

SEEMA, PT 1

She should have remembered her coat. The holding cell was cold, with its linoleum floor of white tiles with those errant brown flecks. She wrapped her pashmina scarf tighter around her, which was a real pashmina scarf, sewn by someone in a small village in Kashmir, which she'd bought in a handloom store in Punjab, that trip long ago in school. They'd allowed her to keep it when they booked her, which was a sign that perhaps this was not so serious. No orange jumpsuits yet.

Instead, she was sitting in a ten-by-ten in the middle of the precinct, the only one there save for the guard who sat at the desk a few feet away from the door. She sat flipping through a newspaper, the free ones that the homeless men gave away on the street in return for a few dollars a day. Seema had read those herself every now and then, grabbing one from Monty who hawked them outside of her library. Had he been there this morning? Perhaps this guard had gotten his from Monty, perhaps from someone else. Monty got around. He spent entire days in the library, printing out his free five pages a day of Bible passages he would copy and paste from a website, and then take to one of the tables in the corner and pour over, writing small marginalia and highlighting with abandon. It was because of Monty, they had to keep a steady stash of highlighters.

She wondered what would be going on at the library right now. They must have realized by now she hadn't come back from her lunch break. She'd declined a phone call when they'd offered to her. There was no one she would call and surely not the library. They couldn't do anything, and if she was being honest with herself, she was in no rush to get back.

The day had started quiet, but slowly the moms had rolled in their prams or strolled in with the babes wrapped to their chests, asking for story time. It was the Tuesday before Christmas, which wasn't until Saturday, and so entered the lull between parents taking off and actually leaving town for the holiday. Did they leave town? It was hard to tell. The neighborhood was a mix of mixes: interracial couples, couples who hailed from opposite sides of the country, couples where one was a citizen and one was not. Everyone was torn in her branch, and even in the small space, distinct lines drew between the four corners of space: in fiction, the upwardly mobile young couples would finger out the bestsellers, whose authors they'd heard interviewed on NPR; in the periodicals, the retirees with their Navy and 'Nam Marines hats caught up with the daily paper because the subscriptions had become outrageous; at the computer desk, each of the eight PCs were taken by the jobless or the job-poor, anxious over the oncoming Christmas bills; and in children's her section, the rug was littered with kids and their parents who'd turned it into their social club.

“WHAT A PRETTY DRESS,” remarked Linda. “I LOVE IT, JUST SO CULTURAL.”

Linda, one of the mainstays of Saturday mornings, rolled in behind the stroller carrying Carol, a chubby boy Seema was always worried as aching under his weight, and Teresa, three, hopping behind.

“Teresa, look at Ms Seema's dress! Isn't it SO Pretty?” The girl gave it one look, smirked, and went off to the corner rug and tumbled the bucket of blocks onto the floor.

“I'm sorry,” said Linda.

“Don't worry. I don't usually dress like this.”

“I’ll say! Is it for the holiday?”

“No, no. I just felt like it. Bit of a change.”

“Well, you should dress up more. You look so cute!”

The dress was a simple salwar, something she’d gotten of the rack at an Indian market years ago in a rented conference room at the Holiday Inn, back before there was a reliable supply chain to get authentic wear into the country, save for some enterprising Patel had entire consignments shipped over direct from the looms in Surat.

“You know,” Linda went on, “I read somewhere that the red dot symbolizes the power of the universe.” Her thumb went to Seema’s forehead and then she went red as the bindi stuck to it and peeled off.

“Just a sticker.”

“Ohmahgosh. I’m so sorry.”

“Not enough power of the universe to keep it on, eh?” Seema laughed gaily, and Linda met it with a nervous tiddle of her own, pressing the bindi back on and thrusting the stroller as quick as she could to the rug, where Theresa had already abandoned the blocks in a litter on the floor. For a moment it was quiet again, but a choking palpable discomfort quickly collected in the small space, on the one side the white mothers anxious about their travel plans and the gifts they still had left on their shopping lists, on the other, the Spanish-speaking mothers, hailing from countries across the Yucatan, saying nothing at all, wanting only a moment of peace. Seema picked out a bilingual edition of *A Color of His Own* or *Su Propio Color*. Her Spanish was still not great, but this was always an opportunity to brush up.

She turned page by page, reciting the colors of each animal, making the sounds and then asking the kids to repeat. “Parrots are green, los loros son verdes! *Kawk, kawk, kawk!* Goldfish are red, algunos peces son rojos, *blub blub blub!* Elephants are grey, los elefantes son grises --” at this she crossed an arm across her face and wafted it like a trunk.

No sooner was the book done did the kids scatter. They played with the blocks. Two older Latinas of four or five raced up and down the waist-high aisles. Linda pointed to them and said, “Ms Seema won’t like that. You have to be quiet in the library.” She cast her eyes at Seema, and then to their mothers, who were busy feeding their infants from a ziploc bag of goldfish crackers.

Seema didn’t have the mood today. “It’s fine. It’s Christmas.”

“WHATEVER YOU SAY, THEN.” She turned to her own daughter and said, “Hey Kayla, if you want to play around, Ms Seema says its okay.”

Across, she could see the security guard sigh and go back to his game of solitaire on his computer. One of the retirees wracked his throat and shuffled his newspaper, staring at the kids out of the corner of his eye. Last year, at the height of the election, he’d began making a point of striking up a conversation every morning with whatever other geezer was across from him about the wall and the jobs. When the tenor would edge to discomfort and Seema asked him to lower his voice, he got up and walked to the circulation desk and asked to talk to the manager, which led to a heated argument about how exactly do people get library cards if they’re not taxpayers, they’d suspended him for a month, hoping that would be long enough to pass until the votes came in. When he came back, he at least wasn’t wearing a red hat anymore.

A man at the computers called her over, asking for help with a job application. His English wasn’t very good, and was trying to apply for a job. Through gestures and repeating

questions, she worked out they'd wanted his school transcripts, which he said he didn't have, they'd been left back home. Seema knew she wasn't supposed to ask, but pegged him from Yemen or Syria. The International Rescue Committee offices were just a few blocks away, and she knew many of them came here in between their appointments to try and work through the checklist of tasks they'd be handed by one of the overworked interns: apply for a job, apply for a home, apply for a bank account, apply, apply, apply. He excused himself to go to the bathroom, and she went back to her desk. When he returned, the computer had timed out, closing out the browser and reverting to the lock screen. The man wailed loudly and smacked the monitor, nearly off of the table, and as the security officer got up to calm him down, he stormed out, but not before passing her table, pointing to her face and saying, "you sabotaged me, you bitch."

The security officer, Vernon, massaged her back. "Don't worry about him. He's just frustrated."

"It's hard being in the new country, trying to figure out a new life."

"Still, it don't mean he had to be rude. They have manners everywhere in the world."

She told Vernon she was going on an early lunch break. She saw his face fall, knowing she was the only person on the floor that morning, that he was now saddled with the kids and telling every patron for the next forty minutes that they would have to go to the circulation desk, where they both knew Rhonda would huff angrily as it wasn't in her job description to work the catalog. Still, she'd caught him in his moment of sympathy and she took advantage.

She had her pashmina scarf, still mostly in one piece, with a few threads coming off at the sides, but it had been one of the few items she'd been able to stuff in her suitcase with her

from India. It kept her warm in the library, which was cold always, even in the winter, with the AC on blast to cool the hub of computers.

Outside, the temperature was rather bearable. Her library was converted from a small cottage in the middle of a square that had been deemed a historical building by the city. In the middle, a small dog park, flanked by Irish bars, a nail salon, a cell phone repair store, and a few ethnic eateries that served something other than burgers and fries. Right now it was quiet. The streets had been strung with Christmas lights, the little globes that she'd never seen properly illuminated as she left before they were turned on each evening.

Still, she enjoyed this time of year. Christmas, though it was celebrated in India, had always seemed a distinctly American holiday. India had its Christians, who held stately and austere midnight mass on the twenty-fourth, but there were none where she'd grown up in Gujarat, where instead it was a cultural curiosity, a last whimper to play out the celebratory hangover from an autumn of Navratri followed by Diwali. She liked to own Christmas, as a time of solace for herself. She had no family to buy gifts for, no harried airport lines to stand in, no turkey to carve.

They were supposed to get a snowstorm later that day, and the air had become heavy with moisture, ready to receive the oncoming powder, and in any case, she didn't want to wear a coat today. She'd finally had a reason to dress up, and took it as an occasion to strut a flash of class past the yuppie couples picking up dogshit.

This year, she'd been invited to something. An Indian couple had struck up a friendship with her on their weekly visits. She'd watched them come in that first time, bracing herself for the convo she didn't want to have. She mouthed *hi, can i help you* in her best American, cutting

each vowel as short as she could, hiding her badge under her pashmina, as if any of it hid her skin, her nose ring, the darkened hue under her heavy eyes. Still, it took a couple weeks until finally the man approached her, asking if she could help him find a book by Thomas Piketty, the famous economist. She almost wondered if he'd waited until her co-worker, the actual adult librarian, had gone on break, but looked it up in the catalog.

Not here, sir. Can I order for you from another system?

You can do that?

Yes. Quite easy.

Quite easy, eh?

Yes. We are happy to try our best. Should I search?

Well, if you can, then of course. I do want the book, na?

The lexical turn was a goading. He spoke in a clear American accent, wore basketball shorts. The woman, who had been pretending to scan the new releases, had had her eyes locked toward them.

Seema kept her eyes on the monitor, while the system sputtered somewhere in the ether, darting her eyes to the start menu in one corner, to the clock in the other, to the window behind where her YouTube was paused on a dosa cooking video.

“What’s your name, aunty?”

She looked up. “Seema.”

He called his wife over, The woman, a pretty waif named Aparna, and the man, a lanky but amber-toned Siddarth, were both residents at the hospital. The wife was from Gujarat while the father was from Karnataka, which she'd exclaimed about, how novel!

They'd giggled at her and said aunty, it's quite common these days.

What were "these days?" she asked. "I am not that old, you know."

"No, no, we didn't mean --"

She let the awkwardness lie.

"So do you want the book?"

"You found it?"

"Yes. I told you. We can find anything."

"How long will it take?"

"Two to three weeks."

"Oh. Don't worry about it then. I'll just order it on Kindle."

For awhile after that, they'd kept it civil, picking up from the reserves at the circulation desk and making a customary round, always sure to pass her with a hi-hello on their way out. It was Aparna who made the next attempt.

"Hi aunty."

"Seema."

“Seema aun-- sorry, I just feel so weird, I have to call you that!”

She couldn't be that old, could she? She caught her first grey just last year, a thin strand that bordered her forehead. Could she need to find a new skin cream? Must one be an aunty to every bemused person their junior? Was it her way with kids? Do people have children as a way to track the passing years in their older age?

“It's okay. Just try.”

“I will. Where are you from?”

“I live out in the county.”

“Oh, come now. You know what I mean! My parents are from Gujarat.”

What was the use?

“Oh! You too! Oh my god! You don't see too many Gujju librarians.”

“I didn't know you were the children's librarian.”

“Mm-hmm. Three years.”

“Love it?”

“Of course, you have to.”

“Oh, you must be great with kids, then.”

There it was coming. *Come babysit for them over New Year's. Teach her Gujarati. Cook shaak for me. Tell her about the old country. Take her to Garba. I don't want her to forget her culture. It's hard enough when her dad speaks and eats different. She'll get confused.*

“You know Sid and I...we were thinking, why don’t you come over for dinner one night, next week? We’re on call, but we should have some time. We don’t know anyone here. You can bring your family of course...”

She thought of her plans, she had a bottle of white wine chilling in the fridge, which she would slowly sip away the long weekend while digging into some of the new mystery novels, her favorite, before returning back to the bulge the next Monday. But then, she thought of the salwar, sitting in a plastic container under her bed, the makeup box with the good stuff - kohl, her favorite Loreal rouge, the travel-size Pond’s powder canister -- nowbundled in her purse back in the staff room waiting for their debut.

“Miss Anthony?” The guard was at the cell bars. She looked to be in her early twenties, with a sparkly lip gloss and blonde extensions in her weave, tied back in a ponytail. “They wanna talk to you.”

“Have I been charged with anything.”

“I am not at liberty to say, ma’am.”

“Come on, it’s noon on a Saturday and you’re picking up random women in the street? I deserve to be told why, at least.”

“They don’t tell me that, ma’am,” she said, opening up the door to the pen. Another officer guided her down a hallway to a bullpen of desks. There were only a few police about, spinning in their chairs or hanging off of their co-worker’s, making idle chit chat. As she walked down an aisle of desks, she felt the eyes turn toward her, taking in a phenotype and garb

uncommon to walk through the precinct. The officer motioned her to a desk, where a plainclothes officer, the first white man she saw in the building, opened up a folder.

“Miss Anthony.”

“Yes.”

“You’re Seema Anthony of 1342 Mulberry Lane, Apartment 3c?”

“How did you find out?”

“We had a call come in from your employer.”

“Good to know someone is worried.”

“How long have you worked there?”

“Three years.”

“And before that?”

“Who is asking?”

“I am, ma’am. My name is Sergeant Pikulski and I’d ask if you could please answer my questions as I give them to you.”

“Why should I? I was brought here without any explanation. I have some questions of my own I’d like you to answer.”

“Ma’am, our patrolman asked you for an ID and when you could not produce it, you became belligerent and argumentative.”

“So you arrested me for not having an ID? Is that a crime?”

“Obstructing an officer in his duty is, Miss Anthony. We’re just trying to do our job.”

“Oh? And what job is that?”

Pikulski sighed. “I’m sorry. I should have asked before - can I get you a cup of coffee? Water?”

“No.”

“Ho-kay then,” he flipped open a folder on his desk with great labor, and passed his finger down the single rap sheet inside. “When we called to check on your record, we could not find any record of a driver’s license. Your work didn’t have an emergency contact. You must understand, these em, hiccups, create certain red flags for us.”

Seema went to wrap her pashmina, but she’d left it in the holding cell. She could feel her blood drain away from her, getting sucked into a black hole deep in her gut.

“Ma’am, I’m going to ask you this again. Can you verify your employment before the library?”

“No.”

“Can you verify your address before Mulberry Street?”

“No.”

“Ma’am, you’re not helping your case here.” When she didn’t say anything, “Ho-kay, I’ll cut to the chase. How long have you been in this country, Miss Anthony?”

“Long.”

“That’s not an answer ma’am. You see, it’s our duty to establish citizen status for any suspects we apprehend, and I am authorized to tell you, that when we cannot, we must report this to Immigration Enforcement.”

“I was just taking a walk...”

“That might be true, ma’am. But without proper documentation, I’m afraid I can’t let you leave here. At this time, I am under duty to tell you you are placed under arrest until such time as we can ascertain your residency. I am also to tell you you have a right to an attorney, and if you do not have one...”

She hadn’t even seen the cop in her periphery. The dinner party had gotten her excited at the thought of shopping for more clothes. Perhaps a little Christmas present for herself. There she was, looking into the window of one of the boutique shops on the street, at a lovely little black frock, which looked so like the frock she’d worn on the last date she’d been, the last time the glint of romance had entered her life. Something austere but chic, with these gaudy tube-like cloak sleeves that she’d hoped would make her look like a witch. But there he was, asking what she was doing.

Walking, she’d said. But the questions continued. Why the store. Where was she headed. Did she live here. Was she lost. No, you can’t leave. Can I see some identification. You see, someone called the police. No, I cannot say who.

SANDESH, SMRITI, and RISHI, PT 1

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

Of wealth, what did they have? Last night, he'd counted his savings, which were stashed in the safe next to the bedside table in the corner of the bedroom. They amounted to \$7,451, hardly enough to buy the motel off of Ramchandran, which was always the point he'd known, but a year ago he'd hoped that he would have a lot more to put down as principal so save on the interest. Ramchandran had not said a concrete number the entire year, insisting that he would for sure offer a better interest rate than what any of the banks would give him. He'd also said not to leave money in the bank, but now as the day arrived, Sandesh realized that might have been the wiser move. He'd recently been put onto the idea of credit by a guest who worked in real estate

and frequently handled such deals of transferring property. The man was a frequent visitor, a Sam Powell from Western Kentucky who liked to poke his head into the lobby and share a whisky with Sandesh on his stops to close deals on tracts of farmland and ranches that were being turned over to developers for large developments of single-family houses.

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

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

“That’s it?”

“I think so.”

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

When Sam had a few in him, he tended to boast about his recent sales. It was a simple hustle, he’d said. “It takes a bit of money to put down first, but you find the right plots, man shit, I tell you -- this world is building and building big. The old ways of farming and grazing on long

pastures is gone. Everybody just wants a house with a garage. Place for their kids to play Nintendo and grill some dogs on the patio. You just need a bank that'll loan you the credit." *Credit*. Sandesh did not even have a credit card. Cards, accounts, financials, these were things Ramchandran told him were cautious things to have when one was new to the country. It made you liable, kept you in their clutches while you were still finding your feet. *These people, once they get their hooks in you, bhai tamne khabar na pade kya thi khechi lithu.*

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

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

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

one of her sides. And for what? To have another child? Any new kid would eat up what was sitting in the safe.

He dressed and lathered his face with aftershave, and went into the kitchen, where Smriti had left a plate of cold kichdi from the night before, with a glass of buttermilk covered by a saucer. He ate and drank, both items tasteless from the lack of any spices to be found. Thankfully at least, there was a health food store in St Louis where they found the proper daals. The buttermilk, she made at home. He put the dish and glass into the sink, went to brush his teeth, and out to the lobby.

He checked the guest book to see if there were any checkouts possible today. Most people stayed either a night or a full week, salesman passing through town. Every now and then, the filanderous couple would take a room for the afternoon at half rate, a staple established by Ramchandran that they'd had to continue. *What can you do*, he'd said. *It makes up a huge part of the income*. He kneeled and parted the curtain under the front desk, revealing the safe that collected the cash payments until Ramchandran made his bi-monthly visits to collect. They had no credit card machine, they didn't take checks. He counted the money each morning just to make sure, in case someone may have come in during the night, some intrepid safe cracker, and cleaned out the house. Still there, \$2,926. The numbers varied month to month, which upset him, as a year in he still had no idea what a good haul was supposed to be. The old man rarely said either way, never concerned nor elated to pack the rolled wads of bills into his satchel and drive away in his Merury Sable, leaving Sandesh's customary cut of \$500.

Back in the apartment, he heard the warming hum of the television. Rishi must be up by now, ready to start his daily diet of sitcoms and cartoons that kept him busy until lunchtime,

while Smriti was off cleaning the rooms. Sandesh wondered, if he did take on the motel, what exactly he could depend on to support his family. The boy would enter school next year, which even in America cost money -- he would need clothes, notebooks, lunchboxes. They would need a car to drive him to the school, and inevitably once he went radkhadwa with other boys, they would need bandages and more clothes to make up for the scrapes and tears. Smriti was not keen on him staying all day with the television, but as far as his father was concerned, it was a more affordable way to grow up than the alternative.

Life for Rishi began in front of the television, watching reruns of *Cheers*, a show he didn't really understand. It all took place in a single location, and the colors of the location irked him. Brown was everywhere - in the mahogany wood bar, the lacquered paneling, the low hanging amber lamps that turned everything into a burnt reddish hue, as if it was his own skin peeling off under the sun. He'd sit in front of the television, in that small bedroom of the motel apartment, gazing at the way Sam would always be there to greet whoever came in, sliding a frosted mug across the counter, his loose fitting shirts draped over his lanky body, angled perfectly across the wood to talk to Norm and Cliff and Woody, who was also played by a man named Woody. Diane would come in, pretty and flustered with her tormentous life outside the bar, a woman of greater things than slinging drinks or sobbing woes into them, but she was not in many episodes, and Rishi had to assume that perhaps the viewers who tuned in, those days before he was born, did not find her very interesting.

Still, there was something homely and familiar about the show. Like him, these characters seemed stuck in a kind of comfortable purgatory, a place from which they could never leave, and

possibly didn't want to. Or perhaps it was the drink after all, which held them at bay, dulled them from making any smarter decisions about life. Frasier Crane would pop in now and then - he was a smarter fellow, always dressed in a suit and speaking with proper syntax. He was fresh and articulate, and he was clearly liked by those viewers because he eventually did get his own other show, though Rishi had left the motel by then and never cared much to return to it.

Before *Cheers*, and his other pleasures -- *Voltron*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and the *Sonic the Hedgehog* cartoon, were the very nadir of what he could consider his consciousness. He had a hard time remembering his actual life, for which his father would constantly berate him. Things escaped Rishi quickly. At the motel, when he was told to watch the front desk while his father took a nap, he would get distracted into his Gameboy, and suddenly grow tense that he was shirking his homework, and run back into the apartment to make sure the day's math problems were done. This would inevitably leave him with a headache and some faulty computations, but by then someone had arrived and dinged the bell several times, waking his father up and leaving him preparing for a slap later in the evening.

But the guests would always stand there and ding. They had to, because this was the only motel on this small stretch of highway 70, halfway between St. Louis and Kansas City, the absolute middle of the middle of middle America, the place where his parents had decided to come when given the wide choices of the entire of America. There, somewhere between Booneville and Rocheport, there was a blue sign on the highway that pointed to lodgings. A typical family station wagon would probably push on until they made the big city in either direction, but certain small frame of clientele knew to veer off at the sign. They would drive deep into the flat lands of Missouri, just past where the commercial strip with the Burger King and the

Wal-Mart and the Amaco gas station, away from the clusters of houses that collected behind them, until the road became barren save for one brightly lit sign of the Spartacus Inn.

They were salesmen of many types -- computer parts, insurance, large pleasure boats, exotic jungle cats -- usually on their way to either St. Louis or Kansas City to meet a client, make a sale, or attend a conference. But it was worth blocking in the extra hour of driving time the next day, rather than spend the money for a pricey room in the big city downtown, where who knew what kinds of rates they'd rob of with, or if you went for the budget motel a little on the outskirts, what kinds of robbery would happen in the parking lot? The Spartacus Inn was known for being impeccably clean, and you had to pass a Waffle House to get to it. Best of all, they loved the Indian family that ran it, a dash of color to add to the local life. The clientele were consistent and they came back because they felt a deep, warm trust in the Indians that owned it, who were not his parents actually, but Ramchandran, the old man who'd brought Rishi and his parents out to Missouri.

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

angry and yell at you for disturbing them in their sleep, this is unavoidable. In America, the customer is always right, and we must be ready to be wrong. You understand this of course?

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

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

Rishi learned all of this later on. His only real memory of Ramchandran was watching his father sign some papers, after which the two men shook hands and Ramchandran got into his car, a 1990 Mercury Sable, a sleek silver that Rishi found an alluring color, and drove away. The old man would come in from time to time, checking in on them and making sure all was good. These days, his mother would cook a full multiple course Gujarati meal early in the morning before the

sunrose, unsure if he would be staying for lunch or dinner, or she hoped, not at all, so then they would be able to eat the food for a few more days. That first year went by slow in his memory, and later on only a few details would remain in his mind. His mother sitting at the edge of the bed after her morning cleaning, rubbing Vicks Vaporub into the small of her back, the folds of her round belly collecting in front as she arched over, wincing. She'd see Rishi watching her, and say "not now," to whatever she thought his eyes beckoned, because he was hungry or bored, or wanted to hear a story, or tell her what happened on the television, in a life so much more interesting that kept him occupied while she scrubbed toilets and bathroom tiles and folded bedsheets that, even when they came freshly out of the industrial laundromat in the back of the motel, still carried a stale odor. It was something she couldn't quite place. She'd smelled the smells of industrial India, the burning trash in the street, the cow feces collecting at the edge of the road, the dirty motor oil let out from the piping of a Bajaj scooter. But this was something like the wet fur of a dying rodent, something natural and yet not.

She'd chosen to blame the smell for the back problems that had developed. She refused to think that this cleaning work on its own could be the culprit, after all, had they still been in India, would she not be doing the same? Running the home, preparing breakfast-lunch-dinner, cleaning the home in between, that dreaded Ahmedabad dhool wafting in from the street and coating the tables, the sofas, the counters. Staying clean in India was a round-the-clock affair. These were not new burdens for her. No, something in that smell had seeped into her nostrils, floated through her bloodstream, and collected at the muscles above her buttocks, which hung inches from the floor as she swept behind the toilet bowl and hunched into the small tubs, which were left with sticky film of the chalky soap bars they left in every room. These soaps, Ramchandran had told them explicitly not to use, as if she would consider cleaning her and her child from this. For

everyone there was a giant bulk bottle of Johnson and Johnson's, which provided for both the body and the scalp, and for the boy, a monthly turmeric bath to stave off the radiation from the television screen and make up for skin the nutrients he was missing from being cooped up in the dark room all day.

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

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

"I don't..."

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

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

But it wasn't the sobs that plagued her last night, rather it was his atrocious Gujarati. The broken, misshapen sentences. The words out of order, like a tub of alphabet blocks tumbled out onto the floor. Her son was not picking up their language, despite being around no one but them all day, meanwhile his only friend was the television, a perfect friend for a lonely child, one that spoke all the time but never required any response in return. Earlier in the year, she'd started taking him to that field in the school, but he just sat in the grass. When she told him to go make friends with the boys playing baseball on the diamond at the far end of the field, he came back saying they told him no, can they go back home? "No," she said. "Stay a little while longer. Play or don't, but you need the fresh air." And anyways, the field was a half-hour walk away, and she was going to rest her legs for a good bit longer.

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

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

“Hamna?”

“Maare field javu che.”

“Pachi chokra, thodu araam karva de.”

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

Sandesh would never go for it.