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The following thesis is the beginning of a novel about immigration that follows three generations of women from India to America. The short story form is utilized throughout the text.

JEWELRY SETS

By
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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee members of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

RAMESHJI , AHMEDABAD INDIA 1928

As Ramesh Patel looked over the red ink in his ledgers, he thought about his daughter, Maadri. Yesterday, he walked into the back courtyard after work and saw Maadri playing. A tumbler was in her hand and a pool of water at her feet. She poked daintily at the pool.

“Hello, Papa,” she said, each word tinkling over the yard. Her voice enveloped him, melodious and clear, her English as perfect as a Britisher. Ram smiled at the sound, the tensions of the day swept away by her presence.

Stress was increasing at the office, and the cloth trade was suffering. Gandhi had called for a strike on British fabrics, urging Ahmedabadis to spin their own cloth. *Spin for Independence!* rang out from flyers on walls and buildings all over India. At first, he had thought nothing of this call. Who would make their own cloth? It was time consuming, and the resulting fabric was coarse, cheap looking and a plain dirty white color. But pictures of spinning wheels were popping up everywhere.

Maadri wore a white dress, clean and starched, the high, lacy collar crushing against her throat. The cloth was thick and closely woven so it felt like

silk if he brushed it with his fingers. Not like *khaddi*, which was rough. Ram wondered at the cleanliness of his child, how no stain or dust marred the dress that she wore. Other children would not be able to preserve the brightness of a white dress; they would get food or dirt on it. Most parents would refuse to clothe their children in white. But Maadri kept her clothes spotless. Ram smiled.

In his office, he thumbed through his accounting notes. The British Cloth Corporation had its own accountant, of course. Actually, a large accounting department, but Ram liked to keep his own numbers on the trade that occurred out of his office. It used to be his delight, to fill the adding columns with black ink. On a particularly profitable day, he would get excited and press the nub of his pen hard on the paper, and the dark color would bleed out into a web of patterns outside of the thick, red boundaries of the numbers he wrote.

The ink bled through to his hands, to the tough pad of skin on his middle finger where he rested his pen. At the end of each day, he examined the scattered thin lines on his finger with satisfaction, and traced the lines with his thumb. Before he left for home, he used a pumice stone to scrape the skin off where the ink was trapped underneath, leaving a thick pad of skin.

Last night, as he approached his daughter, he looked at the puddle of water in front of her. It looked like the surface was moving. Maadri poured more water from the tumbler to the spot and Ram realized that ants, hundreds of them, were bobbing at the surface.

“What are you doing?” he asked. His hands found the cufflinks in his pocket and he was rolled them through his hands, madly.

Maadri looked at her father and smiled, a dimple pressing into her smooth cheek. She said, “I wanted to see what happens to the *crickchee* when it rains.”

“In English,” he said. The insects were struggling, climbing over one another to get to the surface of the water.

“Bugs,” Maadri said.

“Ants,” he corrected. Maadri picked up the tumbler and tried to pour more water over the struggling anthill. Ram caught her hand.

“What are you doing?” he asked, more shocked than angry. The pool wobbled at the edges of the water, trembling with the ants’ struggles.

“I tried to collect them, but they messed my *juta*,” she said. Smears of black ant bodies were dark on her shiny white heel. She dropped the tumbler and reached up to her father. “Carry me.”

“Your shoe.” Ram looked at Maadri, her fingers wiggled towards him. “You can’t do that, my dear,” Ram said, pulling his daughter up on his hip. “You are hurting them.”

The next morning, at his desk, Ram looked at his fingers. After Gandhi and his decree for *khaddi*, homespun cloth, Ram had a light touch with his pen. The red numbers shadowed the paper, barely noticeable. He had written a letter to the president of British Cloth, discussing how the company needed to change

its approach to selling in India if they wanted a sustainable profit. An

administrator had written back:

Dear Mr. Patel,
If you feel, sir, that you are unable to handle your
duties, perhaps we should send someone from
England to handle them for you.

Ram locked his office and began to walk home. He stopped in front of a
litter of puppies.

“Can I help you, *Ji*?” A young, sun-scarred girl looked up at Ram. Her thin,
high voice made him blink. Maadri was not much younger than the girl, but she
had a sweetness to her voice, a roundness to her tone that the girl in front of him
lacked.

“How do you know my name?” he asked her. Tiny snarling barks erupted
from a litter of puppies at his feet. He undid his cufflinks and dropped them in his
pocket as he walked, and felt the evening cool around him. The puppies, soft
and fragile with their closed eyes, had stopped him in the thick of his meander.
He meddled with the cuff links in his pocket. Perhaps having something to love
and care for would help his daughter.

Last night, with Maadri in his arms, he made her promise to not hurt
anything. She had agreed, even cried. He crossed through the back courtyard in
quick, wide steps, yelling at one of the servants to clean up the mess in the

backyard. He put her down in their front veranda, where her mother was teaching her student how to play the veena.

Today, in front on him, the girl, so unlike his daughter answered him sharply.” No *Ji*, but everyone in Amedabhad knows you.” Her black skin was dry, except for small sores that winked, wet in the darkening light. The sores scattered across her face and shoulders, and down her arms. They seeped wet and red in the sun. Untouchable by skin color, Ram thought, and stepped back. “You are the cloth-walla, ” she said.

Her quick, knowing response again startled Ram. As did the dingy cotton t-shirt that hung from her starved limbs. It was too large for her, made for an adult. The hem of the shirt settled on the dirt as she spoke, the large neck hole dipped low on her brown chest, exposing a black nipple. Ram controlled an urge to gag. He wanted to yank the shirt up to cover the harshness of her starved chest, the sharp ridges of her clavicles.

Maadri was probably unaware of her father’s position in AhmedabadFlies gathered at the openings in the child’s skin, buzzing from one welt to another. She flapped a hand in front of her face, a weary gesture that reminded Ram of someone much older that the girl, like his wife.

“I was looking at the puppies,” he said, kneeling. He couldn’t look directly at the girl anymore. He shifted to examine the dogs, whose breath made their

bodies rise and fall in unison. They slept in a furry pile against their mother. He studied them, disturbed by a black puppy whose eyes were weeping a thick white substance down its face. Another one, all yellow, had a patch of fur missing, the skin underneath scaly and bloody. He eliminated them one by one: one with a clipped ear, another with lumpy paw.

“They are mine. And the mother, too.” Harshness entered her tone, a thin roughness like she had been smoking beedis.

He reached out to the pile of sleeping bodies.

“No!” the girl said. She pushed his hand away as the mother got to her feet and snarled at Ram. “She is protective of her litter. Shh, Rani, shhh.” She scratched the matted throat of the bitch, and she calmed, settling again next to her pups.

Ramesh stood, repulsed, and examined his hand where the girl had touched him. He reminded himself to wash it when he returned home. “I would like one of the puppies. The yellow and black one at the bottom.” He was unable to look at her; an insect fed at a sore on her neck.

“*Noji*,” she said and fanned her face. The insect lifted off her neck and buzzed again to her neck. “They are too small, still.” She kneeled in front of the animals and placed a gentle hand on the body of one of the pups. Her fingers stretched over the length of the animal, which sniveled in its sleep.

“How much do you want?” he replied, pulling out his leather wallet. He wasn’t used to bargaining with street urchins and the feeling of her fingers had repulsed him so much he was willing to give the girl as much as she asked for.

“*Noji*, please. They still need their mother.” She ran her fingers against another puppy, a mottled mix of yellow and black. Though the litter was half shaded from the dark evening sun by the body of the bitch, the spotted pup had slipped into the direct sunlight.

“I have 50 paisa here.” He dropped some coins at the feet of the kneeling girl. “That should be more than enough. “

“*Ji*, please, I beg you. Their eyes are not even open yet.” She shaded the black and yellow dog with her hand.

The coins glared silver and clean in the yellow dirt. The girl had not looked at them, despite the fact it was more than the girl’s family probably made in a month. Instead, she bounced, still squatting, to where her body could shade the yellow and white puppy baking in the sun. She bent and fanned the air around the animal.

He watched as the urchin slid her hand slowly under the body of the sleeping puppy and lifted it. She murmured, singing quietly under her breath to the creature. Her voice scraped like a jagged stone against Ram’s ears. His shoulders crammed together, lifting at the sound. She was singing a lullaby. She laid the puppy slowly on the side of the bitch that was shaded.

“I asked you to refrain from coming here during lessons,” his wife said when he placed Maadri in front of her, the smashed ants still on her heel.

He put Maadri down and kneeled in front of her. Something about her small cruelty to the anthill disturbed him and he felt that he must talk to her again. She was looking at her shoe, bending to wipe off the brownish crust. Ram pulled her to standing and placed his hands on either side of her head. “*Beti*, little girl, you cannot do that.”

“Do what, *Ji?*” She tried to slide her arms around her father’s neck, tiny bracelets on her arms jingling. A scent of sandalwood drifted from her open mouth as she spoke and he thought, as he looked at his daughter, of the moon. He often thought this when he looked at Maadri---something about the roundness of her face and the soft glow of her skin. And the calmness he felt when he looked at her reminded him of his youth, when he would get slowly intoxicated and gaze up in the sky. He remembered the image of his daughter over the anthill and caught her arms and held them in front of her body.

“You cannot hurt things like you did outside,” he said. Her hands were small, impossibly small in his, and he felt her straining her arms to get out of his grip. The feeling that she wanted to escape him, his touch, saddened Ram.

“I wanted to play, but they kept trying to get away. I just made them stay,” she said. She shook from side to side, trying to slither out of her father’s hands.

“Please let me go, Papa.” She stopped squirming and looked into her father’s eyes.

“Promise you won’t hurt things again, even if they are trying to get away from you.” Ram said. His palms had begun to get slippery, he was not used to disciplining his child. Maadri managed to get free of his hands.

“I am sorry, *Ji*,” she said as she skipped backwards and away from her father, spinning around as she left him still kneeling.

He had tried to bring the incident up with his wife later and she had frowned. “She killed some ants and you are upset? I wish she would kill more, there are plenty that run around here.” She spread her arms wide to indicate the room. In the gesture, Ram saw the grace that his daughter possessed.

“It was odd.” Ram put his hands in his pocket, playing with some coins that slipped out of his wallet. His wife was leaning over the sitar she taught with, gently plucking at the strings and humming. She moved beads up and down the strings, and strummed. She hummed again, louder this time.

“I wish she would kill some of these flies as well,” she said, swiping her hand in front of her face, wearily. She began humming again.

“But shouldn’t she be gentler? She is usually so sweet.” His wife looked up at him, angry.

“Sweet to you, perhaps, not to me.” She looked at the strings and hummed again, louder. She plucked and laid her head against the neck of the sitar, closing

her eyes to listen to the vibrations. The instrument had been a gift from his wife's music guru. It was a fine mahogany that she polished almost everyday. She had once traveled around temples with a music troop; her talent at playing the sitar was well known.

Blue threads pulsed under the thin pale skin of her eyelids. He was surprised the night of their wedding, when she removed her wedding veil, at the thinness of her skin, its paleness. He held her hand that night, moving his hands softly over the thick, rough patches of skin at the tips of her fingers, the result of years of playing without finger guards, and thought how she seemed transparent, how much like a ghost. How the only thing that seemed to tie her to real humans was the corns on her fingers. She had stopped touring when they got married, as was requested by Ram's parents. But she insisted that she teach sitar to children. Ram agreed, as long as she was never on stage again. It wasn't proper.

"But killing something?" he murmured.

"Ramji," she stressed the last syllable, her eyes still closed. "It is very hard to hear the correct tones when you are talking." Her thin lips pressed into a tight smile. He looked at his wife---she seemed to be floating---and he wondered how she, so fragile, supported the weight of the instrument that rested across her lap. The coins clanked in his pockets and he turned to leave.

"It doesn't matter how she killed some ants," she said, he eyes still closed.

“Why?” Ram asked. A sharp note sounded from under his wife’s fingers. She opened her eyes and frowned. She turned a fret on the neck of the sitar and plucked the sharp again, a low melodious vibration replacing the angry note.

“She is just a girl. It doesn’t matter what she does.” Ram turned to his wife and saw that her eyes were closed again. He slid the doors of the music room shut.

“Okay, okay. Here is 100 paisa.” A few multicolored bills floated down from his open palm. It settled over the coins on the dirt behind the hunched figure of the girl. She turned at look the pile of silver and colored paper and then looked up at Ram.

“Sir, perhaps you can leave them with their mother for a few weeks.” The shoulder of her dirty tee shirt drooped, exposing the girl’s blackened, thin shoulder. She reached out to him and he stepped back, frightened at her touch. Dropping her hand, she nodded sadly. “Please*ji*.”

The evening sun warmed; Ram felt it beating down on him. His cufflinks slipped around his pocket, slippery from his perspiration. He gritted his teeth, grinding down the sands that had entered his mouth as he spoke the girl. He bent over the kneeling girl and noticed that one of her eyes was a pale blue color.

Ram was irritated at the oddness of her eyes, by the disturbing mottled appearance of her dark skin. “If you do not want money, black cunt,” he said, his

voice trembling, “just say so.” Ram swept the coins and paper off the street, the dirt and grit of the road covering his hands.

The girl looked down, avoiding his gaze. She spread her arms, curving them over the pile of dogs behind her. The bitch started to raise herself, growling. Her wasted nipples swung as she moved. The girl, her eyes frightened, murmured softly to her.

“Calm down, Rani,” she said quietly, moving one hand slowly to pet the dog. Something in the gentleness of her motion, the fright in her eyes, reminded him of what he had walked into yesterday.

With each stroke, each coo from the urchin to the puppies, he thought of his daughter’s face. He pulled off a sandal and held it over his head; his other hand clutching the bills and coins. He felt them dampen.

“Give me that one,” he said, pointing at the small black and yellow puppy the girl had moved, “or I will give you such a thrashing.” His fingers slipped on the leather of his shoes. The girl held the small puppy up to him, still looking down.

The animal’s paws hung over the black skin of her palm, dangling furry in the air. The puppy had begun to open its eyes and he noted that, like the girl, it had a pale blue eye. He stepped back, afraid, and swung the sandal, knocking the puppy out of the girl’s hand. It landed in a puff of dirt, its large paws flapping on its side. The rough underside of the shoe hit the side of her face.

“*Ji*, please, she is just a child,” a man yelled from across the dirt road. His shoe had pulled a piece of skin off of her cheek, leaving a bright red triangle on her face. She raised her arm to protect her face, and covered her cheek with a dark hand. He shook the skin off his sandal. The coins and paper from his hand clattered to the ground and he slipped his sandal back on his foot.

The puppy that he had knocked on the ground lay whining, eyes closed. Ram swept it up, and placed it gently next to the girl, her eyes still averted. He murmured apologies under his breath to the girl. An insect landed on her cheek, its legs getting tangled in the wet, clear fluid that shined from the new welt.

Ram walked away from the girl and the dogs in bounding long steps, looking back at the child over his shoulder. Her arm still arched over her head.

He jammed his hands deep in his pockets, damp and dirty from his slipper and the money. His cufflinks clinked against his rings in his pocket.

CHAPTER II

MAADRI, AMEDABAD INDIA 1931

Chanting woke Maadri before the sun lightened the sky. The sound was massive. Hundreds of voices shot through the city and punctured her uneasy sleep. *Gandhiki jaya, Gandhiki jaya*, the voices called. British city officials had begun a curfew after some protests had become violent. Ahmedabad's citizens were not allowed to gather after nightfall. She pulled her blanket tight around her as the cries began, past her narrowing waist and broadening hips. She pressed her soft lobes into her ears to block the sound. Her gold earrings were cold against the hollow of her ears as she slid out from under the blanket.

She placed her feet on the thick stone floors and let her hands drop to her sides. The voices that woke her were unclear. If they were in the old city, marching and chanting through the thin dirt streets, between the towering stone compounds that Maadri lived in, she would be able to make out what they were saying. They sounded far away, on the other side of the Sabarmati River. She waited in her room for the faraway chanting to ebb, as it had a few nights before, when the British police forced the protesters to stop.

But they did not. Instead the words became clearer, louder.

Rupini was in the open central courtyard of Chiminlal, Maadri's father's compound, when Maadri walked out of her room. The young woman's face was pale and drawn in the light of a propane lantern. She sat in front of a small wooden wheel. Rupini fed a length of twine onto the wheel and pumped her foot on a small pedal. A bundle of white cloth collected in front of her.

"What is happening?" Maadri called from the terrace outside her room. Three floors of the compound surrounded the central courtyard where Rupini spun. And three stories of thick stone balconies peered into the courtyard. Rupini looked up from where she sat, her eyes bare and frightened. Maadri's high voice echoed in the courtyard. The sound of the protesters flooded into the compound. Maadri ran down the stairs, to where Rupini gathered the cloth. A square of sky was black above their heads.

"Shhh," Rupini said. She stood and knotted the package of cloth at her feet. "Go back to your room and bolt the door. I have to go."

"You can not leave. It is still dark. Pitaji will be angry--."

"*Chup!*" Rupini extinguished the lantern and put her hand over Maadri's mouth. The curve of Rupini's cheek slowly formed as Maadri's eyes got used to the dark. "There is talk of the protesters getting violent. Your father's shop is in danger. He is there now. After the shop, they will come here. If they think someone is in the British cloth seller's house, you will be in danger. "

Maadri slapped Rupini's hand off her face. "You need to plait my hair---" she began, but the chants of the marchers flooded the courtyard, masking her voice. She clenched her fist, angry at the interruption and looked up into the lightening sky. The sounds of chanting flooded over the roofs, into the atrium, and Maadri, hot cheeked, looked up into the square of sky.

Rupini placed the bundle of cloth on her hip and strode to Chiminlal's front gate. For a moment, the marchers quieted and Maadri heard the metal gates close and Rupini turn the lock. The protesters began again and the words were louder and clearer. *Gandhiji ki Jaya! Gandhiji ki jaya!* Maadri crouched in the atrium, her arms around her knees.

If she were a different child, in a different time, Maadri would have stopped thinking of the thick, black knots that snagged her fingers when she touched her hair. Her cheeks boiled at the humiliation. She would have asked her servant, Rupini, where she was going instead of gently folding Maadri's hair into thick, oiled braids, braids that Rupini always finished with a bit of blue organza ribbon that Maadri's father brought home from his shop.

Maadri could have shouted down to the young woman if she unpinned the wooden shutters that opened up her room to the narrow streets. In the section of Ahmedabhad that she and her father lived in, the roads were so close together and the dirt paths between them so slim that two bullock carts could only pass one another if their dusty wooden wheels scraped.

She could have called out to Rupini, woken the next door neighbors behind their thin closed shutters and asked Rupini where she was going so early, before Maadri's hair was appropriately dressed, and why she was dressed so oddly. Rupini wore a piece of thin, white cloth that draped around her head and shoulders and down past her ankles. Maadri saw the curl of Rupini's hair through the loose weave of the cloth.

But Rupini was her servant, and Maadri believed that she should not have to raise her voice to ask Rupini what she, Maadri, wished to know. A warm flush pooled from the roots of her night-mussed locks to her shoulders and she watched Rupini at the main gate. But the child she was, at the time she was, she preferred to keep the shutters closed. Her knotted hair streamed down her back.

*

Before the protests began, the slight jingle of Rupini's anklets would pull Maadri from her deep child's sleep. From the cool silence of her bed Maadri heard the bells above Rupini's round heels sway and chime dimly as she stooped over with a stacked reeds in her hand and swept the compound. The chimes began on the top floor of the stone structure, before the sun rose and the black birds crowed from the balconies. When Rupini began her chore on the upper floors, Maadri heard slips of the anklets' sounds, muted by the thick stone floors between them.

The silver chain of Rupini's anklets left circle-shaped indentations on her dark skin when she removed them. They were too small for her, better suited to a child of Maadri's age. They were her mother's, Rupini told Maadri, from her wedding set when she was married at 9. A hollow piece of metal shaped like a leaf jutted from the circle of each chain. The very tip of the leaf pierced the thin skin on the top of her feet when she crouched and swept. Tiny red beads welled up from the small cuts in summer when the air was dry and Rupini's skin was brittle. The pearls of blood scattered as they dried, dropping off her shins and scattering across the smooth stone floors.

As the tiny chimes grew louder the dark turned into dim light in Maadri's room. Rupini swept outside of Maadri's room, her anklets filling the cool silence of her sleep. She heard the broom reeds brush against the smooth cool floors in front of her room and Rupini's anklets chime with each squat step. The long *swish* of reeds over the stone floor followed by a short burst of bells sounded over and over again from where Rupini worked. *Swish brrng swish brrng*. Maadri made small circles on the floral patterned blanket on her.

Maadri kept her eyes closed until Rupini placed a tray with a bronze bowl of cool water to wash her face and brush her teeth next to her bed. As Maadri scrubbed her teeth, Rupini opened the window above Maadri's bed. She pulled the thick, round pin from the inside wooden shutters and reached through to open the outside shutters.

Vegetable sellers and temple bells would begin their sounds outside of her window, and the morning sun began to heat her bed, which irritated her immensely. As did the sound of the city flooding through her room and overwhelming the small bell sounds from Rupini's feet. She felt the sound and heat spill around her. Maadri pulled the blanket tighter to her body as cries of vegetable sellers and rickshaws rushed from the city street of Ahmedabad. For a moment, she nestled into the cool, silk sheets on her bed. Then a small pang of hunger made her open her eyes and place her feet on the stone floor.

Rupini broomed the dirt and dust into a small pile in the center of Maadri's room as she woke.

On one particular morning, the sound of Rupini's anklets sounded fuller, more striking. Instead of the slow rhythm of reeds punctuated by dangling metal, pounding footfalls and a cluster of bell sounds woke Maadri from her deep, silent sleep. The footfalls stopped by her bed and thin material covered Maadri's body. Through the white fabric, Maadri saw Rupini's giggling face above her own.

"Up, Up," Rupini said, pulling and pushing the fabric over Maadri's bed, so it moved in small, transparent waves above Maadri. Maadri frowned and pulled the cool covers of her bed over her shoulders.

Rupini clicked her tongue and held the fabric in her outstretched hands. Folding the fabric carefully, without letting it touch the ground, she placed it on top of Maadri's dresser. From the bed, Maadri looked at the slippery pile of cloth.

It was thin stuff, and as she gazed at it the square of cloth expanded, slipping out of Rupini's folds into a white jumble. The black wood of her dresser bled through the cloth at the corners.

Rupini crossed over to the window and unpinned the inner and outer shutters and the sunlight fell through the room.

"Up, up. It is morning, now, Maadri. And I need your help." Rupini brought in the washing tray and hummed as she crouched and began sweeping reeds in across the floor. Maadri, still lying on her bed, looked at Rupini. She had an excitement to her movements; they were more exacting, the pile in front of her higher. The curls of her hair were tamed and smooth. And her anklets rang freely around her feet.

"Your anklets sound different," Maadri said, propping herself on her elbow. Rupini smiled and swept the pile of dirt into a rubbish pan. Maadri sat upright. "Are they louder?" she asked.

"Yes, your pitaji took them to your jeweler to fix them." Rupini pulled up the hem of her brightly colored skirt and threw out a foot. "The jeweler added links to the chain and put more sounders in the bells." Rupini arched her foot so that her foot swayed. "Are they not pretty?"

Maadri examined her servant's dusty toes, the toenails yellowed and torn. From the sole of her foot a pad of lined pink flesh turned into dark cracked skin

that climbed up her heels. Rupini's silver anklet hung swooped over the top of her feet, making her plump ankle look delicate.

"Why?"

Rupini dropped her skirt and walked to the pile of white cloth on the dresser. It slipped in her hands and she poured it over her shoulders. "Because I am getting married."

The sun flamed on Maadri's back, burning through the thin cloth of her pajamas. She felt the shape of the window frame, the cool that the shade offered and the square of heat that bruised her neck and backbone.

"Why?" A bead of sweat slid from Maadri's neck to the small of her back.

"That is what women do, beti. You will marry and leave this house for your husband's." Rupini smiled at Maadri and swept the dirt pile into a piece of paper. She hummed and Maadri heard the bells from under her skirt.

"You are going not going to live in Chiminlal?" Maadri's sweat stained her sheets a dark blue.

"I will for a bit. I need to work a little more, so I can get jewelry to wear at my wedding."

"Don't call me beti," Maadri said. The sound of the anklets were suddenly loud.

“Would you prefer beta, little boy?” Rupini asked. “I can also weave *khaddi* to earn extra money. Nani said she would let me help her.” She gestured at the pile of cloth on Maadri’s dresser.

She brought the bowl of water closer to Maadri’s and sat at the foot of her bed. She pointed at the tray and Maadri shook her head.

“No. I don’t want to brush my teeth and wash my face, I want to drink my tea and you should call me Maadriji, because I am your superior.” Rupini stopped humming. Maadri felt sweat dapple her hair part and she placed her hands on Rupini’s round shoulders and pushed her. Under her damp fingers, Maadri felt the coolness of the fabric of Rupini’s blouse.

Rupini stood up and Maadri’s fingers trailed down her elbow. She folded her hands in her lap and looked at the dark blue fingerprints Maadri’s hands stained on her peacock green blouse.

“Yes, *ji*.” She bent in front of the narrow chest of the sitting girl and looked at her. With her skirt, she wiped a trail of sweat from Maadri’s hairline. “But let us get out of bed, okay? We will pick you out a nice light frock to wear.” Rupini dipped a corner of her pallu into the water bowl and wiped the wet cloth across Maadri’s face. “You will feel better.”

The coolness of the wet water swept through Maadri and she got out the bed. As she stepped out of the direct light of the sun into the cool shadow, she said “Yes. A frock. Press it for me, the way I like.”

Rupini took the dress out of the dresser and bowed.

The heat and the clamor of the outside flooded into the room after Rupini left.

Rupini pulled the newly pressed frock over Maadri's head in the kitchen and gestured for her to sit down. "You did not comb your hair yesterday, Wahni?" Rupini asked Maadri. Maadri shrugged, irritated at Rupini's pet name for her. Rupini had made it up when she began working in Chiminlal, after she saw Maadri fall and skin her knees. Instead of crying, Maadri had stood up and asked Rupini, in prim English, to wash her knee and to clean her dress. Rupini, surprised at the little girl's reaction and unable to understand English, began to call her *Wah-nahi rani*, the queen that doesn't cry. As she spent more time around the girl, she shortened it to Wahni.

She pulled her plump fingers through Maadri's black braids. Tangled by a rough sleep, Maadri's hair fell down her back in dry plaits.

"I did," Maadri, said, "I do not do it as well as you." Small curls erupted from the part on Maadri's scalp. Rupini clicked her tongue, disapproving, as a bullock cart tumbled by the open windows. In the next compound, a servant pulled a heavy basket into a side courtyard strung with drying ropes.

"Where were you yesterday?" asked Maadri. She felt her neck, stiff and erect, warm with the question. The kitchen was dark, despite the brightness of

the sun outside. The neighbor servant squinted against it as she pinned a thick orange sari to a laundry line.

“*Array!*” She looked around Maadri’s shoulder. “Did you miss me?” Maadri rested her gaze on the bright, blue flame of the fire. Rupini warmed oil in a flat bronze bowl above the flame.

“Yes,” she answered. “No one pressed my frock.” Maadri tugged at the wrinkled sleeve of the calico dress she wore and smoothed the skirt around her thin crossed ankles. Bells from the Laxshmi temple sounded through the window and the neighbor woman pulled a pair of dark pants from her basket.

Rupini clicked her tongue again. “You are getting too old for frocks, Wahni. It is time you started wearing a sari.” She pulled a comb through the untangled hair and scooped a palmful of oil from the stove. “And to answer you, I was getting cotton to spin.” Warm droplets slid through her cupped hands back into the flat, bronze bowl above the blue flame.

“I am not too old for frocks.” She traced a set of figures on her dress, a plump yellow-haired girl with a smiling sheep. The pattern repeated over and over her skirt and climbed up to her waist and elbows. “They are too much. Too many folds and too much cloth. I do not like them.”

“Then, as soon as your monthly starts, you will begin to wear them.”

“Ha,” Maadri’s back straightened as she answered yes, her face stiffened.

Rupini turned Maadri's body. "You are starting to grow here." The women pointed at her own full blouse. Maadri crossed her arms across her chest. "And you have almost finished school?" Maadri nodded, staring at the servant woman next door.

"It is not bad. You don't know how to put them on, only. We will go to your father's store and pick out some cloth." She scooped some more oil out of the bowl. "Yes, *ji?*"

Maadri spread her fingers onto the cool stone floor of the kitchen. "Ha."

"English, please. Your father wants you to talk in English, only."

"Yes." Maadri frowned. The neighbor servant pulled a blue expanse of cloth out of the basket, a wet tangle of fabric that twisted in her brown arms. Rupini undid her other braid and pulled a comb through it while she scooped another palmful of oil onto Maadri's head.

"Too hot!" the girl said, her back straight as she slapped at Rupini's hands. Rupini combed the oil from the girl's crown down her back hair.

"*Ha ha*, yes, yes." She blew cool air over the top of Maadri head, "Too hot, I will cool it."

Maadri eased back onto the swells of Rupini's breasts and began to close her eyes as her cool breath smoothed over Maadri's forehead.

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In the market, Rupini held a cinched bundle of cloth against her hip. She took Maadri's elbow with her free hand and pulled her through the tumbling

figures in the market district. Maadri held a bundle of cloth as well. She paused every few moments to look at the blaze of colors in the street. Blue saris and red skirts. Brown sandals and green vegetables. And every few seconds a person slipped passed her in all white. She began trailing behind. Maadri's usual confident stride was slowed by the crowd, the shoppers who rushed from one stand to another, tripping over small animals and the dirty children that begged in the narrow allies. She was struck still by the filthy smell of sweat from the animals and half-naked children.

A park square was positioned at the south end of the marketplace, a few paces from where Rupini and Maadri were. Yellow grass rose from the cracked yellow earth in clumps. In the center of the earth was a small stage, with a collection of benches facing the raised platform. Large, thickly leaved tree branches shaded the benches, reaching in from the manicured borders of green space. Maadri ran the pads of her fingers through the thin part that Rupini set in her hair in the morning, noting the dark shade under the spread of the tree branches.

Rupini stopped. A large woman was seated in front of a free standing cart, a wooden wheel and a pile of white, dingy cloth in front of her. She took a dark length of cotton twine from water filled bowl beside her folded legs. Maadri felt a spray on her legs and feet as the woman snapped water from the twine.

“*Namastji*, Nani,” Rupini said to the woman. She looked at Rupini and smiled.

“Acha, good! Rupini, I cannot spin cloth fast enough.” Nani pointed at the bundle of cloth in front of her.

Rupini’s hand slipped from Maadri’s elbow and she crouched by Nani. Rupini laid her bundle on top of Nani’s collection of cloth and gestured for Maadri to do the same. The girl felt the heat of the sun beating down on the thin skin on her scalp.

Nani nodded and her arms swayed. Rupini and Nani began speaking in a different dialect, a fast stream of words that Maadri could not follow. The syllables slipped around her, lost before she could grasp their meaning. Words and people and brightly colored cloth swirled around her, and she felt the heat and the dust on her face.

“I want to go home,” she said. Rupini did not notice. She chattered on, her tongue snapping against her teeth in wet clicks.

“Rupini, I want to go home,” she said again. Louder this time, so the woman and Rupini’s head snapped in her direction.

Rupini stood up and placed a cool hand on Maadri’s shoulder. She lifted her free hand, splaying her fingers, and tilted her hand and head at the same time, in the gesture of question. “What? What?” she smiled and wiped the beads of sweat from Maadri’s upper lip. Her fingers grazed Maadri’s face.

“Yes, yes. It is hot. One minute.” Rupini crouched again.

A man passed between Rupini and Maadri. Small rivulets of sweat shined under his sideburns. When he saw Nani, he called, “Gandhiji, Jaya!” Nani and Rupini repeated the phrase. Nani pumped the wheel in front of her.

Nani’s puckered arms swayed from side to side as she spun. The wheel in front of her spun so fast the wooden spokes blurred. Maadri glared at her and bitter anger welled up in her. Nani directed her conversation towards the girl.

Rupini saw the confusion on Maadri’s face and giggled. She said to Nani, “Gujarati and English only.” She wagged her finger at Maadri and imitated the deep voice of Maadri’s father, “But English, most important.”

Maadri began to walk in the same direction they came from. Rupini caught her by her shoulder again and spun her around. Her features, usually wide and bright with a smile, were cramped together with anger. Her eyes narrowed and her lips retreated into a tight circle as her cool fingers pinched Maadri’s shoulders.

“One minute,” Rupini said, her voice rising. Her fingers tightened into her shoulder.

“Okay. Okay,” Nani stopped the wheel. “Nonviolence, today especially. Please,” she said to Rupini, who dropped her hand and looked away. Nani patted the ground next to her. “Would you like to see what I am doing?” she said to

Maadri. The woman had spread a thin, white blanket on the ground. The edges of the blanket had turned on themselves and were crusted with yellow dirt.

Maadri looked at Rupini, whose gaze was still averted. Maadri pressed her lips together, dry and papery, and straightened the corners of the sheet and sat next to the large woman.

“This,” Nani said and pointed at a thick spool of thread on a spindle, “goes through here.” She pointed to the wheel, which Maadri realized had a deep groove to hold the string.

“And when I pump this pedal,” Nani pressed her foot against a piece of wood connected to the machine. Nana’s foot was yellowed and dark with dust. “And if you pump enough, you get this,” Nani said. She opened her palm at the bottom of the wheel and a thin sheet of fabric spilled from the wheel, covering her hand. “Do you want to see?” She gestured for Maadri to come closer.

Maadri looked up at Rupini, who nodded to her. Maadri leaned closer to the fabric that spread across the woman’s fat hands.

“What is it?” Maadri asked. The fabric was white and thin. The blisters on Nani’s palm rose in dark patches under the cloth.

“What?” Nani looked at Rupini and laughed. “It is cloth.”

“Cloth for what?” Maadri asked. A pustule on the woman’s hand leaked, a dark, thick fluid bleeding through the loops on the cloth.

“For clothes, bacchi, For saris and lungis.” Nani laid the cloth on the ground and picked her tight sari blouse sleeve from her arm. “See?”

Maadri looked at the women’s blouse. It was the same thin weave from her wheel.” Why do you not buy some colored blouse from Pitaji’s store?” Maadri asked. Nani’s smile became tight and she resumed spinning.

“This is Indian cloth,” she said.

Rupini slid between Nani and Maadri. “I am working for Nani, spinning cloth,” Rupini said to Maadri, who stood up and brushed off her frock.

“But you work for me, “ Maadri said.

“For your Pitaji,” Rupini corrected. “And I am just spinning for extra money, so I can buy some wedding jewelry.”

“But it is so ugly,” Maadri said, pointing at Nani’s blouse.

“Chup!” Rupini hissed at Maadri. She began to chatter with Nani again.

The man that had called out to Nani and Rupini settled in a bench in front of the park stage. The shade of the trees above him fell across his face and he closed his eyes and leaned back, stretching his arms above him and in the sudden cool. Maadri felt the sun burn her neck and looked away when she noticed the white lungi that jumbled around his waist was thin, exposing the thin outline of his dark thighs.

The man slid a hand-rolled cigarette from his ear, smoothing out the tobacco lumps between his fingers. Maadri thought of her father, of the European

tobacco that he smoked exclusively, and clicked her tongue. The man's eyes closed happily around one end of the beedi. He leaned back, opened his eyes, and exhaled, not noticing a collection of four small, dark children on the bench. The smoke slid in a white stream from his mouth. He caught Maadri looking at him.

The man scanned her from head to foot, his face curled in disgust, his features pulling in as he examined the bright yellow dress that she wore. A lazy smile appeared on his lips. "That is a pretty dress you have on," he said to her, his brown teeth visible as he spoke.

Rupini and Nani turned from their conversation. Nani stopped the wheel. "Araah. Leave her alone. She is a child."

"A British brat," he replied. He leaned forward, his elbows on his thinly covered thighs. "Ha, Memsahib?" he said. He looked at Maadri and rose to his feet. The children on the ground scrambled to take his place. "Are you a little British brat?"

Maadri stepped behind Rupini and took her hand. Her cool fingers were limp. The man stood in front of them and pointed towards the lace collar of Maadri's frock. "Very pretty dress," he said to Rupini. He looked at her and took in her bright sari and blouse. "Are you paid in pounds to take of this brat? Is that how you buy for your English saris?" He pulled the pallu off Rupini's shoulder and it fell from her waist onto the dusty ground.

Rupini's gasped and jerked her hand from Maadri's and folded her arms across her bare blouse.

Men dressed in khaddi gathered around Rupini and the man. Maadri heard them grumble, angry, as they closed in. Nani struggled to get up, and her arms shook as she pushed herself off the ground. "Array, bhai, I said enough." Her feet spread wide to support her weight and, steadying her self, she stepped towards the man. He retreated.

Rupini gathered her pallu from the dirt and threw it across from her shoulder. She turned into the direction of the Chiminlal. "Let us go," she said to Maadri. "It is not safe for us here."

Maadri thrust out her hand, reaching for Rupini's cool palm. She saw the man relax back into the bench, and Nani settle in front of the wheel again. The thick of white-clad men moved to the park. Maadi ran after Rupini's bright sari, her palm still open.

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Maadri thought about the man and the day in the market as she heard the chanting echo through the atrium. She walked into the front alcove. The recess was silent and cool and dark after Rupini shut the large wooden door that separated Chiminlal from Ahmedabad. The girl ground her teeth as the wooden beam moved in a creaky arc from the left door and slammed into the latches,

barring both doors. The sound of the heavy beam dropping was loud, and the chants of the marchers seemed distant for a moment.

The small lantern that Rupini carried out, Maadri knew, was now on a stone platform in front of the metal gate that closed outside of the door. She could see Rupini bend down and open the small brass door of the lamp as the hinge creaked. She could see the way she knelt down, plump hands folded in her plump thighs, and puckered her lips to blow out the flame. Maadri flattened her palms against the carved, gleaming wood and rested her ear against the door. The small bells of Rupini's anklet jingled as she slipped on her sandals. The lock on the outside gate fastened with a metallic click. Small chimes tinkled from Rupini's ankle as she stepped around the front gate to a small side window in the alcove.

The key appeared under the outside shutter of the window and scraped against the bars with a screech.

"Take it," Rupini said, her low voice echoing in the stone alcove. Maadri walked over to the small window and felt the bareness of her own ankles, as she crossed the room without sound. "Here, ji," Rupini rattled the key under the wooden shutter. "I can't push it any further, you take it." The large silver teeth protruded under the shutters.

The marchers had switched slogans. *Swadeshi leave, Swadeshi leave.* “We will burn your British goods, freedom now.” Her father, Maadri thought, might be at the front of the factory with his workmen.

“You keep it. You need it to come back.”

The key rattled under the shutter and shot into the room. It clattered on the floor and Maadri knelt quickly to muffle the sound. The coolness of the floor comforted her for a moment, before she heard bells jingle as Rupini walked away.

Maadri waited until the sound of Rupini’s anklets blended into the chanting. A wave of warm air blew past her when she opened the door, weaving into the house. She picked up the lantern and went to the kitchen. The cool surrounded her again as she walked into the dark, and her eyes adjusted to the change.

Inside the kitchen, she found some matches and lit the lantern. The small mat that Rupini slept on was gone. As was her spinning wheel. Maadri went to her room and pulled on a bright green frock.

She unlocked and relocked the gate after she slipped on her sandals. The shape of her father’s shiny black dress shoes was outlined in dust. Maadri wondered when he had left this morning. Or had he stayed at the shop overnight? Around her, the street was empty of people and voices. The bullock carts and dirty children were missing. The servants hauling out large baskets of

laundry to be washed and the vegetable sellers cries were gone. Only the noise of the protesters filled the streets; the chants swelled over the square stone buildings and flooded Maadri's ears.

Maadri hesitated. Outside of her home, the voices of the protesters sounded numerous, Hundreds of people shouted, but it was hard to distinguish how large the protest was and where exactly the protesters were. The chants were thick and angry and Maadri felt the heat of their approach in her face. She wiped her face with her frock sleeve and began to stride in the direction she had heard Rupini's anklets sound.

No British Goods. No British Goods. A drum sounded after each repeat. Maadri ran down the street, angry cries piercing the air around her. The streets started widening as she ran, the buildings became squatter, farther apart.

The marchers stopped for a moment, pausing to change their chant, long enough to let a cool breeze dry Maadri's sweating face and to let her hear small bells sound in the pattern of footsteps. Maadri ran towards the sound and heard the marchers begin again. *Swadeshi Suraj*, some stumbled, others began, *Gandhiji jaya!* The voices tumbled over each other, moving into a roar.

"Rupini." Maadri yanked on the woman's white shirt. The material was transparent in her hands and thin. Maadri's own face was covered with a thin film of dirt and sweat. They were on a side street of the town circle. Maadri could see

her father's factory through the circle of Rupini's arm as she balanced a bundle on her head.

Rupini turned, her hand still positioning the bundle on her head. She looked at Maadri, shocked, and began to yell over the protesters' roar.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Maadri tried to answer, but Rupini covered her mouth. She looked around and took the bundle off her head. Unknotting the cloth, she pulled a white, coarse shawl from her things and threw it over the bright blue sari that Maadri's father had brought home from his shop. It covered her sandals and Rupini pulled it tight across her chest.

"Bhagwan. They are coming," Rupini said.

Rupini said into her ear, "Run back to Chiminlal." A couple hundred feet away, her father's shop window was empty. The bolts of cloth gone. Blues, reds and yellows had disappeared. Maadri grabbed her hand and pulled Rupini with her towards the factory. Rupini leaned away from Maadri's pulling hands, shaking her head. "Get away from here, now. Get away from the factory. They are going to burn it."

"Who will take care of me?"

Rupini removed Maadri's fingers from her own and pulled her close. She tugged gently on the gold rings in Maadri's ears and opened her mouth.

The protests spilled into the main circle and Rupini's words were drowned out. Protesters erupted onto the main market square. White thin cloth stuck to the

slim bodies in wet sweaty patches. The faces of the protesters were twisted in emotion, their mouths wide with anger and energy. Their voices overlapped and spilled over one another. The chants slammed into the building and echoed back over the crowd. Their mouths twisted into painful shapes and their teeth, covered with saliva, glowed dully in the new morning sun.

They marched past the side street where Rupini and Maadri stood, taking no notice of them as their white clad bodies pitched forward in angry strides. Rupini had distanced herself from Maadri, stepping carefully away from the girl and into the marchers.

In a moment, she was marching with the protesters. The white of her sari bobbed and disappeared in the crowd. Maadri threw off the shawl on her shoulders and ran back to Chiminlal.

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The sounds of protests thinned and silenced after Maadri locked herself back into Chiminlal. She sat on the floor of her room and pulled her fingers through her braids.

CHAPTER III

MAADRI, AMEDABAD INDIA 1940

“Appa,” Maadri said to her father, “Why is he looking the wall hangings?” She leaned against her father’s office door, rotating her bangles around her thin wrist. A blond man stood close to the paintings in Chiminlal’s receiving room and examined the art with a square of glass he pulled out of a thick leather pouch.

He stepped close to each painting and placed the translucent square over sections of the canvases, sometimes stepping back to see the entire painting, then stepping in close again. Maadri rested her cheek on her fist, wrapping her thumb and finger over the thick gold hoops of her bracelets.

“Nothing. Nothing,” her father said. She turned her attention from the man and examined her father. He was seated at his desk, a large rosewood table that glowed underneath the clutter of objects of his work. It seemed neater than usual to Maadri, less cluttered than before. A leather bound ledger book was open in front of him, its gold tassel drawn long and straight over the polished wood. He closed it when he saw Maadri in the doorway and pushed it away.

“Nothing?” she repeated. The desk seemed neater, she realized as she approached it, because some of the decorations were no longer there. A small ivory elephant that used to lay on the edge of her father’s desk, gone, as was a

crystal inkpot. The mellow red of the wood glowed under her father's hands. She looked again at the blond man, who had slipped on a pair of gloves and begun lifting a painting off the wall. "Arrrray," she said, her voice thinning with anger.

Her father threaded the gold tassles of the ledger through his fingers. He looked subdued and he was silent. Children were shouting outside.

"Close the windows, my girl."

"But Renu can do--"

"I do not want the neighbors to see this." He gestured to the man, who examined the picture of a golden-faced child on the wall. The man stepped back and nodded. Maadri's father rubbed the silk strands of the tassel together in his fingers, exposing the black thread of the tassel strands. Small gold flecks floated off the string and disappeared into the red wood.

"But, Appa, what—?"

"Now," her father said. Maadri had rarely heard his voice raised to her, and his command boomed in her ears. She dropped the bangle that she had wrapped in her palm and it gave off a metallic rattle. He placed his hand on the cover of his leather ledger as Maadri closed the windows behind his desk. He gestured to her to close the windows in the other rooms on the first floor and she did so, noticing the oil paintings that had been removed from the walls and laid on the floor.

When she came back to her father, he pulled a slip of paper from a silver letter file that stood on his desk. "*Beso*, sit." Maadri settled on a plush chair across from him, where her father sat and smoked his pipe. She touched the arm of the chair, trying to release the rich tobacco scent that usually sprung from the fabric.

"Why is he looking at the paintings? Why are some of them on the ground?" she asked again. Her father stood and walked around the room, the slip still in his hand. In the low light that filtered through the cracks between the shutters, he appeared sunken in.

"*Beti*, we are not--"

"I have chosen some works," the blond gentleman said, walking into the room. He had put away his magnifying glass.

"There is more in here, sir," her father said to the man, indicating his study, "Very nice paintings, very expensive. I got them myself from Italy. Come," he invited the gentleman.

Holding up a hand, the man said, "No, I have everything that I want."

"But I have some very lovely things, here. First class." He picked up a pair of small gold anklets that Maadri wore as a child. They jingled lightly as he lifted them and Maadri saw her father's face, anxious and eager in dim lamp light. He was small next to the blond appraiser.

“Are these baby bracelets?” The man asked and laughed. He pulled one out of her father’s hand and shook it. The small silver bells rang in the room.

Maadri stood up straight and tense in the soft chair. “Appa!” she said to her father, but he kept his head bowed and did not respond. She stood and addressed the appraiser.

“Put that down,” she said. He closed his hands around the anklet and looked puzzled.

“Shh, Maadri,” her father said.

“Yes, well...” the man trailed off and put the anklet back on her father’s desk. He left the room and a few moments later, Maadri heard the front door close behind him.

“Sit down, *beti*,” her father said. His tone was edged with something unfamiliar to Maadri. She sat back down, unable to feel the plushness of the cushion. He pulled a square from the letter holder and sat in the footstool in front of Maadri’s chair.

She was used to seeing him across the large desk, the desk glowing pleasantly between them, full of receipts and black-marked ledger books and small, expensive things. As she looked around him, she noted other things were missing: a silver candy dish, a miniature replica of a cricket bat. He placed the slip of paper on his knee and Maadri saw it was a photograph. She could smell his breathe, moist with the sour smell of old tea.

“I have a match for you,” he said. He leaned forward and placed the photograph in her lap. His hand lingered above the curve of her knee and she slid back on the chair cushion. Her father folded his hands over his middle. Maadri noted his belly was smaller, caved in. Or perhaps it was the way her father sat, slumped over, collapsing into himself.

She looked at the photograph, her eyes adjusting to the dimness of the light. “What match?” she asked, retreating into the depth of the chair. Her father looked tiny, transparent.

“A match,” he said, looking at her. “A husband, no?” he said, like a question. Maadri breathed in sharply, trying to find air that wasn’t fragranced with bitter, milky leaves.

“But you said that I need not try and find a match,” she said.

Her father stood, and weaved his hands behind him as he walked the length of the room.

“You said,” she continued, filling her body with air, “that I am a rich man’s daughter and we have enough money so I can choose whom I marry.”

He shook his head and picked up the ledger from his desk and set it in her lap. The picture slipped off her lap and settled on the ground next to her feet. She flipped through the columns and saw the pages filled with ink and columns and columns of numbers in red. “You must marry. I cannot support you, *beti*.”

She shut the ledger and saw the gold outline of her father's hand on the cover. She placed her own hand in the outline, hers almost as large as his. She picked up the picture from next to her feet and looked at the tall young man, his face large and unsmiling. She shook her head and stood. "But Appa," she began. She walked to her father and tried to stand close to him, her breath mixing with his.

Her father stepped backwards and his face crumbled. He sat behind his desk and cradled his hand in his forehead. "He is a good match for you, *beti*," he said. His voice was high, then low. Then high again. "A businessman."

Maadri kept the photo with her as she left the room, hurriedly, her father's high sobs following her up through the greeting room.

Oil paintings lined the floor as she walked through, grouped by size. Small studies, little sketches of flowers and still, red fruit in bowls leaned against one wall. Then large portraits of almost transparent children and their pale mothers leaned against the other. The outlines of where they hung were light squares on the walls.

Maadri settled in her room, the sound of her father's cries still in her ears. She washed her face in a bowl of water, feeling the sticky bitter scent of tea on her father's breath leave her face. She looked at the photo again, at the broad shoulders of the man, at his large hands.

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One year later, after her father passed and her new husband sailed to Africa to trade, she did chores in the kitchen. They stayed in Chiminlal, as her father had agreed to give it to Maadri and her new husband after the wedding.

The European paintings and knick knacks that had not been sold off disappeared after Maadri's wedding. Her husband preferred Indian things. He replaced the porcelain figurines with stone statues of intertwined Hindu gods making love, and the blank spaces on the walls were filled with paintings of voluptuous village women.

Sourness flooded her mouth when Maadri began to press her clothes; a trail of saliva poured from the insides of her cheeks and bathed her tongue in bitterness. She hunched over the colorful petticoat she was ironing and closed her eyes. The small fire that warmed the iron blazed next to her.

"Madame, are you alright?" Renu asked. She unfolded her plump, crossed legs and pushed herself into an awkward stand.

"I am fine." Maadri straightened herself, sitting up tall over the petticoat. Maadri looked at Renu as her servant sat back down in front of the dough she was rolling. She picked up the iron and smoothed the petticoat, beginning to press it again. Another wave of bitter fluid rushed over her tongue and she hunched over and coughed. She swallowed again and became aware of chanting

from a temple down the street. The voices were unclear, dulled by the closed kitchen shutters.

Renu jumped up and pulled open the closed shutters. "You need some fresh air, Madame. You have been inside too long." The voices at the temple became clearer, louder. Clanging bells spilled through the open window. A thin string of clear liquid fell from Maadri's lips and darkened the petticoat where it fell.

From the window, a cool wave of air pushed over Maadri and the bitter taste in her mouth retreated. "Yes. I will go get some water from the river." She rose and picked up a small bronze tumbler from the corner, from in between the small idols of gods gathered there. The corner was the place where Maadri worshipped daily, after she had bathed and dressed and Renu had fetched water from the Sabarmati River. Her father had sold the elaborately carved Laxshmi idol.

"No, no Madame. I will get the puja water," Renu said, pushing herself to standing again. Her hand outstretched, she walked to where Maadri held the pot. "You just sit here and rest."

Strands of Renu's hair slipped out of a tiny knot on her head as she reached towards the bowl. Maadri's father had said that Renu had thick, black hair when she came to work with his family as a midwife and nanny when he was a small child. Renu's hair was so long that when she let her hair down, he would hide underneath it. Maadri didn't believe him; she didn't believe that the white-

haired old woman that she had known when she was growing up had ever been young.

Renu had stayed with Maadri's father, with his family since he was born. She had lived with her husband and son, Mohan, for a few decades, but had moved into Chiminlal after Mohan had grown up and her husband had died. Renu stayed even after Maadri's father's cloth trading stopped being profitable, after he sold the cotton fields, after all the British furniture and fine statues were removed to pay off debts, even after all the other servants had left. Maadri's father said Renu was in love with him, and flirted with the old woman in the kitchen. And perhaps she was.

Renu stayed with her father after khaddi cloth had replaced the lovely British clothes, long after Maadri's father could not pay her much more than food and shelter in Chiminlal. And she had never asked Renu why, never really thought of her as more than a servant. As Renu approached Maadri, the light from the open window lit her brown scalp. Thin slats of dark brown skin were exposed between yellowed strands of white hair. What Maadri remembered from her childhood were lines that carved Renu's face into different sections of worn brown ridges. Now, the substance of her skin was the brown creviced ridges.

The loose, puckered flesh on Renu's outstretched arm swayed on her slight bones. Her hands were curved as she reached towards the bowl in Maadri's hands, two fingers splayed from her palm, perpendicular to the rest of

her fingers. Maadri's cheeks pulsed acid again over her teeth and she pulled the bowl into her and hunched over it, away from Renu's extended hand, repulsed by the thought of Renu's fingers touching her own.

Renu let her hand drop when she saw Maadri pull back. She walked back to the petticoat and sat, reaching to lift the iron.

"No," Maadri straightened up and walked over to Renu, "This is still filthy, see?" she pointed at the dark rounds of saliva that had trickled from her mouth. "Wash it again." Renu nodded and rose to her feet. She crumpled the petticoat against her and shuffled to the courtyard, where she washed the laundry.

Another flush of saliva pumped through Maadri's lips, and she walked out onto the street where the temple bells sounded again. She continued walking until she reached the bank of the Sabarmati River. As the chilly plane of water stretched in front of her, she placed the bronze pot next to her and leaned forward, her fingers cupping her knees. Liquid filth spilled out of her mouth and spread through the currents. The air flew around her and she stood up, straightened herself up, picked up the pot, and examined her sari for stains.

*

"There is too much movement, Madame. Creating too much heat." Renu kneeled in front of Maadri, and her lined hands sprawled over the slight curve of her stomach. A thin film of moisture clung to Maadri's body, and Renu's hand slid

across her stomach as she examined her. Maadri stood in front of her servant and her head churned as she looked down on Renu's white hair.

The air was damp, like her skin. The monsoons had begun, strangely, with no actual rainfall. The atmosphere was thick; clouds hung low over Chiminlal.

"Close the shutters," Maadri said. She could see the road that ran by Chiminlal's south side. A vegetable vendor pushed his cart through the narrow passage, shouting the prices of his wares in mellow bursts. A servant from a neighboring compound, dressed in a red blouse, called out to him, and the vegetable vendor stopped in front of the window where she stood.

"The air is good, it will keep you cool," Renu said.

Two boys ran around the vegetable seller's cart, pushing a spokeless wheel in front of them with their hands. The slim one, taller and faster than his dark friend, slapped the side of the vegetable cart as they ran past and the vegetable seller ran a few steps after the boys but stopped when another servant from a different compound called out to him. He nodded in her direction.

"Close them." Maadri repeated. The two servants buying vegetables leaned out their windows and gossiped across the thin dirt alley. The sound of their laughter rolled into Chiminlal and the child inside Maadri shook. Maadri doubled over and Renu rose and guided her to a chair. The white haired woman crossed the humid room and pushed the shutters into their frames. The wood was swollen with moisture and they swung back, but Renu, her mangled fingers

trembling, managed to thread the thin, wooden rounds through the metal claps. Darkness fell over Maadri and Renu and the laughter from the gossiping woman softened. Maadri's abdomen settled.

She sighed in her chair, closing her eyes. Her husband had asked that the shutters be opened wide when they first married, and all the city sounds and bright light coursed through Chiminlal and through Maadri, through their first months of marriage. Her husband had insisted on keeping the windows open through the night. She had not noticed at first, but after her husband disappeared into a boat, on an endless business trip to Africa, the sounds echoed through the hollow structure of Chiminlal and made Maadri feel the emptiness of the large stone structure.

Renu approached and resumed her examination. "Yes, the baby is moving too much. Creating too much heat." She weaved her fingers through the pregnant woman's, placing both sets of hands on Maadri's damp stomach. "You see?"

Maadri felt a quick burn, like smothering a candle flame. She sat up and pushed off Renu's hands from her own and touched her stomach again, feeling the heat of her middle and the slippery moisture that collected on her.

"Drink this," Renu said, "It will calm your child and make him strong."

"Is it a boy?" Maadri asked.

"Still a few months until we can tell, but drink this. Turmeric water. It will help."

She drank the bitter liquid in gulps and Renu went to fetch more.

From the road, the calls of playing children and gossiping women slipped dimly into the room through the small spaces between the shutters and walls. The sounds whispered to Maadri's child, and her middle quaked. She pressed her hands against her stomach and bent over. With the child's movements came a shooting pain in her temples.

She walked in quick strides to the window. The noise of the streets became louder as she approached, laughter and animal sounds pulsing through her middle. She unthreaded the pin from the metal rounds that fastened the windows and placed her hands against the wood, trying to press them into their frames, but they were too thick with moisture and she could not fit them. The city sounds still stirred softly in her room and her womb fluttered.

She tried again, pushing against the shutters with the entirety of her new unfamiliar body until she forced the wooden boards a few centimeters into the frame. The sounds of outside softened, her middle settled. She moved back to sit on the chair, but as she turned, the window board popped out the frame and light and sound surrounded Maadri.

Her stomach blazed and she covered it with her hands. The heat that had singed her hands became pain that spilled over her spread fingers. She cried out and leaned over. Warmth spread from her stomach. She turned back and

collected the ends of the window boards and slammed them. They slid into the frame with a wooden shriek that echoed through her body.

Then silence filled the room. Solid, unbroken silence. Her abdomen quieted and she felt suddenly cool in the new calm; not a whisper slipped in through the window. Maadri slowly crossed the room and sat, wet footprints trailing from the window to her chair, her head throbbing.

*

The knob of flesh that swelled in her middle made Maadri nauseous. She rested on her side on her bed, unable to sleep. Her hair spread over her pillows in black tangles. Her temples throbbed now, aching even with the soft echos of Renu's movements.

Renu swept the wide veranda under Maadri's bedroom window. The slow steady whisper of stacked reeds over the dark stone flooring echoed in the narrow passage between the neighbor's compound and leaped up, between the homes, up through the second floor window where Maadri tossed and turned, trying to find a comfortable space with her swollen limbs and middle.

Renu began to hum as she worked, her low, flat voice not quite covering the chattering of her teeth. She had complained about how cold it was earlier that day and Maadri had ignored her. Her trembling voice rose up and spilled over Maadri where she tried to nap. Maadri closed her eyes, moist with the pain of her headache, one that had persisted since she had vomited on the banks of the

Sabarmati. She covered her ears with her hands and shook as her bracelets vibrated through her head. She took her bracelets off, softly placing them underneath the bed.

The sound of the sweeping reeds was softened in the distance between them. If Maadri had not seen Renu squatting and stepping as she opened the windows, she would have heard sounds like the soothing hushes her father whispered to her, when she was upset as a child. *Shhh, shhh, shhh* he murmured as she cried in his lap, patting her back and smoothing the tight braids she wore as a girl. *Shhh, shhh, shh*, Renu's reeds sighed as she worked.

The sound stung Maadri's ears and drilled in her temples. The dullness of the pain sharpened into points that needled above her ears, and threaded the tops of her cheeks to her nostrils in stinging lines. Maadri thought to shout down to Renu to stop, but the pain of her voice in her own head stung her behind her eyes.

A small wooden box was opened in front of her bed, next to her bangles. Two stacks of correspondence were inside, one stack of old, fat envelopes that her father sent her before he died, the other thin slips from her husband, stacked neatly, edge to edge, in the corner of the box.

Resting on the thick lip of the wood was her husband's most recent correspondence, a thin response to the news of her pregnancy. She had retreated to her room to read her husband's small, thinly lettered handwriting,

leaving Renu to finish sweeping. When she began, the almost transparent lines that connected each letter to the other began to bleed into the white paper and she lay down and closed her eyes.

Like his previous correspondences, the letter was brief, simply stating, “Must stay a few more months than originally planned.” His lack of news about his business dealings overseas troubled her more than his not enquiring as to her health, the health of their child.

He had married her, she knew, for Chiminlal. Her father had made it part of their marriage contract, and since their marriage he had borrowed money against the house, mortgaging Chiminlal many times over. He had meant, she believed, to invest money overseas. But thus far, none of the investments had come to any fruition.

The thick envelopes from her father overflowed the wooden box, spilling out after she undid the string that bound them together. He detailed the successes of his trips thoroughly to her, describing the black numbers that filled his ledgers after he had finished trading raw cotton to British businessmen, the number of future sales he had arranged. Then he discussed the luxuries that would result from his business, fine furniture he bought for Chiminlal and the precious stones he would set into gold for her when he came home.

The terse, abrupt sentence in her husband’s letters had no such promises of wealth.

Renu stopped sweeping and Maadri sighed as a breeze slid over her. The points of pain dulled into a throb in her head and the patches of sweat, dark and damp on her blouse, paused their spread. She had been warm despite the coldness of this season, walking to the Sabarmati in wrinkled blouses for the morning puja water because she could no longer tolerate the warmth of freshly pressed cloth against her skin. Even hours after Renu or she pressed her clothes, the heat still lingered in the weave.

Maadri sat up, trying to feel the breeze from the window she had opened. Her vision cleared and she began to look through her father's letters again. They were soft envelopes, almost like fabric, and Maadri would read them daily after her father died: his description of the British people, how they wore long woolen jackets to protect themselves from the cold and their large, winter hats. She pressed her hands to the cold stone of the floors to feel some type of chill, like the ones that her father had described to her in his letters.

The sound of an approaching bullock cart echoed into her bedroom and Maadri lifted her palm from the floor, leaving a moist handprint on the stone. She rose, attempting to walk to sit in a chair near the window, but she sat down immediately, unable to guide her movement. Her body was a new, unfamiliar shape. Her stomach protruded, a huge swell of skin she could not quite understand, not the familiar slender form that she had before. Maadri steadied

herself and rose again, splaying her feet wide under her, so that her stomach bobbed as she stood.

Hooves clomped outside and wooden wheels wailed, scraping to a stop against a wooden cart. A familiar male voice called out and Renu responded to the greeting. Maadri lifted her head above the windowsill and saw Mohan, Renu's son, riding a cart hitched to two dirty bullocks. Renu walked into the frame of Maadri's window and approached her son with the stack of reeds still in her hand, dragging a trail of wavy lines through the dirt road behind her. She pressed her twisted fingers against Mohan's cheek.

In front of the window, the air moved faster over Maadri's body than when she was lying down. Her headache retreated and she watched Renu and her son talk to one another, their voices floating up to her window. He smiled and ducked, freeing himself from his mother's grasp, a gesture Maadri recognized from her childhood when Mohan would visit Chiminlal with his toddler sons. He visited his mother almost every evening, checking on her on his way home. As in her childhood, Renu stepped backwards at this gesture, acting as if she was hurt. Mohan jumped down from the carts and stood next to his mother, pulling the stack of reeds from her hand and placing them gently on the ground.

Renu stroked his thick, black hair with her twisted fingers and Mohan pulled a small, woven bag from his cart and placed it at his mother's feet. She

cocked her head and flipped her free, whole palm up in a silent, questioning gesture and he pulled a ball of knitted fabric out of the bag.

Mohan snapped the garment and turned it almost inside out, splaying open the next hole with his hands. Renu pushed first her dragging arm through the sleeves, then the other arm, and Mohan lowered the neck gently over his mother's head. The jumper was too large; the sleeves covered her hands entirely, and the hem reached her mid thigh. Renu turned back her sleeves and caught Mohan's cheek between her bent fingers. He pulled something else from his bag and slid it into her hair and jumped back into the cart. He waved and drove past her through the narrow alley.

Renu watched his retreat, and folded her arms over her chest. She raised her arm to touch the pin that Mohan had slid into her hair. The afternoon sun flashed in the barrette, and stung Maadri's eyes. A stone fell from the pin. When Renu repositioned it in her thin hair and caught in the loops of fabric of her sweater. Her fingers, as she plucked the glass off her sweater, seemed straighter.

Maadri pulled back from the window and crossed the room to sit on the bed. The slight breeze moved around her, circling the empty room. Her headache was almost imperceptible and she called for Renu to get her a cup of tea. When she entered Maadri's room with a tray, the sweater stretched and long on her body, Maadri commented on the missing glass in her new barrette. As she

sipped her tea, she asked Renu to fetch her a tumblerful of water with a teaspoon of turmeric in it.

*

On the day that Maadri gave birth, the sky was thick with clouds. She felt it in her ears, above her eyes, the heaviness of the air pressing in on her skull. She closed her eyes for a moment, as she stood above the vessels she had washed and was drying, and felt the moisture in the air wrap around her, smothering.

The air that filtered through Chiminlal's closed windows was too thick to breathe easily, and she felt the effort of drawing in breath scour her throat and her nostrils. She opened her mouth, swallowing the air like tumblers of mango juice, and slid a thin white cloth over a stainless steel plate. Water still clung to the plate, in beaded streaks, though Maadri wiped two different cloths over it. She realized that the cloths themselves were damp in her hands and that the air was too heavy with moisture to dry anything and she walked to the courtyard to tell Renu to not hang the clothes the servant had washed.

Grey, green clouds blocked the sky above the courtyard. Dark light fell through open space, and stone balconies were luminous under the square of sky above they framed. Maadri felt the clouds press on her crown with a pain so thick that she did not feel fluid spill down her thighs.

"Madame," Renu called, alarmed. A dark pool crept out from under the hem of Maadri's sari.

Maadri heard Renu's alarm, but did not feel the pool at her feet until she looked down to understand what Renu was pointing at. The feeling of wetness did not alarm her, as her body had been covered with moisture for the last few months, but anger flooded her pained sinuses when she thought of her ruined sari.

And then, damp as her wet hands, birth began. Maadri grimaced and felt a flame slash her lower abdomen. Renu lowered her so that she lay on her back on the dusty courtyard bricks. Chiminlal's balconies loomed above her, bright stones in the dark, damp city.

"Breathe, mam, you must breathe," Renu said. She had gathered a bowl of water and dipped a length of homespun cloth into it, her glass bracelets slipping softly up and down her arms as she worked.

She wiped the wet cotton over Maadri's arms, forehead, stomach- quickly drying with the other edge of the cloth. Repeating over and over, dip, wipe, dry. Dip, wipe, dry. Hoping to bring some coolness to the birthing mother. Maadri's body was leeching warm fluid, soaking the khaddi a pale orange. Heat rose off Maadri in waves, and Renu stood every few minutes to avoid passing out. She touched the empty bowl to her face, her palms, her feet to feel the coolness of the metal.

And suddenly, rain. Rain like silver spring coils falling off the roof, compressing and cooling the air. Rain like ice shards, cold and piercing, Rain and then birth. Surya Chiminlal Patel, Maadri's would-be son, was born.

When she picked up her child, Maadri looked at the small, dark, slitted thing. Her teeth clenched, as did her hands. She gazed on what she believed was the underdeveloped genitalia. When Renu wiped away what was left of the afterbirth, she found thin, half circles of blood all over Surya's body. Where Maadri's nails had pieced skin when she first held her child.

CHAPTER IV

SURYA, AHMEDABAD INDIA 1946

“How many do we need, madame?” Renu asked. Her words echoed through the silence of the courtyard, and Surya saw bird wings flutter in response to the sound.

Crows gathered on the edge of the balconies that lined the atrium. Surya examined them as she pulled tendu leaves from a pan of water. The birds roosted in long black lines on the balconies, groups of eight and nine on different floors, on different sides of the atrium that enclosed Surya, Renu, and her mother. She placed a leaf flat in front of her, smoothing extra water off the wet, veined surface with her stout fingers as Renu sprinkled yellow tobacco flakes on the tendu. Surya rolled one of the tobacco-covered leaves into a thick, wet cylinder. The birds that Renu had startled settled into themselves again.

“A tenth lakh total,” Surya’s mother said. “2,500 more by the end of the day to get paid.” Next to her were pans full of *beedis*. The hand-rolled cigarettes were layered in stacks of a hundred, each pan containing 500. Surya counted the pans. “We need to roll faster,” her mother said.

Maadri hovered next to where Surya sat, folded over her narrow feet. She looked at Surya's hands and opened her plump palms, examining the tiny pustules gathered there. "Where are your gloves," she said to her daughter. "I told you to wear gloves when you roll."

Surya looked at her mother's hands. The exposed flesh on the inside of her hand was crusted with boils and thick with crusted yellow fluid where the pustules had burst. "You need them. You wear them, Amma."

Renu's hand curled around the portion of tobacco flakes that she had collected, a small powdery crumble escaping from the end of her fist. "Stupid girl," her mother murmured under her breath.

Surya counted the number of cigarettes they had rolled. As the numbers in her head climbed, the sting of her mother's words lessened. A crow cackled above her. The lines shifted, and a black mass pitched off her balcony and swooped across the reflective plane of the cistern to another line of birds closer to the sky. Settling close to the bird beside it, it flattened its beak to its chest. Surya struggled to see where one bird ended and the other began, so close was one to the other. The thick, oil-colored feathers balanced in a mass on the balcony.

Renu fed them yesterday, while Surya's mother was buying string. Surya found Renu in the kitchen bent over a high rimmed plate. She rolled the heel of her palm over a thin, dry *chapatti*, breaking the flat round of bread into shards.

She stood in the kitchen when Renu walked into the courtyard, the door between them cracked slightly. Renu laid the plate next to the cistern and took up handful after handful of crumbs, sprinkling them around the dusty stone ground as she clicked her tongue to beckon the crows.

A thin band of light fell from the courtyard across Surya's face, and from the thin opening of door that allowed the light in, Surya first heard cries from the balconies. Long, sharp *caws* dropped from sky just before the courtyard was flooded with black, flapping bodies. As they dropped over the cistern, fear began to envelop Surya as Renu disappeared under a blanket of black. Surya could not distinguish Renu from the flapping black bodies. They seemed to multiply in front of her. She wished that each bird had a string that tangled with the air as they flew, so she could trace their curves and keep track of how many were descending over Renu.

The sound of the birds frightened Surya more than their hungry attack. As the crows fell from their stone perches, the beats of their wings broke the still pillar of air between the balconies. She lost count. Wing beats filled Surya. She pressed her thick, dark lobes into her ears to block the beats.

Renu reappeared as the crows settled on the ground around the cistern and Surya let go of her ears. The crows' long black beaks clicked around Renu's feet. Her hair fell in messy wisps around her ears, and she stepped over the oil-colored wings to the kitchen door. The air settled in the courtyard again and

Surya watched as the blanket of birds took to the sky, flying past their perches.

Surya pressed her lips together as Renu closed the door.

Surya wondered at her fright as she smoothed the tendu leaves in front of her, wondered if the birds would descend over them again, their wings beating at Renu and her mother. She imagined the weight of them. It seemed like hundreds of birds perched around them, hundreds of them that, if not for the straight point of their claws, which curved over the round stone of the balcony banisters, would fall upon them.

“We need four more pans,” Surya’s mother said.

“Five, Amma, Five more pans,” Surya corrected.

The neat row of straight, parallel talons that gripped onto the banisters comforted her, as did the stillness of the air in the courtyard. She began to count the thin scaly digits, imagining the banisters as an abacus and the talons as black beads she could slide.

“We need more water,” her mother said, her narrow feet curled on the ground in front of her. Maadri cut a length of string that she had fastened around a *beedi*, and the knife hit the stones with a ring. A crow in the second story balcony ruffled its wings and Surya watched its claws shift side to side underneath it.

Renu rose and walked to the cistern.

“No, Renu. The water level is dropping. We will get the water from the Sabarmati,” her mother said.

*

When Surya and Renu and her mother began rolling *beedis* for money, Ahmedabad was a loud city. The constant noise soothed her, and she liked the beats of the rickshaws, the carts’ clatters and children’s shouts. They were so different from the silence that moved through Chiminlal. Silence punctuated with sharp sweeps of sound.

Hollow houses like the one she lived in were built close to one another, but the narrow alleys that separated them seemed too wide to Surya, like the river that separated the two sides of the city.

Horns honked and the temple bells clattered. But inside Chiminlal, only silence circulated. The Ahmedabad din pooled against Chiminlal’s doors, its closed shutters. Her mother ordered that the front doors and windows of the house stay closed while she was getting supplies. City sounds were locked out; silence seeped in the stones of the huge empty house, into Surya’s thick young body.

Surya tucked herself in a corner, making up silent games while Renu cleaned around her. In the courtyard, covered, were the soaking tendu leaves and baskets of broken tobacco. Surya’s hands throbbed, and the joints of her fingers screamed with pain of sprinkling tobacco and rolling. The tobacco flakes

were so small they disintegrated in her gloved hands, the dust clung to the woven fabric of the gloves.

The tobacco smell spread from the courtyard through the house, and it blended into the thin cotton of Surya's clothes. The tobacco scent rested in cooking pots, flamed up from the small kerosene stove. She pressed her head against the floor before sleeping and the sweet scent floated up from the stone. The fine dust clung to her gloves and fell through her hands as she rolled. As the days progressed, tobacco particles began to lay thick on shelves and in corners, despite Renu's daily brooming. At night, Surya's own coughs punctured her sleep.

Her mother had left to carry trays of *beedis* to be sold, so for a moment, Surya took a break. The stone blocks felt cool against her palms; she pressed her cheek against the walls as she followed the patterns. She rose, running her fingers against the stones and naming each block.

Mothers...block one. And daughters...block two. And brothers...block three

...and fathers and uncles and cousins and sisters and mothers and brothers and sisters and cousins and fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and grandmothers and grandfathers and uncles and aunts and fathers and sisters and cousins...

Her mind raced through the words. Each stone filled up the lonely mansion with people. Shutting her eyes as she traced each block, she saw people push out of the stone, become life-size. She began running.

...and fathers and brothers and uncles and aunts and cousins and uncles and cousins and sisters and mothers and brothers and sisters and cousins and fathers and mothers and sons...

Chiminlal filled with stone people, laughing and singing as Surya brought them to life, block by block. She was laughing and dancing with them, tripping happily and skinning her knees. She brushed off and started dancing again with her stone family,

...and grandmothers and grandfathers and sisters and brothers and daughters and sons and uncles and aunts and mothers and daughters and brothers...

Giggles echoed through the stone hallways. Until her mother came home.

“Why are you not rolling?” she asked.

...and sisters and uncles and aunts and babies and mothers and daughters and sisters...

Maadri stepped quickly, silently to the window, unthreaded one of the rolling pin rounds and hit her daughter across the face. Surya fell backwards, with a newly chipped tooth, the stone floor of Chiminlal cradling her skull.

As she fell, Surya was grateful for the coldness of stone floor and the soothing numbness that it spread across the back of her head. She looked to the wide plane of stone beside her and envied the smoothness. It reminded her of the slow movement of the Sabarmati's currents.

*

"What story tonight?" Her mother had asked a few night before. She unrolled a bamboo mat next to a small pitcher of water in Surya's empty stone room and laid an old quilt over the bedding. She patted the new, soft surface with her tobacco stained fingers and Surya sat where her mother's hand had left an uneven dent in the patched cotton.

Surya followed the stone floor under the mat until the slabs disappeared under the dark door. She pressed her lips together and sat, arms curled around her shins.

"It is like the river," Surya said to her mother. "If I lie down, I will drown."

Her mother grasped Surya's ankles gently and she unclasped her arms. She let her mother unfold her legs and place them straight on the mat. "The Sabarmati is a special river," she began. She pressed her thumbs into the bottom of Surya's feet. She lay down and threw out her arm.

"No, Mataji. What about my shoulder?" she asked. And looked at her mother's face.

"Please," Surya said.

Her mother looked for a moment longer and took Surya's arm. She continued, "The water flows from snowy mountains that are far north of here, so the water is cold, very cold, like ice. And it is said that if one drinks water straight from the river, it freezes their insides and makes them very brave." As she spoke, she pressed her thumbs into Surya's shoulder. Surya felt her mother's fingers, passing over her dark skin.

"Chiminlal is made of stones from the bottom of the Sabarmati." Her mother leaned across Surya and lifted her other arm, massaging each finger separately, then her forearm. "Because your father's father heard the story of the rabbit and the dog." Still leaning over her, she paused, holding Surya's hand in her rough fingers. She looked down at Surya. "Do you know the story of the rabbit and the dog?"

From below her mother's outstretched arms, Surya breathed in, filling her body with her mother's damp smell. She sensed layers of scent; bulky odors of sweat and dust that fell over Surya from her mother's underarms and body. And smaller odors, like the small remains of English Lavender cakes that her mother bathed with, that hid in the corners and folds of her mother's skin and Surya only sensed when the air hit her just so.

But the best, the richest scent, came from her mother's bumpy fingers. She breathed in again as her mother clasped Surya's hand in between her palms.

“No, I do not know the story of the rabbit and the dog,” Surya said, looking at her mother’s face above hers. Not because she did not know the tale---Renu had told her the same story often---but because Surya hoped her mother would press her fingers against her own, so she could fall asleep with her palm on her chest, the hard, dark stones of the floor under her back softened to waves that would open and let her slip under water, with just the scent of her mother’s fingers: Old honey and sharp spices, flakes of dry skin and faint traces of something dirty, like feces, and new fabric, would pull Surya back from the bottom of the Sabarmati.

Her mother smiled from above her and placed her arm back down, and once more, began pressing her feet, “One day, a brave king was hunting. He and his court, as well as his hunting dogs, got lost.” She pressed her thumbs into Surya’s feet. The scent of her mother’s fingers lingered in the air about Surya’s head. She sensed other odors. The heat of the sun beating down on bronze pots, the sweetness of pistachios. Surya bobbed on the floor’s stones.

“The king became very hungry and he wanted his dogs to fetch some game. From afar, he spied a plump rabbit and sent his dogs to kill it.” As her mother bent over her extended feet, Surya tossed her head to prevent herself from falling through the floor.

“*Beti*, little one, what is wrong?” Her mother moved, her head above Surya. The smell of lavender and turmeric moved with her, covering Surya.

“Can you sleep with me tonight?” Surya slid over to one side of her mat, and patted the quilt in the empty space.

“No, beti.” She kneaded Surya’s breastbone with her palm and continued, “but when the dog approached the rabbit, the rabbit hissed and scared the dog. The dog ran back to the king, who was staring at the rabbit in amazement--”

“I am scared.” Surya closed her eyes and pressed her lips together, waiting for her mother to react. Her mother did not like to hear Surya was afraid, or unable. The story would end soon, and so she would be alone, in her dark stone room.

“Yes, I know,” her mother said, smoothing Surya’s nose, a tiny puckered scar like a small insect bite on the flesh, the pincers of the creature making tiny, sliced moon shapes. “But this story will help. The king followed the brave rabbit as it hopped to drink at the Sabarmati river and told his men that he would build a city on the river that sustained such a brave creature as the rabbit.”

Her mother slid her fingers over the moons. “So cold is the Sabarmati water that it makes everything that it touches very, very brave and strong. That is why my father’s father’s father decided to make Chiminlal from stones at the bottom of the river.” Renu poured water from the stone pitcher to a stainless steel cup and raised Surya’s head. She tipped the cup to Surya’s mouth. “The river goddess will make you brave and strong.”

The water coursed down Surya's throat, lukewarm. Her mother placed her head back on the mat and unfolded a long, white sheet over Surya, flicking the fabric in her hands as she stood. The cotton hovered in the air above Surya, and collapsed around her.

"Mataji, would you close my eyes?"

Her mother kneeled over Surya and pressed her lids closed. Surya felt the floor beneath her soften when her mother removed her hands and left the room. She saw the rabbit in her mind, drinking until the fluid spilled from his stomach into his lungs. He fell into the river, still drinking, until water filled his other organs and weighed his body down, pulling him under the surface of the Sabarmati.

*

The river was dark and still beside Surya and Maadri as they walked to the nearest ghat to collect water for another batch of beedis. Surya, a few meters behind Maadri, stumbled on short, fat legs to keep up with her mother's long strides. Surya followed the swing of her mother's braid, proud of the small, even arcs it traced across her back.

"*Chal*, keep up," Maadri said, calling over her shoulder. Surya stopped a moment, so her heavy, wet breath did not overlap her mother's command. "I will make you carry this if you do not quicken your steps."

Her mother tapped the tumbler in her arms. Her arms circled the neck as she pulled the vessel tightly to her straight waist. Surya delighted in the curve of

the huge, spherical tumbler against the slightness of her mother's body, the way she walked with the tumbler at her side unlike other women who allowed their pots to ride upon the fullness of their hips, mussing and bunching their saris. Her mother's strong arms pulled the vessel against her straight body like a man, her pressed sari skirt falling straight and graceful under the vessel.

"Yes, *ji*," Surya said. She had a low voice for a girl of eight. When she spoke to her mother, her voice became higher, thinner, and she felt as if she were a baby, crying for help. She pressed her lips together, feeling the dampness of her upper lip on her chin.

She wished it was breezy and later in the day. They usually did not begin their walk until the sun was in the sky. When the sun lit the water just so, and a breeze plucked small waves out of the wide, dark plane of the river and the peaks flashed like diamonds, her mother slowed down and took her daughter's hand and they walked together.

Her mother held the large tumbler against her belly, and Surya held a smaller tumbler of her own, gripping the lip of the vessel with her damp hands. She tottered, trying to hold the open sphere against her waist, only the gentle swell of one side of the tumbler visible to anyone behind her; it was too heavy and it slipped from her hands, making a dusty clang as it landed in the dirt road.

"You are doing what?" her mother asked, turning.

“Nothing, *ji*. Nothing.” Surya wiped her open palms on her skirt, the small mirrors embroidered into the fabric scraping at her skin.

“What is this doing here?” her mother asked, long strides leading her to Surya. Holding her own tumbler with one circled arm, she gestured at the ground.

Surya picked the tumbler up in front of her, her palms spread on the largest part of the sphere. “I put it down,” she said to her mother as her hands slipped from the circle of the girth to the neck and it hit the ground again. Her mother put her own vessel down and Surya closed her eyes and pressed her lips together, the image of her mother’s thin straight body and the curve of the tumbler outside of her arms.

She heard her mother click her tongue and she pressed her lips together harder, waiting for her mother’s hand against her face. Instead, her mother moved her right arm into a curve and placed the tumbler above her round hip and wound Surya’s arm around the neck of the vessel. She opened her eyes.

“This should stay,” her mother said and Surya opened her mouth, her lips relaxed. Her mother pulled her own tumbler next to her body and reached for Surya’s hip.

“All this is useful for something.” She smiled at her daughter and pressed her thumb and forefingers against the exposed bit of hip flesh that spilled out of the top of Surya’s skirt. Maadri pinched her fingers together and twisted her

hand. Pain pulsed from under her mother's hot fingers and Surya let a thin yelp escape from her gaping mouth.

"Hurry," she said.

Her mother turned, and Surya looked at the welt under the light of the new sun. It looked black on her dark hip, a new stain on her skin that would raise in some hours and appear wet for days, then join the other shiny marks that rolled over her body like mustard seeds. The wound emphasized the curve of her hips. She carefully moved the tumbler to cover the welt and the exposed flesh and stumbled quickly, trying to catch up.

The cool metal soothed her and she stumbled behind her mother as the morning sun opened the sky.

"Get off the road!" a cart driver yelled as he bounced by.

Surya moved to the side of the road and watched her mother's proud straight back. The cart clomped around her mother and rickshaws beeped at her, their horns long and sharp, until they passed. Businessmen in crisp shirts on bicycles swerved around her, tringing their handlebar bells as they hurried to their work. A goat bleated in front of her mother, chewing on a patch of grass. Maadri swung her tumbler at its hind legs.

Women and girls walked and chattered in grooved paths off the side of the main road, babies balanced on their hips, their heads bowed to the ground. Their sari and pant hems picked up grass stains that blossomed green from their

ankles to their knees. Surya watched her mother hitch up her skirt and raise her chin and, studying her own tumbler, she did the same.

Surya's dark skin looked darker against the yellow of the metal pot. She and her mother stepped down the steps of the *ghat*, steps that lead to the river, straight into the deep water while boys in filthy shirts played around them. Four chickens, all hens, scratched at the layer of dirt on the ghat, dragging clouds of red dust into the air. Surya tugged her skirt higher.

"*Aacha*, that is nice," said a man sitting on the step above her, a *beedi* hanging from his lips. Smoke slipped from his mouth and circled around his head. A dark length of cotton hung lazily around his waist, drooping over his bare, dirty feet. Surya looked to her mother, surprised at the man's words. Her mother looked at the hens and dipped her tumbler into the water.

The tumbler slipped from Surya's grip and sounded against the mirrors on her skirt. A hollow metallic boom spiraled out of the mouth of the vessel. The chickens cocked their heads, and circled closer to her.

"Maybe a little higher?" asked the man. The sun touched his hair, a layer of oil flashing black and white in the light. Maadri dropped her own skirt lower on her legs and looked down as the man kept on speaking to Surya. Surya walked a few steps away from the man, closer to her mother as the chickens clucked at her heels.

“Go away,” she said to the animals. Hens and roosters clucked in groups of four or more on the ghats, sipping the water with their tiny beaks and clucking. Her mother clicked her tongue at the hens that gathered at Surya’s feet, ignoring her daughter.

“What is your name, little one? Do you want a cola? I have some in my hut.” He was coming closer, the perfume smell of his hair oil mixed with the raw human smells of the town. Surya stepped past her mother, feeling the weight of the bronze pot on her hip. Perhaps with her mother in between them, the man would go away.

Women and children gathered on the edges of the Sabarmati. A few meters downstream from Maadri and Surya, a young girl dipped clothes in the water and beat them out on rocks. Heads bobbed above the dark water, people taking their morning baths. Others with vessels dipped water out of the river, for cooking or cleaning or morning prayers.

As Surya squatted by the banks, the hem of her skirt touched the water.

“*Array*,” she murmured and looked at her mother, who had finished filling her pot and was hoisting it up. She rung out the cloth between her fingers, a few grayish drops of water falling to the red dust under her sandals. She grimaced. The hens drinking on the banks stepped closer to her, attracted by the flash of the sun off the mirrors on her skirt.

The river ran wide in this part of town and the white flash of the sun off the Sabarmati made Surya's eyes water. The smoke and sounds of the factories traveled across the river to her as she hunched on the bank.

"Well?" the man said. He dropped the *beedi* on the ground behind her and the tip sizzled as it hit the ground. The water flowed quickly next to her feet and she felt that she could disappear in it, under the glass bottles and trash that bobbed by.

The hens scratched closer to Surya and she shooed them with a wave of her hand. The man behind her coughed and cleared his throat. He stepped forward and spit into the river. Surya felt unsteady on her haunches, like she may be pulled into the current.

"You have such a pretty dress on." The man held a hand on his hip and slipped a finger under the fold of cloth resting on his waistband and flicked his wrist. The dirty cloth fell open and Surya's hands shook, her bracelets sounding against the bronze pot. Pulling the cloth tight, he tied two ends together under his belly button, and hid the pouchy brown organ trembling between his legs. A lazy smile appeared on his lips. Surya looked to her mother and saw her look away.

"Perhaps another time? I'll save that cola for the next time you come by."
He turned and walked back up the ghats.

A brown hen pecked at one of the mirrors in Surya's skirt, leaving a tiny tear in the cloth. The red comb on the animal trembled as her beak moved. Surya snatched her skirt up and stood, swinging her pot at the bird.

The hen ruffled her feathers before the impact of the vessel spilled her small, thin body in the river. The feathers on the bird's chest were not simply brown, as Surya had thought while the man was harassing her, but black and covered with dirt. Hints of white speckled her head near her eyes. Surya felt a weakness in her knees when she heard a small crack from the hen as the vessel smashed into the small body, sending feathers floating in the air. She watched as the hen floated, still, on the current.

A few children downstream whooped and started swimming towards the body of the bird, trying to catch it before it started sinking. She jammed the vessel into the river, struggling with it as it filled with water, and saw her mother smile.