bewildered, I walked back through the clatter of hesitant applause. Why? Why was I holding this thing in my hand, why me, why *citizenship*, why? I could think of nothing I'd done to deserve it. But then I walked back to my seat and saw the faces of Kendra and Feza and friends—saw them looking at me with horribly cold and neutral looks on their faces, saw their hands clapping listlessly. Suddenly I understood. I had not been given this award for *doing* anything. I had been given this award for doing *nothing*.

For being neither here nor there. For hovering in the hallway outside the study hall. For taking no stand. For joining no coven. For being passive, retiring, cowardly. For being *nice*. Harmless little brown skinny nerd girl. Neither subject nor object. A threat to no one.

The award wasn't really for me. No, Mr. Bellows had given it to me in order to have the Kendras and Fezas of the world see it being given to someone like me. He thought he was elevating me, flattering me. I experienced it as a degradation. The Citizenship Award might as well have been a scarlet letter sewn to my blouse: *L for Loser*. Apart, not a part.

Rainbow High

Patti Lupone looked down her long sharp nose at us in our fourth row orchestra seats at the Broadway Theater and did a double-take, almost imperceptibly. On that spring night in 1980 My sister and I sat side by side in our fancy party dresses and whisper-sang along to every single lyric in Evita. We had the entire show memorized. Occasionally one or two of the chorus members, dancing right up to the edge of the stage, would look at us and smile. And then it happened. The mighty Miss Lupone herself saw us, too, and in that brief moment of eye contact, with my mouth forming the same syllables as her own, I received her blessing. It was not her intention to pass the torch to a stranger, a young girl, someone she'd never seen before—but she did. Patti Lupone became my new idol, supplanting even the magnificent Liza Minelli. For weeks afterwards, I went around telling my friends at school and in my dance classes about the show, and then imitated the deep, agile, ballerina's bow that Patti Lupone took at curtain call, throwing herself on the floor in a semi-split with her arms and head bent all the way down to the floor. She humbled herself to her fans, but really it should have been the other way around. We should have prostrated ourselves in awe. Patti Lupone was a shooting star, a goddess. Just like Eva Peron, queen of the people! Minus the corruption and conspiracies, presumably. I would grow up to be her—no, I would be me, inspired by her, and one day she'd be sitting in the fourth row of the orchestra for *my* show.

Our father was the original Broadway freak of the family. A Chorus Line, Jesus Christ Superstar, All That Jazz, Sweeney Todd—we would end up seeing all those shows with their

founding Broadway casts in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as The King and I in one of its many revivals with Yul Brynner. Good seats, expensive seats, the kind of seats a surgeon could afford.

(Or was it really his surgeon wife who paid? Later that was one of my mother's many constant complaints: He'd been lazy, uncommitted, irresponsible, she said. He had never studied hard enough to make it into a cardiac surgery residency; thus he got stuck in the far less glamorous role of thoracic surgeon. It was she who had earned most of the money as a gynecologist, she said, but he was always deciding how to spend it.)

My father sometimes played Broadway cast albums on his cabinet stereo system in the living room, sharing the music with us all. More often he was by himself in his home office behind shuttered wood double doors, his ears under headphones as large as coconut halves, connected via curly cord to the reel-to-reel system. He could be heard from time to time in his rich baritone singing along with Ben Vereen or Len Cariou. A house filled with music: one might presume a joyful house, a convivial house.

My father would tell the same story once in a while, about having sung an Elvis Presley hit for a talent show, way back in his days at Vellore, the Christian-missionary-run medical college in southern India where my parents had met. Like a young Elvis, my father was tall and seemed so commanding: his broad forehead glinted in the light under a widow's peak of dark brilliant black hair, his face was soft and kind when he was happy but intimidating when he was enraged. (At that point, I had no reason to question or wonder why a grown man with a demanding profession and a family would still be talking about one single performance twenty years after the fact. A kind of empathetic understanding would come, in time.) For Evita, my

father had purchased the 8-track recording to fit the format in our new Oldsmobile station wagon, and on a winter vacation drive from New Jersey to Florida we'd listened to the entire show—ten times, twelve, maybe fifteen in a row. And then again on the ride home, over and over, until we'd memorized the entire thing. I'd be in the way back, right next the rear windshield, lying on my back with my knees bent and my legs draped over the top of a large green metal cooler that contained our lunches. I'd lie there and examine my thighs for signs of unwelcome thickening and pick at the fraying edges of my cut-off jean shorts. My little sister would be stretched out across the back seat, her head on a bed pillow against the passenger door, playing a handheld video game in which a stick-figure fireman had to catch stick-figure babies that dropped at an accelerating pace out of a burning building's upper window. As if subliminally instigated by the game itself, I always harbored the secret fear that the passenger door would pop open and My sister would go tumbling head first out onto the highway. Or maybe, the way sisters are, it was a sinister hope as much as a fear: a fantasy of impending disaster, a catastrophe befitting children who'd grown up watching The Towering Inferno and Earthquake and Airport.

My father would have been singing along loudly while driving; my mother, I'm not so sure about. She is both a felt presence and a visible absence. I can see my father from this time period with ease but I often have to conjure my mother forcibly, imagining her in the passenger seat, silent, angry, arms folded across her chest, staring out the window, big brown eyes focused on grievances of the distant or recent past. She is either very fat or relatively thin: it changed from year to year, but in any case, on vacation she would likely be wearing the same cheaply made, sassily top-stitched Sears jeans, either filled out to bursting or hanging loosely off recently re-exposed hipbones. (From her I learned the womanly art of yo-yo dieting.) She would have

started the morning with her usual brusque efficiency, moving through the kitchen before dawn to make a huge plaid-patterned thermos full of sweet, milky, cardamon coffee. Maybe in the car she is subdued, but is involuntarily nodding her head along to the beat of the music. Maybe her mood has returned all the way to its apparent default, its characteristic darkness. She is staring out the window and muttering in barely submerged rage at her lazy husband, her willful and disobedient children, her no-good brothers who manipulate her—a word she mispronounces *manoopilate*—as well as the Jewish doctors at the hospital who treat her like a servant or second-class citizen, her nagging mother, her dead-too-young father, and her divine *Bapu* in Heaven who has apparently forsaken her.

Or maybe this is entirely the wrong picture, and my mother is just as happy and engaged and musical as the rest of us, her smile bright and her dimples dancing, yet the years have caused me to retrofit the memory with realities that emerged later.

I sang “Rainbow High” from Evita at my audition for the role of Sally Bowles, and sounded pretty good until the second syllable on *rainbow*, the high note, which came out thin and unsupported. But it hardly mattered because the game was rigged. Miss Gambone had told me in confidence a few weeks prior: she had chosen Cabaret with me in mind for the lead all along. I was only in tenth grade and there were two seniors who auditioned as well, but I was the clear winner anyway. I had the sultry voice, I had the verve with line readings, I had the dancing ability, and most importantly I had—somehow I understood this—the look. Legs and arms and eyelashes for miles, cheeks hollowing out beneath angular bone structure, a face of pleasingly symmetrical planes and shadows. I was still a brown girl in a mostly white world but I was growing into someone conspicuous.

I'd been in the choir and in every annual musical production as background player, but in my ninth grade year, when a senior girl got mono during the run-up to Godspell, Miss Gambone asked me to take her place in the duet "On the Willows." I learned the song cold, and convinced myself I sounded better than the girl I'd replaced. In dress rehearsal I even added a spontaneous bit of business: during the instrumental break, I looked down mournfully, let my long hair cover my eyes, and crossed my arms in front of my chest. A dramatic little self-hug, an intuitively diva posture. In real life I was quickly falling away from my family's old-school churchliness, but this Broadway tune was about the death of an ecumenical hippie Jesus, so it was easy to muster the needed sentiment.

I'd befriended a senior boy named Will Merrill. He was an absurdly all-American standout even in the sea of upper-middle-class suburban niceness/normalcy in which we all swam, the cultural whiteness that molded us, no matter what color our skin or what language our parents spoke in childhood. Will's great grandfather had built a five-and-dime store into a famous major retail chain; his father had bought and sold and merged various insurance companies on his way further up the American business hierarchy; and Will himself would soon attend a college where his family had endowed chairs and had sent several generations of fine young future leaders. I knew none of this explicitly at the time, and yet I must have intuited it. Will was the kind of person for whom the word *scion* was coined. What was he doing hanging out with me? Daughter of people who used their hands to eat balls of mushed up rice and dhal mixed with crumbled Wise potato chips (because papadums were not easy to source in those days). Somehow this utterly mismatched boy and I had latched onto each other at rehearsals. I can't imagine what we could have talked about. Regattas? The Dow Jones? Will exuded the easy

charisma of the high-born. At debate demonstrations in front of the whole school, he had everyone laughing with his two-minute extemporaneous speeches on critical topics such as *Briefs Versus Boxers*. He had a girlfriend, a fellow senior, an equally clean-cut and pretty blonde. Field hockey star, if I'm remembering correctly. (Or maybe I'm just extrapolating from stereotype.) To me she seemed a bit cold and uptight in her wrinkle-free khakis and Fair Isles sweaters and LL Bean duck boots. Will and his girlfriend had the same kind of hair, thick and straight, with sandy highlights, and the same kind of nose, long and sharp. They could have been siblings. There was some talk that they'd eventually get married, and also that she was *saving herself* until then. I was only fourteen at the time but already aggravated by the idea of virginity, almost burdened by it, and the mere rumor of Will's girlfriend's principled abstinence made me resentful.

After the last night of Godspell came the cast party at Miss Gambone's apartment, and all of us were seated snugly on the three sides of Miss Gambone's soft sectional couch. Will Merrill was right there with me. I'd been in enough productions already to know that the eternal beautiful bond among cast members, forged by all those coordinated dance moves and shared vocal vibrations, could weaken and fail just weeks after the last curtain call. But for the moment I was right there, among my gang, where I belonged, where we all belonged: the depressives, the closeted gays, and the mumble-mouthed introverts, now briefly in cahoots with a few varsity athletes and future masters-of-the-universe, those who were cool enough to admit they liked to sing and dance without tarnishing their alpha-male images.

Somebody had snuck something strong in the punch. I was three glasses in already. Primed for an improvisation. A vamp, vamping. I maneuvered myself a little closer to Will. His

arm was draped around the back of the seat, and now he was letting its weight fall gently around my shoulders, as if he and I were together for real. I passed my empty cup across the row of friends and when it magically reappeared in my hand, I took another big swig, half the contents at once, then turned to face my friend. I could barely focus on his eyes because his lips were at my eye-level. I lunged at him tongue-first. I basically punched his face with my face. He accepted my wet kiss for about three seconds before pushing me back.

Hey there, he said, almost apologetically, as if he'd been the one to take a liberty. Ever the gentleman. He would later drive me home, give me a chaste one-arm hug on my way out the passenger door, and even call the next day to make sure I was okay. Later still our semi-platonic bond slipped and he would ride off into the rest of his life: business degree, joining the family company, marrying appropriately (albeit not the high school girlfriend), begetting appropriate children, getting involved in multigenerational estate and power disputes that would be written up in The New York Times. I had never belonged to him or to his world, but for a brief moment I had his attention and the vicarious net worth it conferred on me.

What I can see now from the distance of decades is how needy I was, not just in the typical way of a young girl wanting an armored knight to sweep her up and reveal her true, ascendant place in the universe. I was also just desperate for someone, anyone, to tell me who I was—anyone other than my parents. For the time being it was good enough to be given a character name, an ersatz history, a song to sing and lines to memorize. In the following year I'd strut upon the boards in the lavender-and-black-lace corset of Sally Bowles, I'd sing songs with gravelly low notes and piercing if still insecure high notes, and kick my legs above my head, and become the school star, adored and beloved by the small masses of a progressive college-prep

school. After a rough middle-school start, I became pretty comfortable in that bubble.

So there at that Godspell party, driven by a heady mix of hormonal ambition and existential yearning, I accidentally on purpose lunged at and kissed my temporary best friend. Some wag in the room said *Oops*, and a few people laughed. Coming to my senses, I glanced around to see who'd been watching—short answer: everyone. I caught the look on the face of my beloved Miss Gambone, who had promoted me and believed in me, who was on the verge of casting me as a singing dancing sex-worker with no prior experience.

Her face was terrible. Narrow eyes, pursed lips, broad head shaking. A face of unvarnished scorn. Not a blessing; its exact opposite.

I was very familiar with the look.

Where Is Love?

There is an old family photograph I struggle to comprehend. My mother and I are sitting together on the red plaid couch in our den. I look to be about thirteen, long and lean, with black hair all in a lustrous tumble down my shoulders. My mother, in one of her heavier phases, has her arms crossed tightly around her chest. She looks enraged. Her narrow face is pointed straight ahead, although her eyes are not looking at the camera, or at the camera's operator, presumably my father. They are fixed elsewhere, glaring at nothing, glaring at present-past-future. Her small mouth is squeezed shut. She is all closed up. There but not there. A visible presence, a felt absence. She gives me nothing.

Yet in all innocence and love I am curled up with my legs tucked under me, leaning against her warmly, like a purring cat. I am there, fully present, enthralled with my mother. I recognize both characters in this tableau: the first, shrinking darkly inside herself; the second, needy and oriented outward. But I can't comprehend the context. The photograph baffles me. I can't begin to imagine a mother who doesn't give herself over to the affectionate child that clings. And I can't at all remember what it was like to *be* that girl, that still-in-love daughter, hanging onto the woman who made me as if onto a lifebuoy.

In later years it would become clear just how little actual affection we got from her—my sister, especially, says she does not remember a single maternal hug. There was adult drama behind all this, unmentioned yet formative details of my parents' lives and thus of my own, patchwork truths it took me years to unravel. All I knew at the time was this: these were my

mother and father, and they were wildly different from my friends' mothers and fathers, who talked to them in unaccented English, who passed down family stories and worldly wisdom, who laughed and joked around and definitely doled out hugs on a regular basis.

My mother had been the enabler, the person who did the research and signed the application forms and wrote the checks, then drove me and My sister around for hours every week: art lessons, music lessons, dance lessons; late practices for the school plays. Oliver, West Side Story, The Roar of the Greasepaint. It must have been an enormous sacrifice of time and energy. Also of money. (In the end, what we daughters mostly got from my mother was money, which was often a great boon and just as surely a kind of curse. In the end, it became clear that doling out money was the only method my mother had for relating to almost anybody.) Now I dig inside myself, searching for an organic sense of gratitude, manufacturing it consciously when it doesn't arise on its own. In fact now I know exactly what it's like, to be the writer of the checks, the keeper of the clock, the procurer of art supplies and costumes—one Halloween, Mom sewed a beautiful full-body mouse outfit for my sister, from scratch and without a pattern...she was gifted like that, an improviser. I know now what work and emotional investment it takes to be the planner of summer camps and school enrollments, the organizer of the bills, the buyer of birthday presents, the parent-teacher conference facilitator, the glue of the family. It can be lonely work, under-appreciated work, but also very satisfying and also an enormous luxury: the American bourgeois mother role. So much of it is entirely voluntary even when it seems necessary. It's easy to martyr oneself on tasks no one else ever asked you to take on. It is a trick but you let yourself be magicked by it. Because of love, and other murky motivations.

All those hours spent in the car to and fro with my mother, but in silence. I see her face in

the rearview mirror. Eyes distant, mouth clamped. I can't remember having a single conversation. What remains instead is this kind of thing. My name being used like an epithet, ricocheting around the large empty expanses of the house.

Sandhya! Sandhya! Sandhya!

(To imagine it in pronounced correctly, hear it like this: *SUN-thee-ah, SUN-thee-ah, SUN-thee-ah* with a slightly dental sound to the *th*.)

Sandhya!

I was fifteen, newly menstruating. Her high-pitched clanging of a voice still reverberates. Her face is a mask of demonic rage, cheeks aflame, eyes bulging.

What is this filth? Huh? What is this, filthy girl?

She stalks into my bedroom, a pair of my underwear balled in her fist.

Just throw your bloody panties in the hamper? Huh!? Is that what you think is the right thing to do? What kind of stupidity is this? Don't you know you have to wash them out by hand in the sink? Oh, but you are too lazy to do this! Is that right, lazy girl? After all, you are just a princess who can do whatever she wants, isn't that right? You can do whatever you want, and your sister can do whatever she wants, and your father can do whatever he wants, and I will work and make all the money, and YOU THREE PEOPLE can just be like grand pashas and do WHATEVER YOU WANT!!!

She stalks back out of the room as I mutter a feeble apology.

Once as a toddler I zapped myself. I could not have been more than two or three. I sat on the floor in our apartment kitchen and stuck one of my mother's long black bobby pins into the electrical socket. I didn't tell her; I was more fearful of being punished than of being hurt. Same

kind of thing happened a few years later when I was about four. Out of curiosity I put the head of a tiny toy construction worker in my left nostril, and the minuscule blue hardhat popped off and stuck there. I was sure it would be there forever, blocking half my breath. I was scared but I said nothing to anyone. It stayed there for days until it finally fell out. And another more serious incident when I was maybe five: I was walking myself across the street from our apartment building, to the home of Mrs. Fogg, an older lady who watched me for a few hours after school. I had my lunchbox with me, and I was standing on the edge of the sidewalk, singing a song to myself and swinging my arms this way and that, this way and that, like twisting ribbons around a maypole. A car drove by and clipped my wrist and lunchbox. Luckily my arm and the car were traveling in the same direction, so the impact was lighter than it might have been, but it still made a loud slapping sound. I yelped just once. I think I went into some kind of mild shock. I did not cry. My wrist was stiff and achey for days afterward. I hid it from Mrs. Fogg, from my parents, from everyone. It had been my own stupid fault for being a stupid little girl standing stupidly too close to the stupid street. I would get in trouble if I told anyone. At five years old I understood this implicitly.

Sandhya! Sandhya! Sandhya!

It was my job on Saturday mornings to vacuum the entire 3,000-square-foot house, but like all teenagers I conveniently forgot my chore from time to time, and then I'd hear my mother stomping up the stairs. She'd throw open my bedroom door and find me there, still in bed, daydreaming about being one of The Police's back-up singers on tour. (I had come home from my first ever rock concert, the Ghost in the Machine show at The Meadowlands, and had painted this sentiment in red ink directly on the wall next to my closet door: *I WANNA GET STUNG BY*

STING!)

Sandhya!

Time to vacuum the whole house!

Do it now!

Do it!

What are you waiting for?

And then she would turn and disappear down the stairs but her voice would continue to ring out into the wide tiled foyer and reverberate throughout the house, and I would wonder exactly to whom she was talking.

You must do these things because they are your DUTY!

Do it for DUTY, I say.

Not for LOVE.

There is no LOVE in this house anyway!

My world would go black when my mother talked this way, when she disavowed love, when she abandoned me with her words. There is no way to tease apart the dark stew of emotions suddenly engulfing me in those moments: rage, fear, sorrow, resentment. Those are mere words. It was a physical sensation, all light suddenly absent, like being shut in a closet. But the frightening thing is, you get used to it. This baseline misery becomes like a stubborn low-grade fever, bringing you down, draining your energy, blackening your mood—continually but not acutely. For the moment you are subsumed in deep darkness, tears gurgling from your eyes and nose like lava. Eventually everything quiets down, your eyes find scant light and adjust enough to the dimness to let you move around again, and you go back to your day and week of

scheduled and unscheduled items. Vacuuming. Homework. Dance lessons. Soap operas and games of Atari Pong. Clearing the table after lunch, after dinner. *How was school today it was fine how was work today it was fine.* Then silence and nothingness and everybody alone together in different parts of our big suburban house.

SANDHYA WHAT IS THIS? WHAT IS THIS? WHAT IS THIS? WHAT IS THIS?

I'm sixteen. My mother has my diary in her hand, my private diary. She took it from me and read without my permission. I am cowering on my bed, enraged by the violation but also scared shitless and ashamed. Her big brown eyes are red-rimmed with tears.

You wrote here: MY MOM IS CRAZY. You wrote this! Why did you write this terrible thing? Is that what you think? Is it? Is it? Is it? Is it? Is it?

I couldn't say anything in response.

All I could think was *YES YOU FUCKING LUNATIC* and maybe in some smaller rougher place inside myself I was also saying *I'M SORRY SORRY SORRY MOMMY.*