A Bend In The Track (selected chapters)
By Aditya Desai

The ride in from Jessup was longer than he'd thought on the way coming in. He knew in the back of his head, though he tried to keep from expressing it, that it was because he dreaded returning home more than he had going to prison.

The delicately planned, richly cultivated green scape of Howard County dried up around them as the car edged further back toward Baltimore.

"Comin' home," Momma said, dryly, as if reporting it.

Home. The word echoed in his head and gave him a migraine. He remembered his last night before being sent in, his family watching solemnly as the cop ushered him from the station into the back of a cold van. She hadn't come, and he didn't ask whether it was because she didn't want to or she couldn't bear to. It was only his brother and uncle. Worse, he knew, no one else gave enough of a damn. In that moment it was clear he'd been finished, disowned, not just by kin but the community at large.

Horns honked. Rush hour had started, and Pratt Street was gridlocked. The only other way to get to the east side of the city was the tunnel, but that was gridlocked too, and had a four dollar toll.

"Sometimes it's worth it to pay," he'd told her many times.

"It's never worth it to spend money on time," she replied. "You put up with the little inconveniences."

She sighed deeply, hands wringing the steering wheel as she would a damp cloth, staring at the endless river of cars before them. They could see straight down. The harbor ran parallel on the right. It was a bright day afternoon and the hordes were out for ice cream and boardwalk fries. The apex of the Aquarium's pyramidal building glistened at the fringes.

She saw a series of openings in the lanes, and geared the car, zigzagging in and out and back through slips between the sedans, trucks, motorcycles, and came out the other end barely missing the red. She was good at that, Abdi thought. Good at calculation.

"What day is it?" he asked.

"Saturday," she said. "You comin' to church tomorrow."

He didn't give an answer. He didn't have a choice.

They were in East Baltimore now. The streets were lined with crackheads and their dealers, puppets and puppeteers standing on the same stage as their audiences, making their way to the waterfront, the park, the hospital, or perhaps just trying to claw out to the other side of the county, passed by hoping not to divert their gaze too much. To his mother, Abdi's entire childhood had been a crusade against letting him fall into this pit. "It don't take long," she'd said, "before they approach you." He'd been obedient then. It was still a year or two before he even understood what crack was, when he read about it in a crime novel. Until then it was only a phrase without meaning but full of demonic flavor.

They stopped at a light. At the corner, a hobo wrapped in a burly jacket and hat jammed out to his Walkman. Good to know some things don't change, Abdi thought.

They passed through the hospital campus. The houses seemed newer here to him. But maybe he didn't remember it all that well. This was, ironically, the neighborhood to avoid, at nighttime, daytime, all the time. Then, as if answer his unspoken question, she said: "They finished building those a year ago. Kicked out everyone who was living there before. They're more projects, but full houses now. City said no more high rises. But houses are different. Cost way too much for anyone around here, even if they are the cheaper kind. Big deal, people getting angry at the developer, some big real estate guy down from Philly, say they're gonna sue him and everything. But there's not point to it. I don't think they'd been built for folks like us anyway."

Abdi had never heard her wax or opine like this before, much less even express thoughts on social happenings. She had always been a woman who to kept to hers and her own. Anything beyond his wellbeing, or their home's, was not a concern.

They pulled up in front of the house. There was a spot, unfortunately, right in front.

When they entered he was awash with a daze that sent him blind and dumb. He heard her say something behind him, that sounded like "there's food if you want it," but he didn't want anything, and counting each footstep, made his way up the stairs. He collected himself only once he closed the door behind him and stood in the bedroom he'd had his whole life, frozen in time since when he was twelve, the last age he gave a shit about posters or bedsheets. He was tired, but didn't want to lay on the bed. He'd been lying in a cot with nothing else to do for two years. But what else was there? He laid down anyway. It was secondhand, and lord knows what had been done to it before Momma had his brother haul it from the sidewalk where it was abandoned. The bed felt like a cloud to him now, mostly after the stiff brick they stuck him on, but also from years of wear from his jumping up and down on it. He dug his face into the pillow and tried to make the world melt away behind him. How he'd relished the opportunity to do this before everything had gone to shit. Even when he'd only ben looking at a DUI fine and service hours, before the boy he never knew, had died in ICU, he was only wishing to get back here, roll up in the blanket, a flip through a porno and pick at a bowl of dry cereal.

He flipped around and looked at his bookshelf, the only other furniture in his room, perhaps in the whole house, that ever gave him any comfort. The spines stood erect and alphabetized, categorized by genre, mostly comprised of thrillers, mysteries, whodunits, crime fiction, pulp adventures, anything with a dark alley, an unknown killer, and an inevitable fate. Where the reader was aware of more than the characters themselves knew. Late and night, when the world was asleep and he didn't think anyone could hear, Abdi wished to have a career writing some seedy series. A smart, thinking hero. Just, but not altruistic. Moral insecurities. Infallible charm. Things he did not have.

On the dresser next to his bed he saw the last thing he was reading before heading away. He picked it up: *In Cold Blood.* A true crime story, his teacher had called it. Fuck him.

He'd lived a true crime story. It wasn't thrilling at all.

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It wasn't much when the district bigwigs came through. They never had much to say ad never really cred, Ashok thought. The head chair was a prematurely bald man, Steve his name, who always arrived in his suit and hardhat and reminded Ashok of Donald Duck. He'd paint and gaze at lifters ad rods and wiring and say "yeah, yeah," nodding his head. This gave the site that approval to move on, and more, without altering or redoing what had been finished. At first, Ashok feared the intense danger of Steve's lackadaisical supervision, but after a few projects successfully went under his belt, he relaxed. And of course, that's why maintenance was always on call.

But the downside to it was that work completely halted for the day. Steve's visits were scheduled only for an hour. "I'll zip by before lunch," he would say. But he would run late in the morning, take lunch anyway, and arrive in the afternoon just as it became too late to start up the machines again. This also angered Ashok time and again, but after a few projects, he only became angrier.

Today, he stepped into the trailer prepared to make his declaration to the guys. Only Bill was there, reading his paper. "Morning, Ash," he said.

"Good morning. Today Steve is visiting?"

"Yep."

"Got his nonsense to put up with again?"

"Yep." He turned a page of his paper. "Sooner or later that boy better learn some sense."

"He is not too young."

"Younger'n me in age. But by his work ethic, he's a damn child. Sit down, Ash. Ain't no one doing any work today."

"I think we should."

"What?"

"Do work."

Bill laughed. It angered Ashok he had to repeat himself, only then to be teased.

"I'm serious. Such a waste of time it always is. Let us just keep the machines going."

"Well Ash, the thing is, we all kinda like the days that Steve comes. It's a little paid holiday for everyone."

Ashok nodded; it was true. Then he reconsidered. "But we don't do much everyday anyway."

Reggie walked in. "What's going on?"

"Ash wants to keep working."

"But Steve's coming today, right?"

"We know."

"I don't get it then."

"Nevermind, nevermind," Ashok said. Leave it to these guys, he thought, to make grand inquisitions of the smallest things, and little curiosity of important ones.

"Free day, Ash," Reggie said. "What's better?"

"I got an idea," Bill interjected. "Why don't we get lunch at that Indian buffet you keep raving about? What do you say, Reggie?"

"I can do that," he said, grinning.

"Ashok sighed. "Okay, fine."

An hour later the call came through from Steve. They all listened on the conference speaker: "Uh, hey guys. Yes, umm, I've just gotten into lunch. Some VIPs, sudden meeting, y'know" – they rolled their eyes – "so once I finish up here, I'll swing over, looking at about another hour or so…yeah. So, see ya then, okay? Bye." The line clicked. They sighed. That meant he would be at least until two in the afternoon.

"Buffet time it is," Reggie said.

He ran out of the trailer. Ashok looked at Bill. He knew, too.

"It's a demon," he said, rubbing his beard. "Not our problem, though."

"No, not our problem."

"I'll get the car."

Ashok followed Bill out of the trailer, but instead of going with him to the car, he swung the other direction to the diggers. In his periphery, he could see Reggie putting a finger to his nose.

The Mexicans were lounging in the cabins and the scooper of the diggers, smoking and chatting away.

"Hola!" Ashok said.

"Hola!" They all waved.

Ashok looked around, wondering which one spoke he most English. He thought of when he'd first come to the country. How embarrassed he'd been to open his mouth in front of Americans. He, a man who'd read and written English all his life in school and work. The Queen's English. But those first few weeks, at the sight of any American, from the passport officer to the checkout woman at the grocery, only after a series of false starts and stammers did he speak; in broken, retarded phrases.

"Yes?" one of the Mexicans finally said.

Ashok sighed. He walked up close, like a police informant, and told the man in simple, plain words, that Steve wasn't coming, and to keep working anyway. The Mexican man looked at him quizzically, then nodded. "Okay, Ash."

"Okay," he replied. He called shame on himself for not know any of their names.

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The Mughal Palace was a mainstay of Baltimore's Indians. All of the birthdays and anniversary parties were catered from here. The restaurant held an annual Diwali party to celebrate the Hindu New Year, and everyone went, if nothing else just to know what was going on in the community. Aptly enough, it was through the Mughal Palace that all the familial intrigue, marriage proposals, and alliances were made. It's how the newly arrived met the mainstays, how the gossip that went behind backs was affirmed or negated.

Ashok avoided these parties after it had become too much. The place of comfort and welcome instead began to ostracize him with a backhanded kindness, the kind of veiled pity that was given to widows or alcoholics. *Such a shame*, he knew they said, *but let's not bother too much with him*, he knew they thought.

After awhile however he began to miss that excellent dosa they rolled here. It wasn't the best he'd had in his life, in fact it wasn't even really all that good compared to the fresh-off-the-pan pancakes he'd gobbled back in South India. But it was the only place in town that made them, and so he urged his coworkers to join him for their lunch buffet. When it was not too crowded, when he would see no one who knew him at all.

"Sit here, please," the waiter said. They slid into a booth. Paintings hung on the wall of village maidens rolling roti, churning butter. The requisite framed photo of the Taj Mahal adorned the back wall, an Air India logo stamped in the corner.

"Do we have to order the buffet?" Reggie asked, scanning the menu.

"All we have right now is buffet," the waiter said.

"What about this?"

The waiter shrugged. "Just in case."

"All right, then." Reggie and Bill got up and headed to the line of chaffing dishes. Ashok remained seated. The waiter moved to leave, but he tugged onto his shirt.

"Is the manager here?"

"No, no this early."

The man who owned the Mughal Palace was a fried, but they hand not talked in awhile. Ashok got up and went for a place. Bill and Reggie were already at the end of the line. The selection was standard – naan, salad, rice, dhal, paneer, curries. He went to the end, where saw a dish of small rolled dosas – rice pancakes packed with fried potatoes and onion. The manager was Punjabi, in no

way having an ethnic expertise at the South Indian staple, but there was no other place in town who made them, and so Ashok loaded his plate with four dosas and a steaming hot cup of sambhar, and went back to the table.

Bill and Reggie were devouring.

"I don't know what all this stuff is Ash, but it is good."

"I know this is chicken." Bill said, gnawing into a leg of tandoori.

"I'm sure it tastes very good," Ashok said.

"Have you had this before?"

"No. Vegetarian."

They looked at him, aghast. They shrugged.

"That explains why you never want lunch from McDonald's," Reggie said.

Their radios buzzed. Bill picked his up. "What now, I wonder?" He rolled his eyes and clocked the button. Chuck's voice spackled from the other end, saying that Steve had arrived on site.

"You gotta be joking," Bill said.

"He's right here man. He's brought some other guys with him, too. Where the hell are you?"

"Had to go check on something at another site."

"All three of you? Come the hell on."

"All right, all right, we'll be there soon." Bill cut the line, and belched loudly. Ashok sighed relief the restaurant was mostly empty, even more that the manager was not here.

"Well, it was good for what I got to eat, Ash."

"For sure," Reggie corroborated. "I'm coming back here for sure. Thanks, Ash."

"Of course," he replied, looking down at his untouched plate of dosa. "I will pay," he said.

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When they arrived back at the site, in a surprising turn of punctuality, Steve was indeed there, standing in the middle of the workers, pointing and nodding at the excavators, while two men stood behind him. They wore sunglasses and hard hats, but their suits were of a finer and better cut than Steve's. Even on the gloomy November day, their slacks and jackets had a shimmer, cutting through the rising dust and grime from the site. They were asking a lot of questions to Steve and Reggie, who was exasperated in answering them.

"Where the hell were you guys?!" Steve said, charging up at Ashok, Bill, and Reggie. He spoke in a hushed, pious tone. "These guys are just going on and working, working. You know it's

protocol to shut down operations during a supervisor visit! Well, fuck that, it's protocol for you guys to *be here* during a supervisor visit!"

"Well excuse us," Bill said. "We're all a little surprised you're following protocol for once, actually getting here on damn time."

Steve put his hands on his hips, attempting to look authorial. "Yeah, well," he said, and craned his head for a quick moment to look at his two companions. They stood quiet and reserved in the back. They were watching attentively, but made no move to jump in. Ashok starting filing through the ranks of the higher-ups, thinking who would possibly have come to the site that would get Steve so twisted up? The two men were young, younger than any of them, so they can't be the department heads or any state legislators.

"Those guys are here from some big consulting firm down in DC. They're taking over the project."

From DC, Ashok thought. Hardly an hour's drive from where they stood, but a world's difference, one of fast-paced wheelers and dealers, of boardrooms and teleconferencing, where things ran efficiently, smoothly, and expertly. Not the kind of place where he could duck away for a three-hour lunch break. He was not quite sure what consultants did. They must be lawyers, perhaps here to see a corporate takeover of the MTA. Those terms and labels went over his head, mostly, and he'd always been thankful to never deal with them much at his level of work.

Now however, standing a few feet from them, he felt his blood running cold. He was the one who had broken protocol.

He saw the two DC men approach them. They removed their hardhats, one revealing a shining bald dome, the other slick jet-black hair that gave the shape of a shark's fin. He spoke to Steve.

"All right, I think we got a good look around." He looked at the supervisors. "Are these the guys?"

"Yep," Steve said, crossing his arms and projecting disappointment. "I'm sorry they weren't here to answer your questions. Maybe they can do that now."

"Well now we're running low of on time." He put up his watch, a pricey looking one, and pointed at the dial.

"I'm sorry," Steve said. "One of these smartasses told them to keep working and just bounced off somewhere else."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yep."

The bald one spoke now. "Which one of you told theses guys to keep working?"

The group was silent. Chuck looked at Bill and Reggie, who turned to Ashok.

"I told them," Ash said.

"You told them to keep working?"

"Yes." How many times were they going to ask that same question? The anxiety he felt a moment ago dissipated, and now he was getting annoyed with these men. Surely with those expensive clothes and watches, weren't they intelligent enough to not ask obvious questions?

"Sometimes," he said, it is a waste of time to halt for so long. This project is already very behind. To be honest, I lost faith long ago that it was ever going to be completed. It's no secret around the administration there are better places to be putting this money into, not to mention my time. But as long as you pay me, I'll stay here and see it through. But someone needs to take charge and wrangle this horse. I tried in my small way, but it looks like not all of you agree." In his head, Ashok knew he was signing his own resignation, not only admitting to his idiotic shirking of responsibility, but standing behind it like a foolhardy protestor. But he'd discovered long ago he was terrible at lying, and thought it better to always go the other extreme -- better to own up to every sin, rather than get away with committing two.

"Okay," the consultant nodded. "Okay." He drew a spry bony finger out and gestured Ashok to follow. He whispered something to Steve, and Steve nodded. A look of delight formed on his face, and Ashok knew that was it for him. He and Steve had never got along, and a look like that could only spell misfortune for him.

As they walked into the trailer, the slick haired man put out his hand. "My name's Brian, this is my partner Chris." Ashok nodded, and shook Brian's hand, knowing he would forget their names before the meeting was over.

The two suits took Bill's desk as if it was their own. Chris took a seat and put his feet on the table, while Brian sat erect atop Bill's desk calendar. Ashok took his own chair, already scripting in his mind the dialogue he would deliver to his wife this evening about how he'd lost his job. She would harass him for making such a stupid mistake. He would tell her he was trying to show initiative, as she'd urged him to do so many times. She wouldn't listen.

"What's your name?"

"Ash, Ashok. Ash."

"Which one?" Chris said, chuckling. He was inspecting his nails.

"Ash."

"You sure?" said Brian.

"Stop treating me like a damned child," Ashok spat. "What do you think I am? What do you want? I was only trying to be productive at my job, and now you are here about to cut me off? Why don't you just slap me on the wrist and be done with it?"

The two DC men chuckled even more.

"You got attitude Ash," Brian said. "That's what we like. Attitude, and productivity."

"Relax, man," Chris said. "You are not getting fired. Look at him, Brian, he's breaking a full sweat."

Ashok was, but the relief didn't make him stop. He was still heated from the patronization.

"Ash, listen. Chris and I have just started our own consulting firm down in DC. I wouldn't even call it a firm, more like a boutique. We got a few contracts that started us with the Federal government, some defense stuff, some civil engineering. But we're both Baltimore boys. Born and raised around these parts. We want to take a project that's really going to turn this area around, give something back to our home turf."

"Yeah, we heard about this rail project, how it was supposed to be the goldmine for the area."

"Fucking goldmine. We need someone who really can take initiative. Don't get me wrong we have great people on our staff. We only hire the best and the brightest. Chris and I are more than capable as well. But we want to hire a guy already critically embedded in the project. Someone who is already ingrained and won't require much training to get a handling."

Project. Critically embedded. The phrases bounced off his head and brought him back to primary school English. They were still just an amorphous, just as mysterious.

"We're offering you a job," Brian continued. "Maybe. We'd like to meet you about it, at least. You'd still be doing the same thing you are now, really. Just for us instead."

"You'd be in charge though." Chris interjected.

"Right, you'd be in charge. Come on, sweetest deal ever. Nothing changes you get better pay, and if this project is a success – and I'm confident it will be – you get a crown jewel to put on your resume. Your name at the top. Your career is made, Ash."

Ashok looked at the two men. Indeed they were young, perhaps even half his age, and clearly, they were making volumes more money than he could hope to see, probably lived in grander houses and drove foreign imported cars. They spoke efficiently, and knew what they were doing. He, on the other hand, was clueless about what this offer meant, how legitimate it was. But it was just a meeting, they said.

He put a hand to his face, and felt the wrinkles across his cheeks. What had he to show for his many years toiling away? Men out of college were striding to fame and fortune in all walks. The new state senator for his district was barely thirty. Constantly he heard from his wife of the other Desi kids who were getting high, prestigious jobs right out of college, the kind that had international travel and company-paid tabs.

Chris leered from the back. "And you're getting on in the years, it looks. Retirement getting close, huh?"

"Sure," he replied. "Yes, yes." The words almost stammered from his tongue. "We can meet."

"Excellent," Brian said. "Here's my number." He handed a glossy business card. The numbers were in gold, and bumped up against his fingertips.

"Call us tomorrow, okay? I promise, you're at the threshold of a grand new revitalization."

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As he got closer to the job site, he noticed the volume of cars increasing around him. They were slowing down. Deep in his thoughts, he hadn't really been watching the road before him. But no, there it was. A massive pile up of cars, with the strobe of red and blue flashes at the far end. It was, Ashok realized, where the site was. Were they shut down, finally? All of the doctored reports, the backhanded deals, had it all finally come to a head? He lodged the car into the jam, sighed, and thought to himself, it was a relief. Perhaps it was best if the project were shut down. No more headaches, no more late nights. No more charades and handshakes and toothy smiles, behaviors that felt unnatural to him, and ones he did not have talent in at all. It was like wearing a heavy animal fur and pretending to be a primitive, unthinking beast. The sites, the stations and tracking, the half-produced train cars somewhere in a factory in the Midwest, could all be left unfinished, incomplete relics of a legacy that was never meant to be. It could join the boarded cabins, the ash-quilted empty warehouses, and the caged-off parking lots all across Baltimore, as another aspiration that was never allowed to bear fruit, to grow and become a new pillar of the town. Baltimore was that place where dreams and wishes remained eternally invoked but never granted. Ashok lamented, briefly, for this loss, and cleared a blockage he felt growing in his throat. He put his head down on the steering wheel, and heaved, letting out a booming roar that filled the car. Drops began to cover the windshield. The patter of rain took over the silence, and the truck in front of him edged forward.

In a few minutes and halt-and-go, he made it finally to the job site. The trucks and equipment were all moved to the side of the road. The entire crew had been rounded and herded to the small shelter, out of the rain, and three police officers stood before them. Most of the small work lamps they kept were turned off, instead two great floodlights shone directly in his face, and he was unable to see properly. Squinting, he made his way to his parking spot, passing a fourth cop who stood in the road, waving cars past. He saw Ashok pull to the side and ran after the car, slamming the hood with his hand. Ashok pointed toward the site, at the sticker at the corner of his windshield that cleared him to be there, but the officer slammed harder, this time the hood, and Ashok saw a hand go to the gun holster. He stopped the car and got out. The officer berated him for entering a crime scene, and Ashok bit his lip, trying not to provoke this trigger-happy idiot. The glare of the floodlights hurt his eyes and the rain water was soaking into his shirt.

He saw two figures walk up to them, another cop, and Chuck. Had he come on the wrong night? Wasn't Tuesday his shift?

"It's alright," the cop said. "He's one of the crew."

"Watch out, Ash," Chuck said. "You're gonna get killed like this." His voice was eerily grave, as if he was a doctor giving diagnosis, void of the his usual good humor. They all eased and walked back to where the rest stood.

"Chuck, why are you here?" Ashok asked. "What is going on?"

He saw Bill at the front of the group, and behind him the workers, each man's heads hung low and heavy, as if tugged to the ground by the weight of shame. He knew that look, and with it, he immediately understood why worked stopped, why Bill and Chuck were here on their night off, why an edgy policeman called it a "crime scene." But he let them speak anyway.

"It's Reggie, Ash," Chuck said. "Clipped by some drunk asshole. He's in ICU."

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The bed was cold beside him when Ashok got up that morning. His wife had already risen. Downstairs, he could hear the pressure cooker making it's searing whistle noise, and the faint smell of turmeric popping in oil. He looked at the clock, saw that it was ten minutes past the time he'd intended on waking, and pulled the covers closer over his body, luxuriating in a sensation he hadn't experienced in many years. After a few more minutes, he got up and went into the shower. With the warm water running over his back, he thought of the many mornings when he would walk through the front door, the chilly dew hitting his face as he walked to the car and started it, then let it warm as he went back inside for a quick cup of tea. Upstairs he would hear his wife wake their son, and he would be gone before she'd properly gotten him out of bed.

When he came out of the bathroom, he saw his suit laid out on the bed. It was as if some heavenly being had whisked it's way through the house, rearranging things bit by bit as if to send him through a time portal and live a life that had left him so long ago.

He dressed as quick as he could, but as he struggled to put on the tie, a task that had always frustrated him so much, his wife walked in, as if on command, and clawed at the twisted knot that chocked him. Without a word, she undid the entire thing, and refastened the loop. She always knew somehow, despite never having worn one herself, the right ratio of thin end to thick, the exact taut to wrap around. Silently, he watched her in the mirror, the back of her head staring back at his face. He saw wrinkles he hadn't known before across his temples and forehead, and made himself believe that one the other side of that greying scalp, his wife was still as young and fair as the day they'd circled the we

Only once the tie tightened against his neck did she speak.

"When will you be back home?"

"Well, it goes late into the night, I think."

"I will wait for you," she said.

"Don't worry yourself," he said, looking still at the scalp in the mirror

"Who said anything about worrying? It's nothing for me to wait a few hours to eat. Look at me, I don't need too much food anyway."

She still held onto the tie, fiddling with the knot, as if it was a work of art still incomplete.

"The tie is good," he said.

"It needs to be perfect."

He dared to look down at her. It was not the vision he expected; there were no tears, no somber trembles in her lip. She looks only at his neckline, discerningly, meticulously. It was here he realized, in these simple adornments, that her life lay. It was in the right amount of spice in the dinner, the creaseless shirts stacked in the closet, the ice-temperate attitude when he walked through the door, despite what kind of day he had had.

"If tonight goes well," Ashok said. "We will be set for the rest of our lives."

"Don't talk like a big shot. Just do your job."

"That's all I've been doing, all of these years. Can't you see where it's gotten us?"

"We are still alive aren't we? Isn't that good enough?" Her hands shrunk away from him. He looked back in the mirror, at the head that dipped slightly, and the at his own face, questioning whether this was the image that would lead the city to new prosperous heights. The face that looked back at him was worried, unsure, and perhaps not even fully understanding of what was ahead. The body before it, shrunk before him.

He felt her warmth collapse against his chest. He put an arm around her, perfunctorily, and waited as the sobs ensued. They had not come for a long time. They had built up, and now they flowed like levees undone. He closed his arm tighter, and as he did she clutched his back. A wail muffled against his body, and he felt it absorb into him. It was a shared pain, he knew. Not because they felt it at the same time, but because just as one managed to break the surface, the other would succumb to its depth.

His put his other arm around her and closed his eyes, so as not to see her heaving back in the mirror. It made his stomach wither to see her in pain. When it happened, and it had not for some time, he never knew how to react. For him, the pain was cast out into a dark pit that he'd refilled with dirt and left unmarked. He knew only how to shrug it away and move on. But she reveled in it, accentuating the hurt and soreness, like some inverted massage.

When she was finished, he let go. She folded the rest of the clothes she had sitting on the bed, and told him tea was waiting on the kitchen table. "Get it now before it cools off."

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"Ok, I'm gonna say a few words and then I'll have you go on and you do, you know, your little Q and A or whatever you have to say."

The delegate turned from Ashok and went out of the tiny hallway that housed the bathrooms, and into the main interior of the bagel shop where this week's town hall had not begun.

While the delegate still had every one's attention in shaking hands and smiling and waving, Ashok swiftly took out a flask and sipped heavily. His shirt was soaking from the inside, and he cursed himself for ever accepting this job. Had he known he would have to be the company mouthpiece, for that alone he would have declined.

The only time that Ashok had ever made a public speech was when he was little boy in school, and one day in literature class his teacher had forced every one to recite one of *slokas* from the Bhagavad Gita. His had been short, but still made him a nervous wreck, so much so he went in his pants. The teacher saw it and puled out his wooden ruler, the kind with the steel edge on one side that was meant for drawing proper, aligned lines, but was used in this classroom primarily for striking the valleys between naughty knuckles. He thankfully made it through the rest of school without ever having to bother with such a charade again, until he found himself in Mithibai College when he struck a friendship with a girl who was in the drama troupe. he accompanied her to rehearsals but balked at ever joining in, despite her urging, and after awhile she called him a *funtoos* and drifted away.

He thought now about her, while standing inside a bagel shop that had stayed open past its closing time ad packed in dozens of the local Jewish folks, young and old, some in the Orthodox all-black dress, others relaxed and casual, but all rambling to each other like it was a session of parliament. Ashok wondered if he'd ever tried out for one of street plays they always put on, promoting Gandhi's axioms and ethics of Brahma, maybe this wouldn't be such a calamity.

The delegate was saying more than a few words. No matter. Ashok took another heavy sip.

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Abdi had walked into the bagel shop and immediately walked back out. Walking toward it, he could see through the window that it was filled with old, white people and that if he even dared come through the door, the adjacent tables and packed patrons would part and back away. He could, sure, find a small corner and lodge himself there and hope no one would look back from time to time, wondering why this city boy had come to their community power hour. Or, he could have skirted around and kept at the edge of the crowd, and they would have certainly wondered whether he was either going to rob the place, or simply a druggie trying to pawn a stale, musty bagel for dinner.

Instead, he stood outside and smoked several cigarettes under one of the columns that held up the strip mall, cloaking himself in the shadow. Through the window, he saw an old balding man speaking to the crowd, and postulating with his hands, expressing so many different band stands to gain support. *The trains will add jobs. The trains will ruin our fair neighborhoods. The trains are a strain on our taxes, which could be used for so much – the roads, the police department, the schools!*

Abdi wished he could have talked Stella into coming here, somehow. He was convinced that she'd somehow played a trick on him, that she wanted to test him and see how well his mental fortitude could carry him into the lion's den of these old golfers and crochet knitters and Hebrew school children. He replayed the meeting in his head, back in Red Emma's with him and Stella and Jackson and Joaquim and a few others sitting around in a circle delegating who would picket where. Every one got all the nice, pulpy city locations. Places where people where angry and raging, like that scene in *Network* where the news audience of New York started screaming out of their windows into the storming city streets. Stella got to down to the waterfront neighborhoods, because that's where the white people were and all agreed she was the only one who could get them to listen. Stella was like a wild predator, once she bit in she didn't let go. All she needed was that two-second eye contact and she could hook any pedestrian into an intense debate. She didn't even bother with the clipboard or the t-shirt. They were just huge signals for people to cross the block, she said.

Abdi was different. He rarely got any one to stop, and when he did, he flubbed the script that they all learned. He'd told it Momma from memory, without any preparation. But out there on the street, when he was trying to flag down a blonde in pink pants and bug-eye sunglasses, or the moonlighting touch football player, saliva dripped from his mouth and his lip quivered to say "Hi, do you have a moment to talk about the new metro line?"

She would say no and he would shrug and wait for the next denial. It felt to him sometimes, though he dared never speak of it at the weekly meet, that no one seemed to *really* care. Sure, there were the signs and online newsletters and the grassroots so deep he thought the roots ought to be poking into the subway tunnels by now, and still a majority of the city went through life with the same languid motions of standing in the coffee line, slowing too quickly at yellow lights, checking their watch at the bank. Everyone was in a constant state of complaint over the shitty waiters, the shitty tastes, the shitty roads, the shitty politicians, the shitty shittyness, and who could be bothered to do anything about it?

Joel once addressed this: "It doesn't feel like it's getting done."

He was outside with Abdi, trading off his last cigarette. He was a guy who shared everything, believing that one's own moral and spiritual constitution grew by adding the fluids of others. He'd grown up eating the Eastern style, with big pots at the center and a family of eight picking at it with their fingers.

"We're busting it out there every day, man. You tell me. You feel like you're making a difference?"

"To be honest," Abdi said, "I never really assumed we would make a difference."

At this, Joel laughed, then nodded silently. He agreed only too much to that. "Well, why do it, then?"

"I guess tricking myself into thinking it is better than not. I don't see life changing any time soon."

Joel enjoyed the comment so much he let Abdi finish the cigarette. He was that way of open source, one who'd digest another's words one day, and then the next would repeat it verbatim, part of his own neo-collective lexicon. Abdi wondered why no one seemed to mind. Sooner or later he'll pirate a pure original thought, and the owner would be infuriated, not getting to unveil it himself. Joel believed only in the ownership of the body, and anything that came out of it was the public crop for harvest.

It didn't matter who got it done, as long as it got done for everybody else.

This, Abdi kept telling himself as a cold wind swept through the street, and until finally he was shaken by one of the construction workers, a big bearded man with a pony tail and a Marine Corps tattoo on his arm. Abdi stared at it, thinking how he could stand a bare arm in this cold. The man, not interested in waiting for him to ponder, lifted him effortlessly and held him by the shoulders until Abdi found footing. He'd been sitting for so long it took a bit for the blood to rush down his calves and into his feet.

“Go home, son,” the man said. “You got a home to go to?”

Abdi moved his head up and down vehemently, so much so the bearded man was confused and asked, “what, that a yes?” But by now blood had coursed its way all through Abdi, and his regained his wits, and his temper.

“Fuck you think I said? Back up!” He pushed the man off him.

Bill was a man who got shoved around regularly, whether physically or through some office jockeying. Most of the time he could shrug it off. Maisie had always warned him his girth made him extra responsible for his rage, which he never understood. He’d been the pacifist in his company, holding his gun so lightly it would slip into the swamps and Gunny made him do squats right there in he water.

But now this punk kid had thrust both open palms, in one spasm that spelled to Bill bitter hatred, and though he wasn’t violent, what he couldn’t abide by was genuine contempt. So, he heaved the boy, with one hand, back into the building façade behind them.

Abdi felt it, and his brain seized on leaping back and hurling fists, but he was knocked with such a force that his back cracked against the brick, and the thought dissipated.

“You okay, son?” the man asked. “Sorry. Don’t push a brother, y’know?”

“Fuck you,” Abdi spat. The saliva soaked into the Bill’s beard. “You ain’t my brother.”

“No I’m not,” said Bill. He walked backward, off the curb, and turned back the trucks.

“Fuck you, piece of shit. What you waiting for? Come at me, son. Come at me!”

And Abdi stood at the corners screaming for a few more minutes, until the sun had finally set, and the crew turned on the giant floodlights that cast so wide the streetlight sensors didn’t trigger on. He stood in the darkness, on the street corner, watching them dig and haul dirt, and left. At the first sewer drain he passed, he slid his sign through the grate, and pissed down it because it made him feel he’d accomplished something.

***

He heard clapping inside, and turned to look in the window. The bald guy must be a real big talker he thought, seeing a couple of the old people bother to get up and clap. Whatever he said was the next credit in the election bank. Good for him, Abdi thought. It’s great that you can make a living out of being a smooth talker. Bogey did that. Well, Marlowe and Spade did. But Bogey smacked his tongue, with that wonderful lips he had. Of course the ladies swooned. It was that easy.

Abdi thought he should bounce before everyone hobbled out the front, but proceedings weren’t done. Another man had taken the stage. A brown man with a familiar face, and Abdi in that moment suddenly wished he knew more brown men, so many he could barely keep track of who was who and worry it about it later.

***

The boy who'd died was brown. He was as Abdi had seen him, but when he walked into the court, shuffled in front of a judge whose bald head peeked over stacks of depositions in rainbow of white, yellow, and pink, suddenly the boy wasn't colored in any way. He was from the suburbs, he was from a family that considered themselves above any trappings of the minority.

In the marble hallway, outside the room, he'd heard the mother scream at him: "You people are all the same! Filthy, reckless!" The words echoed down the crowded courthouse.

He wasn't fazed by hearing such things. But what shocked him was that no one else was either. He was black, sure, but what did that make this brown woman, dressed in a drab, faded sari? He'd only seen them once, on an old Flashman book cover. That woman's sari was bright and lustrous and beautiful. This woman wore hers like a second skin; like she had been born with such morose pigment.

His mother, on the other hand, was in her other Sunday best, the ones she saved for that wedding she hoped he would have sooner or later. When the judge passed the sentence, he turned to her, and found her beautiful in a way he hadn't seen her before. She wasn't crying, or holding her hand down. Instead, she looked straight ahead, back upright, in a poise he knew she was feigning, but doing well. He'd never seen her bother with appearances before. She never needed them, until now, seeing her son sent to prison. Had she wept like the brown woman, she would have considered it would be typical. "This isn't a soap opera," she would've said. had she screamed and raged, he would have gone to jail in that same way, and perhaps not made it to the other end in one piece.

But he wished she had at least looked it him, given a hand to his shoulder or hand, and had she even made the gesture to do so, even if she couldn't connect as the bailiff wrangled his wrists and pushed him through the back door behind the judge's bench, he could have at least known she was happy he wasn't the one who died. That she knew what the brown woman had lost, and how lucky she was. But that she didn't, Abdi now only guessed what she thought.

***

When he got home, supper was on the table. Momma still believed in suppers. Dinners were feasts for the family. Suppers were private, intimate. When Momma made supper, he knew that she wanted to talk real.

It was fish soup, something completely foreign to her, but what she'd picked up form the Jewish woman who'd lived above her apartment when she was a little girl, back when the Whites still hung around the city. Abdi grew up on it, with healthy dollops of hot sauce, and when he tried the real thing at Estelle's house, from her Grandma's old country recipe, he spit it back n the bowl.

"Got you a job," Momma said.

Abdi took two big spoonfuls of soup. Then he said, "Why'd you do that?"

"You want it or not?"

"I don't want you to help me. I can get my own."

"Have you?"

He ate more soup.

"So shut up and go see Uncle Larry at the Country Club on Sunday. And I don't wanna hear any back talk about wearing a penguin suit and serving food to the rich people."

"It's demeaning, Ma."

He didn't feel the sting of her palm until after her had had already returned to her spoon.

"What you mean, demeaning? Like that, like momma giving you a couple slaps like you're a little kid? Demeaning, like living in this garbage can? Demeaning, like I gotta see a bill for lights and water and court fees at the same time and choose which one I won't pay this month? Demeaning like that, like a mother who can't even keep her son out of trouble? Like looking at you and wondered what happened? Where'd I do it wrong? I didn't did I? I did it right. I did, didn't I? Or what, you think I fucked up somewhere? Tell me, you oughta know. Demeaning, like how? Like having to run away from every one I know, and then when they find me ask, 'how's your boy doing?' like he's supposed to be in college, and I gotta think of different ways to say 'The usual. You know, prison,' like that? Like I'm playing some kinda fucked-up crossword puzzle?"

A small tear of fish flesh hung at the edge of Abdi's throat. He felt the choke tightening, but didn't have the power to push it down.

"Swallow your food," Momma said. "If you don't want it, put it in a tupperware for tomorrow. I don't have time to make you anything damn new. Just eat what you got left."

***

The traincars were coming from a company in Germany, and though there was a brief moment of talk for the tam to take a trip to the factory yards in Bern, the county board urged that they save their funds for the dirt on the ground. They were sent crude photos that they poured over, trying to discern what was a door and what was a panel, where the emergency latch was hidden, and whether it was possible to have a bathroom installed for the driver. The last possibility was shot down quickly, but it only brought the greater headache of having to negotiate with the transit worker's union about the higher pay raises they would surely demand.

At each of these meetings, Ashok was called upon as an avatar of the project administration. As was Vishnu across the ages, he thought, taking form where and when it was required of him, he was malleable to the situation. In the depths of a galactic flood he became an extraterrestrial boar, and when man battled with his brothers, he too became a wise and knowledgeable warrior. All of these though, pretense he felt, hoping that if he could keep abreast of it all long enough the trains would finally roll and he could sit back and perhaps take himself away to another project.

The time seemed right; at home his wife was becoming more lively. She began cooking more elaborate dinners. Rather than simple roti and vegetable, the table was set with more options, including various pickles and sweets like kulfis and gulab jamouns for dessert. He ate these relish, and she quickly saw as much.

"I know I have not made them in so long," she said once.

"Yes," he replied.

"I'm sure they taste even better when you have not had them for several years."

He dared not mention how he had had them many times, not by her hand, but stolen under her nose from restaurants for lunch, from a housewarming party they had attended some years ago for a friend who moved away to Pennsylvania, and always when he passed, from the refrigerator at the Pakistani Grocery nearby the MTA headquarters.

"You could pack up some of them for me. I think my coworkers would like to eat them."

"Like who?"

"Any of them."

"Tell me about them. You never tell me about your job."

"You never seem interested."

"It's not my job to be interested without reason. But if you tell me, I will listen."

He told her about Bill and George. Of Steve he mention cursory details and of Reggie he said nothing. The day of Reggie's funeral she had called the office to tell him the air conditioning had broken in the house but he was not there to pick it up. When he got home he found her sitting inside, beside the patio door, fanning herself with the newspaper and drinking a glass of lemonade. She looked at peace in a way he had not seen her in sometime. Perhaps never, really.

She kept asking questions, about the machinery. How did it run, by petrol or steam or electric battery? How many tons of rock could it lift? How deep can it drill? Could it lift a car, or an airplane? He gave her the answers one by one, and as he saw her lean closer with zeal to hear further, he went into deeper detail, as if recounting old war stories – the dates and numbers, colors and smells or dirt and undergrowth, and tales of then those machines became heroes in the field.

He told her then one day, about the meetings he went to, how droll an rote they were. He asked if she wanted to come to one of them, just to see how they are. Since she was so interested. She said no. She was not interested in watching men argue and prattle about useless points on a report. It was in India that she worked for a brief year as a clerk in the municipal court, this was after they had married and before they had come to the States, and she knew what bureaucracy was too well.

When they'd first arrived they'd discussed, though the child was still newborn, her getting a job. She had a general degree in social sciences, which in India meant an overview understanding of agrarian to urban lifestyles, of religious scruples between Hindu and Muslim, of the ways Ministers are elected and criminals executed. She knew her own country in its most grittiest ways, but of this new land very little. She once went to the store for yogurt, and brought instead ricotta cheese because she only saw them in the smaller fist-sized cups in flavors like guava and banana-strawberry. When Ashok asked her why, she said it was because "Perhaps they use a different word here, you never know."

She constantly questioned the veracity of all things around her. Could be, she thought, that driving on the left was more dangerous than the right, or that baseball was just a money scam over an actual sport. She had read that somewhere she knew, but when Ashok shook it away as the paranoia of a new immigrant, she could not think of where it had been.

Of the baby, alone at home with him learning to take steps, she wondered if the world was safe for him to explore. Sharp edges cut out of the legs of the dining table and the metal strips on the floor at the threshold between the kitchen and dining room in their small apartment.

When he cried, she did not know what to feed him, because the cheap food seemed unnatural, out of a can. Or even cheaper, from a wax wrapper at the hamburgers restaurant across the street. When he finally got onto his feet, it was a cold outside that she had never known, that shred her lips apart and settled in her bones. Still, she wrapped him up in three layers of t-shirts and a jacket they found at the goodwill store, and took him outside to make tracks in freshly fallen snow. The power had stacked up to his knees, and though he did not enjoy it, she hoped these would be the first steps to acclimate him into a country he would know better than she.

As he got older, more and more seemed to confuse her when it should have been the opposite. She could not tell why he would not take to so much spice or garlic, why he did not want to wear his pants waist so high or his hair so parted.

***

When Ashok came down the next morning he did not see the tie, he did not see the bag, he did not see the chai, He was just able to scramble down the stairs so quickly, still in his white linen pyjamas, to his wife scuttling out of the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"It is today, isn't it?" she said, as if he had forgotten. But in doing so she inflected all the same, how for the past five years she would take off on her own. For a full day, Ashok would let her be, free from any tether of the household. At first he pleaded, why, on this day of all, to live in such a cloud of solace where she could be so susceptible to the wills of her own despair. But no, she would say, she was going to temple, where she will not be alone, and where gloom has no place, and he would see her off, spiteful and jealous that she had found détente while he carried on with his commute, with his office, embattled with his quotidian stresses, passing the day as another.

Today though, he had hoped to hold her back, to envelope her ritual into the momentum of good luck that had somehow befallen them these past months. He thought she'd had some magical fortitude to carry on as she had, seemingly with no friends, no hobbies, no ways of continuing life as he'd been forced to with a new project, a new site. He bit his tongue thinking of this perverse envy in her lived-in sadness.

"But no," she said. "I've already told the Priest I will be there today. He is expecting me."

"He would not mind, I think." He thought perhaps he could show her the worksite, show her the trenches clawed through the middle of Loch Raven Boulevard, or the train yard where they'd just received the new shipment of cars, having come the long circuitous route from Japan.

The sun had barely risen yet this morning, and the dew had collected at the tips of blades and leaves, the weight bending them over. Ashok wondered, and ultimately assumed, it must have been this way in the morning five years ago also. He could not know for sure, but it comforted him.

"Do you need something?" she asked. "I can stay for a bit and cook breakfast if you are hungry." She immediately took steps back into the house. Ashok let her get nearly all the way inside the door before deciding against his own wills.

"No, go ahead. I am content."

"Who will make it then?"

"Don't you think I would have learned by now?"

He said it to ease her mind, but her eyes turned cross, and instead he hung his head low and let her go back outside to the sidewalk, and watched her go to the end of street, turn the corner, and away from his sight. He went through the house to the back patio an caught her again, on the main road that ran behind their house on the other side of the palette fence, waiting for the bus whose line ended at the metro station where he kept his office, though she never got off there.

It was the only route she knew. He had told her, hoping in her lonely days she might come and visit him and pass the time. After the accident, she stopped trusting cars entirely. He took it wholeheartedly at first, and then began to think it was only an excuse to bar herself from the outside, and after some more time, an excuse from seeing him more then she already did.

***

But she did not go to the temple. At the bus stop which took her downtown she got off all the way, at the train station, and saw all her husband had talked about, and not for the first time. She saw the giant goldenrod machines and the army of sleeveless men heaving themselves deeper into the earth. Such a scene, though it was not unfamiliar in India during her childhood, the young nation still building it's new identity through this half of the century, as the America and world deconstructed itself and challenged old notions of honor and cooperation, it was still alien to her. Everything was bigger here. Not simply two tracks going one way and back, but several, splintering across even a small city like Baltimore so one man could get in and out as quick as possible, to a quiet street where they felt alone, safe, settled. Bit by bit she and Ashok had parsed such a life; the house whose deed sat at the bottom of a drawer in the closet, the money in the bank which sat, innocuously, ever promised security from the government while at home her father constantly complained about the rampant corruption and instead kept hordes of cash in a safe sitting by his bedside.

This was America then, where new things arose as soon as someone wanted them. Desire was all, and it was satiated with fervent pursuit.

She passed into the grey hollow tunnel, and like a warp hole between planes of existence, she was ushered to a platform alongside no one who wore a sari or the tilak on her forehead. It felt insidious in a way; she was not dressed honestly as the others were – over there a woman in pantsuit and sunglasses, and here those two youth with bandanas and torn jeans, brazenly letting her know they were out for trouble.

When the train came she got in with the rest, and tried to spot the closest seat lest she was not quick enough to depart; but it was crowded on the morning of a busy workday, and she found herself standing in the aisle barred by a fat man with hairs growing from his nape and again, the woman with the pantsuit, neither whom commented of asked on her dress. At parties she was commonly cited, as were all of her Indian friends, about the golden lining and deep greens and blues and oranges. But here people were busy, too besotted in their own lives, their own troubles.

Down the car she saw two old women, with mall-store bags seated on their laps. They were the only ones talking in the car, and she listened intently trying to make out what they said. It was still foreign to her, the local speech, so unlike the British-born grammar classes she took in school, which taught her "i before e" and the nature of morphed letters like "tion" standing for "shun"

Shun. Shun.

Shun. Shun Shun.

Ta-tun. Ta-tun., the tracks said.

She wondered if she thought loud enough, someone would ask her to strike conversation.

Two stops later a seat opened by her, and there was for a moment the sudden hesitation where the fat man with neck hair looked around, silently begging for relief, and though she didn't project any want of her own, he gestured for her to take it instead. She did, and then looked up to say thank you and ask his name, but seated she was suddenly cast too low for it to be a bother.

She took the train the nice neighborhood, and then again past the dirty one, and then through the one that was the former but becoming worse, until the tunnel blocked it all entirely. The city passed above her, ages since she'd seen it with her own eyes.

People departed, shuffled in and out of seats. The fat man left, and others got on. She stared at her left hand in her right, and started speaking *slokas* in hushed tones until the line reached the other end.

There she got off at the terminus, a grand railway station, and without leaving the building, bought a ticket for ten dollars further north into Pennsylvania and got onto that train.

Here she watched the city dissipate behind her into the eastern foothills of Appalachia, where in the distance tall metal towers strung electrical wires up and down to take power to small little hamlets, nested in the trees on the sides of the hills. What peace it would be, she thought, to be so far from everything else, where the rainwater could rush downward and wash all of the unneeded annoyances away.

At Pennsylvania she got off at a smaller, manageable platform where waited in the parking lot, her friend waited in her grey Honda sedan, waving from a dim glazed windshield with smile.

***

Over tea, they talked. Of times past and further back. They were friends since grammar school where it was integral they learn the difference between reversing subject and verb when

switching from Gujarati. They remembered the cool ice creams in July they picked right out of the refrigerator in the market store and had to eat immediately as it melted into the small silver-wrapped bowl. How in college they toured the country in a raas team and spent long nights in cots in trains traveling up and down the subcontinent, playing games of *teen patti*.

Of the present they discussed nothing, for there was nothing to discuss.

She wanted to remark on how her old friend had greyed at the temples and how it was not the first time she had seen that sari, and they only met but a handful of times every year.

Her promise for temple had never kept. In the initial days she had mourned so much before God that to set aside time to do so every year felt redundant, and perhaps imposing. So on the first anniversary she took instead to the coffeeshop around the corner, where she'd heard that they now sold chai lattes. What a latte was she wasn't quite clear, but it piqued her interest to know the Western world had caught up with India's confection of milk, sugar, and spices, boiled with Assam's finest leaves. But at the first sip her lips coiled. Whatever latte meant, she'd tasted it. But she sat in the shop anyway, reading a magazine someone had left rom earlier. Articles about film stars she didn't know, politics she didn't follow. It was her husband who kept up to date, as he was the one paying the bill, signing the forms.

She felt guilty and presumptuous of course, to expect so much out of him. It could not be too hard, she thought, to learn the habits of the new country. But any time she thought of America, of their first day landing at JFK, of that first time seeing the left-hand steering wheel, or that fifty dollars was a note of money not easy to come by, she thought of how those novelties had become betrayals so quickly. How every dollar that had been invested, every hustle to the bank or the post office to send off tax forms, or to the consulate downtown with it's asphyxiating traffic, trying to submit another application for green card renewal, was lost entirely in the blink of an eye.

She weighed on these thoughts for a day. She sat on them until they compressed under her, so she could store them in a small corner of her mind until again next year, when she chose instead to be adventurous. At the urging of her friend, she booked a seat on a charter bus that left early in the morning and battled the gauntlet of three state's worth morning rush to get to Atlantic City., where she had never seen so many lights in one place. Though she did not like gambling, she was convinced to try a hand at slots, and sent almost five quarters down the hole before giving up. They had French fries on the boardwalk and watched people slink by: men with holes in their tanktops and in their teeth. Woman who looked tired and upset simply as being in the heat, and sneered at the signs above trying to find the restroom. People threw cigarettes and bad language, they spat on the wood planks and at each other, they slurped down on hot dogs and popsicles and at each other. It was America, in the flesh.

The year after, she decided it would just be a simple house visit.

They ate strawberry ice cream after tea, and her stomach could not handle the excess. Her friend took out an old photo album and they ascribed the wrong names to faces, and filled each other in on who had married, who had moved overseas, and if any had died.

Out on the patio she noticed the large flowers with long yellow petals around furry buttons. She had always fancied the idea of being a garden hobbyist, and asked her friend how long it took her

to plant those. She asked her how to repair those broken shelves in the cabinets, and how to get the TV to work without having to call the cable company. All these things, which she had never had the need nor want to do before in life, suddenly became new adventures. She would never tell Ashok when he would come, for more often than not he wouldn't even notice.

The last project he had undertaken was to build a sturdy new porch in the back. Countless times he'd promised out loud, to everyone else but mostly to himself, he wanted a an old fashioned Indian *jhulai* to swing on during the summer months, to lay back and sleep away the cool nights. One of the great joys of his, hers, and every childhood in India,. He had even gone so far to call one of his friends in India and have them scout an authentic sandalwood swing from the local carpenter.

But first had to come a deck. From the day he brought the wood home, there were new setbacks pushing the nostalgic recreation further and further away. Planks were misaligned; nails drove through cracks, and Ashok nearly punctured a critical artery in his arm trying to undo a wayward chip of wood. So it went unfinished, as there was no money to continue with hired contractors. In this moment she had told him, "why not just bring some of the workers from the site? Don't they know how to do this work?"

"That's not the point," he said.

"The point is to finish it, isn't?"

"No, the point is the process. Why bother building it if we can't say we didn't do it on our own?"

"Who is we?" she said. "You have just been hammering away by yourself. You haven't asked me to help even, yet."

***

As he turned to corner to his house later that night, Abdi saw a figure walking down the pathway from his front door. From the truck parked out front he saw it was Uncle Gordy, and as odd as the hour was, he was little surprised to see him there at all.

When he walked through the front door the entire house was quiet and still, but there was a buzz in the air, as if suddenly the house had awoke and shaken the dust off the shelves and countertops, as if an invisible party was going on all around him. There was a warmth and welcome.

In the kitchen he saw the flicker of a candle cast dancing shadows out into the hallway. He crept around, wanting only to slip upstairs and jump under his covers, when Momma called out. "We'll don't stand and wait, come sit down."

He saw her sitting at the kitchen table in her silk robe, hair pulled back, smoking a cigarette and looking out the window into the alley. Her make-up hadn't been smeared, as it usually was when she got home from work.

"I didn't know you were smoking again," Abdi said.

"I figured can't lose all of the little pleasures. Sit down, now. Have one if you want."

“Are you serious?”

“No, but have one all the same. Just blow out the window.”

Abdi lit, and sat with her as they finished one, then another, and when they were on their third he finally spoke, “Those kids still out there late at night?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“They ever cause any trouble, Ma?”

“Not to me. Who knows what they’re up to though. These boys grow up they just learn liquor and cards. Can’t even count the cards but they learn enough to get all bothered over them when they lose. I can hear them arguing sometimes late at night when I’m trying to sleep. ‘I won!’ ‘No, I did!’ Then they chase each other on their bikes down the alley, and then their gone until the next night, and I just gotta hope I fall deep asleep before they start playing.”

“I can talk to them if you want.”

“You will do no such thing. No need to go rattling up another person’s business. Unless they’re hurting you directly, physically, you stay out of their business, you hear?”

“What if they’re hurting you emotionally?”

“Baby, if emotions are your own control. If you’re getting hurt inside, only you can make that go away. That’s the easiest hurt to deal with. Every thing else you have to spend money on a doctor.”

She stamped out her cigarette. “I’m tired, I’m going up. That’s your last one, you hear?”

“Yes ma’am,” Abdi said.

As she passed behind him her hand grazed his shoulder, and he caught the stale scent of old, dust-ridden perfume she must have dug up from the back of a drawer. He considered the moment that had just happened, how for the first time since coming out neither he nor she felt tense around each other, how they shared the same mental headspace, and however brief it all was, that it happened at hurt him very much inside, and he cheated and smoked one more cigarette to make it go away.

***

When he got home, supper was on the table. Momma still believed in suppers. Dinners were feasts for the family. Suppers were private, intimate. When Momma made supper, he knew that she wanted to talk real.

It was fish soup, something completely foreign to her, but what she’d picked up form the Jewish woman who’d lived above her apartment when she was a little girl, back when the Whites still

hung around the city. Abdi grew up on it, with healthy dollops of hot sauce, and when he tried the real thing at Estelle's house, from her Grandma's old country recipe, he spit it back n the bowl.

"Got you a job," Momma said.

Abdi took two big spoonfuls of soup. Then he said, "Why'd you do that?"

"You want it or not?"

"I don't want you to help me. I can get my own."

"Have you?"

He ate more soup.

"So shut up and go see Uncle Larry at the Country Club on Sunday. And I don't wanna hear any back talk about wearing a penguin suit and serving food to the rich people."

"It's demeaning, Ma."

He didn't feel the sting of her palm until after her had had already returned to her spoon.

"What you mean, demeaning? Like that, like momma giving you a couple slaps like you're a little kid? Demeaning, like living in this garbage can? Demeaning, like I gotta see a bill for lights and water and court fees at the same time and choose which one I won't pay this month? Demeaning like that, like a mother who can't even keep her son out of trouble? Like looking at you and wondered what happened? Where'd I do it wrong? I didn't did I? I did it right. I did, didn't I? Or what, you think I fucked up somewhere? Tell me, you oughta know. Demeaning, like how? Like having to run away from every one I know, and then when they find me ask, 'how's your boy doing?' like he's supposed to be in college, and I gotta think of different ways to say 'The usual. You know, prison,' like that? Like I'm playing some kinda fucked-up crossword puzzle?"

A small tear of fish flesh hung at the edge of Abdi's throat. He felt the choke tightening, but didn't have the power to push it down.

"Swallow your food," Momma said. "If you don't want it, put it in a tupperware for tomorrow. I don't have time to make you anything damn new. Just eat what you got left."

***

It surprised him, that of all the thankless jobs he'd ever done, this was the one that took the most breath out of him. Abdi limped through the front door, glad to see his mother's car absent from the front driveway. He poured himself a glass of milk and sat at the kitchen table, looking out into the back where Uncle Gordy's old, beat up Oldsmobile was finally gone. He'd left it parked there for years, and Abdi had worried it would turn into a permanent exhibit like a museum, the way he'd always seen broken, rusted pickups stationed and embedded outside trailer homes when he and Momma would make the drive out to West Virginia to see her folks. He let the cold milk drain down him; right now he had neither the strength nor will to make or chew anything. After this another glass, then time to crash. Perhaps he would pass out right there on the chair. He reclined back into it,

thatched wicker cushions and back that he never liked as a child; always cutting into his shirts. He would complain to Momma it would make small pores, but then should would wrangle it from him right there at the dinner table, invert it, and show him he was acting stupid.

Abdi realized this might have been the first time he'd sat at the table since coming back home. He took all of his meals back up to his bedroom, ate them in silence while flipping through an old comic book the first few days. When that grew tiresome, he began swiping dailies and freebie magazines wherever he could, few of them ever in his interest. There was the Latino circular, the gay weekly, and the alternative that listed all of Ricky's gigs for the week, that he could never go to because cover was ten dollars, and anyway, Momma wouldn't want him out that late.

Headlights pulled up in the spot. He heard the doors open and slam shut, followed by his mother's voice. Uncle Gordy had given her a ride back home from work. Though it ached him, he got up to look out the window, and when he peered over, he saw both his mother and uncle staring back up. They couldn't see him though, as he'd kept the lights off. They stood there talking for almost fifteen minutes in hushed tones. Abdi knew, instinctually, that it was about him. About his life now, with getting a job and landing on his feet and making him a decent man; and about his future, giving him enough money to support Momma when her legs would finally get sore and give way. These were burdens expected of him his entire life, he knew. those filial duties that had carried over from his father's ways.

Though his mother considered his father a non-issue. From what he'd read in books, his absence would have normally manifested as a spectre looming on their hardship. But rather, he'd only ever been that a person with a mustache and glasses in a an old dusty photo, packed in a box in the attic. Still, she supplanted a few choice values of his into the household. It's the only time his father would ever be mentioned, when he would complain about chores, about school, about manners.

"It's how your father was raised," she'd say.

"Weren't you, too?" he'd asked. Surely all parents came from the same responsible rearing.

"My father was a fiend and my mom took it, bruises and all, without ever thinking it was worth getting upset over. I don't have much to say about your father, but at least a absent deadbeat is better than a guy who'd beat you to death."

Abdi had once tried to find the photo, which became a bigger ordeal than he'd expected. The attic was filled with unmarked boxes, a dusty tables and chairs, a torn couch, all things he'd never known they'd ever owned. When he finally told his mother about it many years later, she said none of it was theirs to begin with; it all came with the house. Still, he'd crawled and climbed over the junk to see if he could find anything marked "photos," then realized that was useless because his mother would have never bothered to make it identifiable. He knew it was there though, blended with other vague memories; of him eating cereal for breakfast and curiously, that one time that come home with an extra mint from the restaurant and it was as if Christmas had repeated in March. Though those memories were in the vague haze, he envisaged them all from that same eye level as when he'd looked at his father, in the frame sitting on the lamp table, with heavy afro and glassy stare in a cheap tuxedo. What his mother wore, he could not recall. He knew that his mother would not

have thrown it out, for she didn't have the scorn or spite in her voice when she said "it's how your father was raised," the kind that spurned women to discard all sentiments of a fled lover. He knew his mother, having never taken another man since then, wouldn't have gotten rid of the one she did completely.

The front door opened. "I'm home," his mother announced. Abdi was too tired to turn, so he waved an arm, but Momma scolded him anyway.

"Ain't you going to say hi to Uncle Gordy?"

"Leave him be, Celia."

Abdi did turn now, because for the first time, he heard his mother's name spoken with the Spanish inflection, *sell-i-ya*, and as he turned, he saw his mom dressed well and regal, carrying herself like a queen, and she seemed another person entirely.

"Have you asked him?" she said, looking squarely at her son.

"Me?" said Uncle Gordy.

"Don't be silly. I told him. I guess you didn't, huh?"

"I was going to," Abdi said.

"Ask him now, why don't you?"

"What, about the job? Don't worry about it now, Celia."

"I got a job," Abdi said.

"Doing what?" Momma asked.

"Giving out flyers. For Pastor Robinson."

"Flyers?"

"Church flyers."

"And what's he paying you to do that?"

"What does it matter? It's a job, isn't it?"

She turned to Uncle Gordy, who walked over and sat down in the other chair at the kitchen table next to Abdi. He put a hand on his shoulder, as he'd done many times over the years, trying to give sound advice to the maturing boy. It was something his mother had never asked of him, but Uncle Gordy had done anyway, perhaps because, Abdi thought, he didn't have any kids of his own, because he'd always been jolly and loved life, and thought promoting good fortune was a duty of any average joe. At times Abdi thought he looked like a buffoon, smiling and patting him on the back for insignificant things, like getting an A on the ten-times tables quiz in third-grade math, or that first time he lifted all of the groceries from Momma's car in one trip. Faint praise that he'd never cared for back then, thinking he was too above and matured for it.

***

It was like that scene from *Casablanca* in reverse, Abdi told himself. He had never been any good at revisiting situations that he left in haste, in anger, in awkwardness. But when he went through the door of Red Emma's, the look on Stella's face almost made him hyperventilate and crumble where he stood.

He managed to make it to the counter though, and took a seat. Stella still stared at the cuts on his face. She reached out and stroked her hand all over, exerting a light pressure on the wounds that felt good, like a massage. His felt his face withering, relieving some of the stress he'd carried around for the past few days.

When Ricky had seen him, the theories had flown out of him like an old barfly. Did he get in a fight at the pool hall? Did he run into those boys from MS-13? Was it drunk Archie coming around the corner when he wasn't looking? When Abdi told him the truth, Ricky squealed and offered a high five. "Don't care if it was another guy," he said. "At your rate, this is the closest you've been to laid."

"Yeah, well. it's hard to find a woman when you don't have money."

"What, free? You're not old yet, boy. Work that charm."

"Charm? I look like Mike Tyson over here, except I don't have the muscles to make up for it."

"So find someone who doesn't care about your looks."

Abdi's mind went straight to Stella. It wasn't that she hadn't had her vain moments when they were first together. Their first date, she'd dragged him to the mall and pointed out all of the expensive clothes and jewelry and make-up cases he can buy her. At the time, part of him felt she did it on purpose as a tease, knowing he never could. The other part of him just went along with it in hopes of getting action. But even as they continued seeing each other, in pre-configured locations where no one she knew would ever shop, and everyone else wouldn't stare at them, she never failed to make a point of her wealth. On a walk in Patterson Park, she went "ew" at the row houses one side of the green and compared them to the other side as "not as bad, but still so ghetto." When he asked her to that house party in Arbutus, she asked him if they were going to get chopped with an ax or a chainsaw.

Those times when she wasn't willing to drive out of the way, he would take the light rail that cut through the center of the city, and take it to the end where the horse farms and mansions were just a mile away up in the hills. She would meet him in dad's Mercedes, and they would frisk each other's clothing and lock tongues, squirming around on the backseat leather. If he had some pot they would smoke it in the mall parking lot, where there were no cops because there were no more stores in the mall; looters would ride the light rail up, swipe what they could, and hop on the next train before security even got the report. She choked on every blunt and he called her a lightweight. This was how, he thought now, she first started growing a thick skin; where she first started to put together a repertoire of comebacks and jabs.

One time he gave the crash course in his brand of swagger, his de facto disposition. She learned twenty-seven slang words for coke, ten for pot. She learned carnal acts that nearly made her vomit, and asked Abdi if he'd ever done any of those. He said "no" immediately, then wondered how much of a pussy this made him look like. He also told her why women shouldn't be so offended at *that* word, because "it's just because we like you that much. We just use extreme words."

Then there was Ricky's first gig. He told her he was playing a bar on the water, and instead brought her fifty feet within the small empty warehouse hidden under 1-83, before she screamed and demanded he drive her back home. He sat upright in dad's fancy-pants car the whole way back, afraid to let his shoulder blades touch the back of the seat.

"I'm hungry," she said on the way. "Can we stop at a drive-thru?"

"What about home?"

"I just didn't want to go in there. I'm not in a rush to go home, either."

She put her hand on his leg. He swiped it off.

"Well, that's where I'm going," he said.

"Oh don't be like that. That place was freaking sketchy. You lied to me."

"Sorry."

"No you're not. You can't take that back, anyway. You already did it."

"What do you want from me? I *am* sorry now. I got to be sorry to Ricky tomorrow, when I see him."

"You want to go back? Let's go, then. Fine."

This is what angered him the most. He knew getting into this he had to deal with the prissiness, the antics, and the fear bubble that kept her divorced from any place that didn't have a bright sign with neon lights. But here, on the highway, as the passed the last towering lamp that marked the line between city and county, where he couldn't turn and was too far to go if he wanted to, he heard her words plainly and simply as a dare, an attack on his manhood.

There in the darkened road, where the county curiously had less money than the city for freeway lighting, Abdi took a hard right, thrusting the car toward the stone barrier.

Stella, too fazed and tired, didn't notice it until they were almost a foot away, and when he saw he face drain all color and lose any muscle to shriek, he tugged hard back onto the road, and drove soundly.

She panted a few times, then looked sideways through a mane of frazzled strands.

"Asshole," she said.

"Bitch," he said.

The rest of the ride to the mall parking lot was dead and still. They raced to undo their belts and get out of the car first. He parked sideways, out of white lines, so he could walk directly from the car door to the train platform without having to turn around. He did see her though, driving off on the other side, before he'd even bought his ticket. She passed under the light, just quick enough for him to get his last look at those golden locks.

The next day, heartbroken, he knocked on Ricky's door. Ricky would not see him. He had to drink his sorrow out alone.

***

Life was nearing steady. Abdi now had conversation to make with his mother at the table, where she let him eat cereals she'd never bother buying when he was young, back when it was bacon, eggs, and other one-bite meals that held steady in his belly so he could not complain about being hungry at school. She was now suddenly, a great fan of tea since a woman at work had told her it helped to relax. The women at work told his mother many things, and she abided by most of them: there were new shampoos and soaps in the bathroom, recipes stuck to the fridge door with a magnet of Abdi's middle school PTA which she'd never attended and he'd never brought any glowing report cards to hang up with. She chose to walk to work when the weather was well, and took up knitting. There was regiment in the house now; laundry was every Saturday morning and church on Sundays. Wednesday night was volunteering with the community center. Habits that, Abdi regretfully realized, she could afford to take up when there wasn't an extra body to feed.

She would share these stories at the table, as if she was just waiting for someone to listen. And Abdi did listen, taking it all in silently while thinking of something to offer back. But there was little; to go into the myriad of small failures and falls he took at the country club would require a detailed history of the people, the processes, many of which he hadn't even cared to memorize.

Larry the floor director was curt and direct. Things had to happen when they were supposed to, and there was no room for slack. The other night Abdi had been standing next to the dumb waiter while dishes piled up in the door behind him, but he hadn't even been told there was anything behind that small cupboard door to watch out for. He was demoted quickly to the backroom staff, which served him just fine, since that was where the interesting conversation happened, Darnell and Corey always sharing a yarn about the characters they met on the bus getting to the club. Abdi rode with Gordy, who kept to himself and rarely made eye contact during events. Gordy was front house staff, and was taking a bartending course at BCCC to snag that gig for the tips.

There was rarely anything to report about the flyering he was doing for the Pastor either, though when Momma asked he always had a canned answer ready: "It's not very exciting work, but it gives me time to read a little bit." She liked that, and she could never check him too much on whatever phantom scripture he claimed to be studying.

So mornings and nights passed, the son unable to communicate anything to his mother, who before now seemed to have never had a life outside of errands and frustration.

The Pastor pried Abdi constantly to talk about his time in prison. "Talking helps put your burdens out into the world, son. The more you do that, the more the world will have to bear the plight that our young men have to deal with. We are an industry to the government, you see? The

more of us they keep locked up, the more money the prisons make. They make one hundred dollars a day on every person in one of those cells, do you know?"

Abdi would nod at all of the statistics the Pastor would throw out, and though he did not believe them, he too knew he couldn't all truthfully say the idea was false.

"People are just looking for your story, boy. What about the other boys who were in that car? What were they? White boys. Do you see them in jail? Did they even get arrested, or questioned? No, you were behind the wheel. It's always dangerous to be a colored man behind the wheel of a car."

Abdi asked if this was why the Pastor drove such an expensive car.

"I get stopped all the time. Broad daylight or night, cops asking me how much I've drank, how much I've smoked. Where I'm coming from and where I'm going. They want to know my whole life story without even bothering to read my license, which would tell them all they need to know. They could see I live out in White Marsh, with a nice big house and two other very nice cars. They would see, if they wanted to. You hear?"

It was moments like this, when the Pastor got heated, that Abdi would pick up traces of an accent, Jamaican or something. Behind the pulpit, his voice was booming and heavy, so much so that it weighted down on his syllables, and the language disguised him from being anything other than the boy of the streets. But Abdi chose to build a backstory, that he'd escaped from one of those small island nations ruled by dictators who sent large crops of sugar cane and marijuana and pocketed the profits. That he'd come from a small village where the only reputable building was a chapel overlooking a sea or a valley between mountains, and he'd been caught doing bad things in a place where a stint in jail couldn't guarantee another few years of comfortable life on the state's wallet.

He wanted to believe that he wasn't the only one with a chequered past, not just from brushes with the law but one with a blood and history that ran deep and across oceans.

"Where do you think the Pastor's from?" he asked over a quiet Sunday lunch at the Ruby Tuesday on the harbor. Another new ritual, to spend money on Sunday lunch after church – a frivolity that his mother wouldn't have entertained before.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I can remember Pastor Martin. And then he got kicked out for something. I don't know what. I think I was only ten or something at the time, but I always thought there was some kind of scandal there."

Momma put her fork down, which had cleaned off already a pull plate of salad, and now that it was gone she still scraped the bottom for drops of ranch dressing before she would get up for another. She looked hurt, perhaps because her own son had found it necessary to cite his age

"I don't really remember why he left. I don't know where this new one came from either."

And such were still the moments when it was clear she was refusing to take the conversation further. The dynamic was clear; she got to talk, while he listened. He did not have many useful things to say if it did not help with the bills or his health.

***

The tradition of the wandering beggar thrives in most cities around the world. Like roaming rhapsodist they travel in the early mornings and late night hours acting like roosters in concrete streets that have none.

Old Moe was one of these such beings. There he was, always with the same Walkman that had not left his hip since before Clinton was president with a mixtape whose origins were lost – who'd made it and why? Was it for him or had he simply found it stuck in the little plastic tray, waiting for him in that gutter or on the bus stop bench where the portable jukebox had been left to wither? In any case, the tape had almost never run out, for he'd managed to play the same rotating playlist of Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, The Gap Band, and Earth Wind and Fire, mistaken to no one who passed him on the street as he played it so loud it usually hit your ears before his voice. And where did he get the batteries? This most people unconsciously assumed, he must have just purloined from the corner store, or at least saved up to buy from the errant coins he found as well on the street, because over food or cigarettes or smack he always, without fail, never lost the music pounding his ears from both sides. And truth was no one really cared. Every man needs his drug. He would stand at corners and under bus shelters, and in the middle of parks littered with used fast food bags and buds and emptied dime bags, dancing to his own enjoyment, lost in the rhythms of a decade ago, unhinged and unconnected with the world that passed him by.

A more discerning, concerned observer, though there were few, and usually those families driving in and out of town for a game at Camden Yards or a Saturday afternoon stroll in the Harbor, would look at him and wonder how could he live a life with such disorder? But Old Moe found his maps through life. There was the summer when an enterprising business man wrangled him to selling newspapers outside Hopkins, and it was in those hot three months he learned more than he ever had, taking in headlines about City Hall corruption and homicide victims who were being treated in the grand multi-million dollar doctor's office behind him. But he gave up the gig after he wasn't selling as much to make the businessman happy, and as with the nature of current events, he was again loosened from having a grip on the daily lives of the people who shared the city with him. It sparked an interest for him to seek out further literature. He'd not been so successful in giving it out, but there was no reason he couldn't be on the receiving end. and so he migrated pamphlets. People love giving out pamphlets, he thought to himself, people of all color and creed. There was the missionaries who advertised their church with bright golden lines surrounding crosses to make it look as if it was glowing of the page. That was nice, he always appreciated an effort in the art work. Some wanted him to know about their next community food drive or toys for Christmas, and while these flyers weren't as flashy, but he admired the intention so he took it anyway. He liked menus a lot, and would spend hours developing his fantasy meal from the corner takeouts, and imagine the combinations of how dishes could taste: fish sandwiches with eggrolls, gibblets with pig feet, French fries and apple pies, delicacies his mind's tongue assumed went down pretty okay with liberal helpings of ketchup and a sweet tea from the can to wash it down.

The other week however, he'd been down the Lexington Market subway station. He'd slipped by the turnstile, having spent glorious hours watching the bodies rush through and timing exactly right just how close he'd have to grope against a stranger's ass to make it through, the entire time fearing his leg would get caught in a vice and his bones smashed in two. But he made it through,

following a large woman with a large bag of groceries who wore a nice perfume and a polka-dotted dress that ate into her curves. He figured if he did, as his fears kept telling him, get his body caught in the turnstile and perhaps snapped in two, he could always blame on her inability to move quickly, and perhaps she'd have to pay for his week's stay in the hospital as he recuperated. But he made it through, and weighing the options of which way he wanted to travel, out into the county or down to the end of the line at the hospital, the sat down on the hexagonal wooden bench and watched the trains go by. He considered whether it was worth trying to snuggle into the alcove beneath the escalator for the night, but he'd tried that once about a year back and the cops had taken him to the holding cell for the night, which wasn't too bad a lodging but the other characters in there traded drugs and arranged meets for the next night when they'd be left free, and he'd wanted no part in that nasty business. For awhile the tried counting the cars for each train, but they passed so quickly, and instead he took to people watching through the windows, hoping perhaps to see a pretty girl or maybe a couple engaged in sexual acts. He'd heard those things happened on trains. At mid afternoon, he'd been there for the better part of three hours, or so he guessed. He'd come in with the lunchtime rush and now there was another deluge of the butchers and fish hawkers above going home for the day. They rammed into each other trying to get in and off the train. Some thrust their bags into the doors to stop them from closing entirely, and others would just stand and watch them close, then spend the ten minutes griping about the unfairness of time until the next train came.

In all of this, once the dust cleared and another cattle car was loaded and shipped down into the dark tunnel, he saw it fluttering around in the subterranean breeze: another pamphlet. It seemed divine almost, answering his own unreasonable decision to hold down there without a destination. It was bright yellow like a bird, and carried the dusty print of a sneaker, whose force had almost flattened the tri-fold. What a shame, what a shame. He pressed down on the creases, once and then a second time, until it had it's original shape, able to sit upright next to him on the bench, and once he was satisfied it was rejuvenated, he lay back on the hexagon to read. It didn't all too much sense.

It didn't seem to be selling him anything, or slipping him the scoop on an upcoming fair where he might be able to get free samples of food. There was a list of street names, and arrows that looped around and back up and down the page. It was an address book, maybe, or a treasure hunt. Or a little black book of mistresses. Old Moe had found his new adventure in any case, except now he had to figure out how to get to all of theses addresses. His knowledge of the city streets was poor at best. He was a man who found his way around by sight and recognition; church spires and corner gas stations that called out to him like longing lovers. To him, the city had always been like traversing the body of a good woman, whose curves and cervices could lead a blind man to never want to see again?

***

Today was a different day on the corner. Old Moe had returned. Old Moe had been there Abdi's entire life, hanging out on a few stoops but never grazing too far from the corner. From the start, it seemed to Abdi he knew everybody, and so it as only until later as a teenager when he began wondering why Old Moe never actually had a home of his own, and by then it seemed too late for him to bring up a point that clearly the rest were well aware of.

Old Moe wore the same faded, paint-stained nylon coat, winter or summer with popper buttons and a hood that sucked his angled head into a shroud. In the warmer months, he would wear

nothing under it. He never had any money of his own, save for a handful of coins that jingled in one of his coat pockets. He attested to anyone who asked that he wasn't broke, that he wasn't a beggar. But he would always be at a stoop that didn't belong to him when Abdi went to sleep at night, and there again the next day, all day.

He always managed to have food as well, despite having no serious income. Abdi would come across him holding a white Styrofoam take out box, filled either with fries and fried chicken, greasy pepper steak, or a filet sandwich. He would hold it open, exposed to the elements while ranting to anyone who listened about his latest adventure.

They would always be benign tales of getting into shout matches with this or that nigga about whether the Chevy was a better car than a Oldsmobile, or whether Michael Jackson was beyond his time. Grander tales snuck in. Moe was occasionally sought after the police for robberies he claimed not to have committed, though no patrol cars ever turned onto the street. There was the time he snuck into the Ravens locker room, and snapped a towel on Tony Siragusa's ass.

Abdi heard these through his window, and despite his zeal, never approached closer.

When he was in Hagerstown, the thought of Old Moe had come to him late one night, when another inmate was moaning in his cell somewhere else in the vast building. He thought of Moe, who he could hear sometimes late at night, rapt in conversation. He'd gotten up once, muscles tight at the bottom of his foot to avoid any creak that would wake his mother, and saw out of the window that Moe wasn't talking to any one at all. He had a pair of headphones across his head, and shimmed on the sidewalk back and forth.

Moe's absence since Abdi's return had been one of the many, tiny, unsettling changes that had nagged him, just as Stella's new firebrand attitudes, just as Momma's reticent tones, just as the occasional suit-and-tie developer walking the block and appraising lots.

That morning, with the chill hanging before his mouth, he approached Old Moe, holding a white styrofoam box and a can of knock-off root beer. Moe eyed the box, but briefly, and then close his eyes again stuck into the loop.

"What are you listening to?"

Moe didn't take. Abdi repeated the question.

Moe started shimmying backward. "Good man, Michael, son."

He took the headphones off of his head and placed them on Abdi's, and while the stun of "Rock With You."

***

Old Mo had been around. He had gone up and down, inside and out of the city and seen parts Abdi had only caught in far corners the newspaper column, or in passing conversation by one of the neighborhood boys who'd gone to visit a cousin who lived not far enough to really leave but enough for a nice vacation.

"This is what we've been looking for," Stella said. "This is our fucking ace card."

"With what?" Abdi said. "It's not like some state secret."

"God, think to the future, man! Some of them haven't even broken ground yet. That gives us our opportunity. We get to those communities first and begin flyering and campaigning. Get them ready so that when the shovels come, they will be totally against it."

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On the days he wasn't with Stella, Abdi would be hocking pamphlets for Pastor Robinson. He would leave the church every day with a box packed to the brim, about a hundred or so he gathered, and by the end of the day he'd have given away a handful, and the rest he'd tossed into the nearest wastebasket.

"God's Light is at the end of a tunnel…and that tunnel leads to Emancipation Baptist!" it read, blazoned on the front page. On the other side there were pictures of a full congregation, rapt in Sunday service. An image that at this point, was a fantasy entirely. Abdi squinted at the picture because he thought perhaps his mother was one of the women singing gospel, but the printing was of terrible quality, and he couldn't make it out for sure.

On the other side of the street he would always see Old Moe, rocking out to his Walkman. His eyes would mostly stay closed anytime he was enrapt in dance. When he wasn't he would smile and point and click his tongue at passersby, somehow assuming the world was his stage alone. Old Moe had been a neighborhood fixture since Abdi could remember in his younger days. His mother scolded him preemptively to not approach or talk to the funny man in the puffy rain coat. As he grew older, he asked around the other boys at school if they knew what Old Moe's deal was. They did not say, or could not since they had no idea. Much of the time, they didn't even know who Abdi was talking about. By the time he was in high school, spending more and more time away from that corner of Hamilton and North, he seemingly forgot about Old Moe in a same way his mother would tell at him for forgetting all of his errands and duties in the house. It wasn't until some nondescript day, as they were eating dinner, a rare occasion of itself, that he realized he hadn't seen Old Moe in quite awhile. He looked out the window, perfectly positioned to look at the corner behind their house, and when he didn't see it, he remarked so to Momma. She kept on stabbing her fork into shriveled fried greens, so he repeated, "Where's Moe, Ma?"

"Who's that?"

"Moe. You know. They guy who stand at the corner."

"I didn't know he had a name. I don't fraternize with the fiends out there."

"I don't think he's a fiend."

"Why do you care so much? You want to join him out there?"

And the matter was finished. Before the meal was even over, Abdi started to wonder if perhaps Moe was a creation of his own mind.

It was one day in these initial weeks that Malcolm came to visit – his only friend, his only confidant. They sat and smoked out the back window, and Abdi reported on select snippets from his time in prison. Though he did not tell Malcolm the whole story, he did not mind divulging small tidbits, about how he took a weekly therapy class with a woman that made them do sew tiny quilts and do group yoga early in the morning. Malcolm balked at the idea, and Abdi changed the subject.

"Been doing a little bit of the music, man," Malcolm said. "You know, got a couple decks, a mixer. Just messing around on the ones and twos."

"Who would give you a job doing that?"

"We'll see. I got a couple friends at the clubs."

"You think they have jobs for me?"

"What do you wanna do?"

"I don't know man. Whatever pays good. I need to get out of this place."

"How's your mom?"

"Crazy."

Abdi mentioned she would be back soon, and they went for a walk.

Malcolm had lived across the street until his aunt had her own child, and suddenly the family was forced to find a new home. They moved a just a few blocks down on Ashland, not terribly far to walk but far enough that Abdi's mother only allowed him to visit if she were able to walk him there and back, even in the blinding light of day. It was the nature of the city, where peace coexisted in spitting distance of chaos. One could spend a lifetime in absolute content while watching, across the street, the pedantry of crime and drugs eating away at each other, climbing up and down stoops waiting for life to become exciting and take them away.

They walked into the fish sandwich shop, debated eating, and bought a pack of potato chips instead. Abdi had forgotten the taste of the salt, the oil, crumbling in his teeth. They turned corners, and walked in circles, straying far from home but never quite leaving the neighborhood. Conversation soon petered out between them, for they both realized that there was only so much their lives could offer in two small years. When it got too quiet, it was Malcolm who spoke up.

"I hear some guys get fucked up in there, you know?"

"Yup," Abdi said.

"Did you see anyone go wild?"

"Sure." He did not look up. "A couple guys."

"It's okay if you don't wanna talk about it."

"But you asked. Don't say that if you asked."

"Forget it, then."

They shut up, and walked some more, and as the house got near, Abdi spoke anyway.

"I mean, it was tough in there, you know? You're just stuck a small room. Start hearing voices and shit."

"Like in your head?"

"Nah, man. Like in real. Like at night, you're laying there in your bunk, but somewhere else there's a guy just, I don't know, like tweaking. Talking to himself. Crying out for his mom or saying he wants to go home or he's sorry he did whatever he did. Most of the time the other guys will keep cussin him out until he goes to sleep. But then you keep hearing him anyway, even when he's not there. Not just at night, but during the day when you're out in the yard, and in the shower."

"So, the voice was in your head?"

Abdi shook his head, and opened his mouth to elaborate, but they had reached the footsteps of his house. He shook hands with Malcolm and made a light embrace. Neither seemed to eager to put an arm around the other as they'd done many times in the past.

"Let me know when you wanna show me the one-twos, man."

"It ain't all that man."

"Man, whatever. I don't have anything else going on."

"Get a job, bro. Get a fucking job and be a regular schmuck like the rest of us."

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That night Abdi had to walk the ten blocks from the Shot Tower station home, his umbrella broken from getting caught in the doors coming out of the train. The bus route had been halted this way a few weeks before, to allow for the construction crew to begin tearing up asphalt. A track was supposed to cut under the I-83 bypass and skirt around the harbor straight through the pier and through Abdi's backyard.

Old Moe had summarized it so: "Man, when it was back in the day, they called it urban flight. Then, when all the white people came back to Baltimore they called it Gentrified. I don't know hat word they've chosen for this madness here, but I'm gonna call it foraging, like the squirrel. Squirrels, you know – they feel the cold of winter coming, and they start scrounging up all the little acorns they can to keep fed until it's safe to go back out. That's what this is like right now. Don't nobody talk to each other, nobody wants to help each other. Everyone's just trying to figure out where their buck's coming from."

Another house on Abdi's block was sold last week. Another two last week on the street north. People had gotten wise to their houses, once dilapidated piles of shingles and dry wall, an obstacle course for rats and nothing more, was now a palace-in-waiting, a brick and mortar

Pygmalion – something so far ugly and wretched and unfit for polite society, but waiting to be transformed into royalty.

Abdi broached Momma about the topic one night over the ashtray.

"You wanna leave this neighborhood?" She said.

"Well, I'm just saying. It'd be smart, right?"

"That it would be, honey." She handed him the cigarette. Abdi almost didn't take it, watching her, waiting to see in her eyes if she'd known this was the first time since he'd been back that she conceded to his opinion. But she kept staring out the window, undeterred.

"I don't want to go, Momma."

This made her turn.

"What roots are keeping you here?"

"You, ma."

"Baby, I don't have roots. I cut 'em all off a long time ago. Had to stay spry to keep going in this life."

Abdi first took that to mean that she would always be at his side, she would follow him around wherever he would go. The next day, when he saw Stella, he told her he wanted her to come to his house and meet his mother. She guffawed at the idea, and reminded him that they weren't in a courtship. Told her it wasn't about that at all, he just wanted to show his mother that there was somewhere he went late at night, productive and upstanding.

"So, I'm just your alibi?" Stella retorted. When she saw Abdi's cheeks arch upward into his eye sockets, she grabbed his chin and wagged it lovingly.

"Just kidding. Does your mom like wine?"

Though they would shudder to admit it to each other, Abdi knew they were getting serious. More and more his clothing was left at her place. Once when he came, he realized so much of it had accumulated she'd folded it neatly into a corner of her dresser. "I hate dressers," she said. "Opening drawers is so tedious. This thing just sits empty. Might as well put it to use with your shit."

She said the last word intentionally, as if it only occurred to her to add it as the sentence culminated on her tongue. Time and again Abdi noticed she would do this – refer to his things, his life, his maladies as undesirables – they were not just stupid but fucking stupid. Not just sad but goddamn pathetic. She went the extra mile to show him apathy, a contradiction he looked through only as further proof she cared as much for him as he did for her.

And likewise, he wanted to keep his distance. He still remembered what her mother had said that night at the house, when he'd slipped away to the bathroom and passed the kitchen, where Marie was hunched over getting pie out of the oven, talking to her girlfriend overseeing it all like a casino pit boss.

"I mean, she brings these guys around. they've never been any one to ring to my mom about. I swear she calls me and says, 'when am I getting any grandchildren?' and I just tell her, 'I'm sorry mom but this girl is doing her own thing and she won't be slowed down, either by me or her father or a baby.' But I'll tell you want scares me…" She lowered her tone with the last words.

"Oh my god, Marie," her friend demanded, as if she knew what was going to be said. "What?"

"This boy. He slows her down. Just tonight, the way she talks, way she acts. And it's all for him. I feel an ouch in the pit of my stomach, hon."