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Summer

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Summer

Laika Abdulali '13

We were on our way to the Pathans' farmhouse and I was sitting in the back of our car, settled deep into seething irritation. It had been almost an entire day listening to Dolly Parton, holding a plant stuffed with all its mud into a torn plastic bag- "no you can't put it down, it's *delicate* Maliha"- and being kicked periodically by my ridiculously annoying brother. "Please go faster Abba!" I whined, and my father did for a minute, the speedometer flying clockwise. My mother snuffled and shifted, opened her eyes and was horrified. "Rafiq- slow down! You know Ali can't handle this, he's bound to crash." Abba snorted, but one look out of the rear view window saw our driver Ali veer the luggage car terrifyingly around a truck piled high with steel rods, and Abba slowed until we were crawling again. Ugh. I really couldn't wait to be there.

My father and Sameer Pathan had been friends since before either of them could remember. When Abba was fourteen—just a little older than me now—he was out hunting pheasant with Uncle Sameer and his family, and a snake swayed up under his lifted foot. Before he could move—who knows whether he would have tried to run, or simply stayed frozen—Uncle's father aimed, and shot the snake's head off. So it was pretty much decided for me that the Pathan daughters would be my best friends. And Aria really was. Younger than me, and than her sister Priyanka (euch), she hadn't told on me when I dragged her into an absolute mess putting dead crabs in my Swiss uncle's bed. We really bonded over our mutual disdain of Priyanka, who though my age screamed like a baby if you tried to make her go into the sea past her calves, and twittered around like an affected flightless bird where boys were involved. I had just drifted into the pleasantest daydream of Aria and I picnicking in her big mattress swing when I was jolted back by our car screeching to a halt.

A man stood in front of our car, gesticulating wildly. I couldn't hear a word, but knew he was screaming something. My father looked nervously around, saw the four or five people drawn from their houses converging on us, and started thinking of the best way to maneuver around him. "No no Rafiq", my mother intervened. "It's alright, see there's two women also now. Just roll down your window and see what's happening. We don't have to get out." Our driver Ali had left the luggage car and joined the little group at our window now, which

convinced Abba. The screaming man, seeing that we wouldn't immediately take off, came around to my father and started yelling even louder. He spoke Marathi, and we had to strain to understand the harshly rolled syllables. "You kill my chicken!" I watched fascinated as the spit dripped to form little globules quivering in his beard. "All day I work and only six chickens I have and in your big car you come and kill those also? You think this is a place for holiday only? This is not Mumbai with its smooth smooth roads. People live here, and now you kill my chicken, and you pay me for it!" My mother cut him off in her embarrassingly accented Hindi. "OK, calm down brother please. Really we saw nothing. There was no bump even. Where is this chicken?" Ali tried to help. "Nobody's trying to cheat you brother, these are good people—" Suddenly the angry man went down on his knees and bent, reaching under our car.

My brother and I looked at each other, smiling because the grown-ups were there to be terrified instead, and when I looked back up the man was upright again, swinging by one wing a dead chicken next to my father's nose. Abba spoke now, in his Hindi that was even more forced than my mother's. "This is really ridiculous. I hit nothing, and I have no idea where this chicken came from!" I saw how red my father was getting—we called him Toto sometimes, short for 'Human Tomato'—and I was scared now. He turned to Mum. "He *must* have planted this chicken, and I'm damned if I'm going to pay him a single rupee for it. Look at it! Looks like it died days ago. Not one tire mark even!" My mother cared less about principle now. She beckoned Ali over to her window, and plucked a hundred rupee note from the toll money kept in the cup-holder. She gave it to him, and we watched as Ali walked back to the man and silently tucked the money into his fluorescently lime-green shirt-pocket. All the people stepped away from our car, the chicken man with his hands pressed together in thanks. "Bloody cheats", Abba growled. "No innocence left in our villages these days!"

Once we were moving again I tried to float back into my happy picnic, but there was a worse tension in the car now. Abba was muttering under his breath about how careful one had to be, driving too fast again and refusing to signal anything for other cars. My mother's hand had moved across to her shoulder, massaging in that way that I knew meant she was trying to manage more stress than found in the muscles she touched. Then Abba misjudged some distance and tried to overtake a truck, having to screech to a halt ignominiously in the middle of the road as the trucker honked furiously. He exploded. "These *ghaati* people. No manners, no fundamental human morals! I don't know, how can they behave like this?" My mother looked at him, and spoke through clenched teeth. "Rafiq just stop talking. Stop now. That was a terrible overtake, and I'm fed up with you and you just won't stop talking! God, even if you hit fifty chickens you just wouldn't shut up, would you?" She thumped her head down to her window, and Abba just sat there, slowing down again to that miserable crawl.

Finally we arrived. We curved into Aria's driveway, and at my first glimpse of the beloved sandstone pavilion, circled by gently flowing streams, that seemed set up especially as a retreat from the adults of the main house, my face settled into an uncontrollable grin. We had two whole weeks here this time, and I had so many things to tell Aria! Our car pulled up, and we all got out, my father leaving his keys in the door for the parking to be handled.

I could hear her scream before I saw her, tilting around the corner, a round twelve year old with the squarest most pugnacious chin in the world, and blackly curling hair I would have given almost anything for. I started to run towards her, and we were hugging when the shyness hit. I hadn't seen her for six months, suppose we had nothing to talk about? Suppose she grew up, and thought me boring and silly? Strange thoughts to have of a girl younger than me, but her sister was so very poised! And then we smiled at each other, and I asked-"So where's Priyanka?" She rolled her eyes so dramatically I knew it would be okay. "There's this boy, Sameer, and he's seventeen so she's taken him to show him the cashew tree near our well. I don't think she knows how bitter the fruit is, or that you have to boil the nut, so that should be fun." "Oh my god, *she's* such a nut Aria!" We laughed hysterically for more than the appropriate time, and then I asked who this boy was. "Some cousin or something, I don't know. My mother met him somewhere and loves him, so she told him to come" was the answer. I nodded. Her family, like mine, was a thicket and definitely not a bonsai, with the lines run all together from a hundred years of intermarriage and an insistence on counting as kin one's grandmother's third cousin's wife.

She said she had a surprise for me, and I was sure it was something stupid like a German candy bar. "Okay, but what shall we do *first* Aria?" There were so many possibilities. We could go swimming, or look for ripe groundnuts in her fields, or climb through the acres of orchards that waited, fruited. "I have to show you the surprise silly!" She grabbed my hand and we had almost made it out of our parents' horizon when her mother's voice reeled us back in. And Aria's grandmother was there now! That woman was really scary. And then we had to go through the obligatory hugs and exclamations-"you've become so *healthy* my beautiful Maliha! You used to be so slim, too much ice cream and all hmm?". What was wrong with old people? I really hoped she didn't catch the grimace I couldn't stop before I giggled ingratiatingly. My mother stroked my back apologetically, her easy smile still in place, and tried to rescue Aria and I from the inevitable invitation to tea. "Why don't you girls go ahead and start to explore? Just be back by"-she looked at Sharmila Auntie- "say 8 o'clock for dinner?"

We'd already pivoted, hands linked, bouncing lightly on the balls of our feet as we tried not to break into a run. Auntie moved behind Aria though, and laced one hand through her hair. "You know the rule Aria!" She looked at me. "I'm sorry, Maliha, but there's some construction happening next door,

and these workers aren't like our villagers, you know. You're going to have to take Reena and a driver with you if you go out beyond the pool."

My heart sank, and I felt Aria grip my hand a little tighter. Reena was Aria's maid, maybe ten years older than us, and she resented every pulling out of her comfortable kitchen. She would make us beg for hours before she'd move, and then she'd walk like an ant, and tell on us if we went a step out of sight, and complain constantly about how inconsiderate we were. "Why can't we just take a driver Mum? Reena hates walking!" Aria begged. There was no answer. We weren't allowed to be alone with male servants.

"Let's just go swimming friend. This is hopeless. Maybe we can get Abba to come with us tomorrow." I pulled her away from the group standing where our car used to be. Aria snorted. "Please, my dad told the 'so drunk we woke up in the tideline' story again waiting for you guys. None of them are going to wake up tomorrow. Oh but there's the surprise. Come come, this is perfect actually!" So I flew with her on winged feet to the pear grove beyond which was her swimming pool, through the narrow hedged paths and gardens. There, shielded from view by sculpted white-flowered hedges, was the first Jacuzzi I had ever seen outside a hotel. "It's still not been polished, so don't wear a nice swimsuit because the concrete will ruin it, but isn't it perfect?!"

It really was. We changed, and sat there, searching in the warm relaxation for confidences to bind us together again after our distance. She told me about the friend who came to sleep over, who started her period in the middle of the night and tried in embarrassment to explain away the stains as a nosebleed come morning. We laughed forcedly, but it was the scariest thing imaginable. I had something really important to tell her, of a boy who made me feel as if I were floating on thoughts light as dandelions in a breeze. "So there's this boy Jason, and he sits in front of me in math class-it's so lucky actually, he's so cute! So the first thing that happened was"- But I could hear footsteps now, and laughter, and I broke off. "No tell me!" Aria begged. "Later!" I whispered. "No no, we'll never be alone again, quickly!"

"Oof, they're totally going to hear Aria. Ok, well, he and his partner (also beautiful aah) had both forgotten their math texts one day, so the teacher made Jason move back to share mine. We were all cramped together and all-

I screamed. Aria had taken this development in the story as cue to fling her arms around my neck. "Eegh get off...have you been bodybuilding or what?"

Aria's whole face had lit up. "Ooh Maliha, let's do math, let's sit together forever, let's kissss..."

I was laughing too hard now to do more than pat weakly at her hands. I just sat there a moment, snorting, and trying to keep her hair away from my nose, and listening to her go on in her best stricken-heartthrob vein.

"What are you doing, stupid?" The slightly hoarse, high-pitched voice came from just behind me. I turned sharply to it, pulling Aria with me.

“Ouch ouch ouch!” she yelled in my ear. “Eep sorry.” Her knee had slid scrapingly over the raw concrete.

I saw the shoed feet first. Those soulmate shoes were soft, silky blue, with little scrunched bows at the toe. And then I noticed the big, hairy bare feet lined up next to them. I snorted again. Those dirt-orange streaked toenails belonged to the tallest, gangliest boy I’d ever seen. Ack he was smiling at me now. I snatched my eyes away, meeting Priyanka’s green gaze for a second, and then my eyes went horrified down to myself. I yanked Aria’s hands away definitively this time. Yuck, my stomach was slumped out, thighs squashed huge against the floor, swimsuit stretched tight outlining the sloppy rolls of me. My body startled to straighten, tighten, to be less flailing jellyfish and more –well, still squishy but streamlined squid was all I could hope for really.

I lifted one hand, from the elbow only so my upper-arm flab wouldn’t flop at her, and waved to Priyanka. “Hi Priyanka!” Priyanka cut short her glaring at Aria, simpered and crossed one foot behind the other. “Maliha. I’m so sorry I couldn’t be here when you came! I had to be with poor Sameer, you know, he doesn’t know the place at all. Your family is always here, like every holiday-my house is your house no?” She reached up to tuck some of that perfectly streaming light hair behind one ear, and her million sparkly silver bangles floated jangling down her arm. “You know, I was talking to Mum this morning, and we were just saying how much we adore your mother. All of us think its so lucky your father noticed her-otherwise where could we have ever met, after all. Your dad is such a romantic.”

I was so confused. Why did her voice always sound like treacle with a truckload of broken glass mixed in? And why did she never make any sense, ever? Aria cut in. “Where did you take Sameer Priyanka? To the one paved road? And then you stood there and yelled for him to ‘please, come back, I can’t ruin these shoes’, when he abandoned you for the more interesting cow dungy ant-hills? You’re so stupid, take your stupid thin boy and go away.”

Sameer giggled. Aria looked at him, and started to babble. “I’m sorry Sameer. You’re not thin, really, I was just talking. You’re the perfect thinness I swear! Really, I’m just too plump, I don’t know, I’m sorry!” I grabbed her arm and frog-marched her back to the house. Oh Aria.

I was so tired that night. I woke up, all groggy in the morning, to the sound of Reena’s bangles clanking, and her broom rustling an inch from my ear. “Reena go away. Aria told you not to work here so early.” Reena swished that broom so the bristles scraped my arm, at the edge of my mattress. Ouch. “What early? It’s lunchtime almost madam-ji! All the time you’re sleeping and everybody yells at me. Today only they’re having all the big people come for tea, and they tell me, Reena do this, make the children ready, clean this-and madams just want to sleep! Get up now, your mothers are angry.”

Aria flopped over miserably next to me. “God, Reena, how much you talk! Go get tea then. Peppermint, ya.” Reena left, throwing the broom

down with disgust to the floor next to my head, and we went immediately back to sleep.

We did have to get up, eventually. Aria was still getting dressed when I opened the door from our room into the hall, and almost walked straight into a fat screaming man. "You illiterate fool!" I bit my lip hard in shock as he waved me dismissively away, and kept yelling at the poor garden-worker who just couldn't see why silk wall-hangings aren't nailed lopsided fluttering free. I looked around, and saw similar scenes everywhere, as maids and workers yelled at each other through clouds of dust. The big dining table, and all its chairs, had vanished, leaving sandstone barrenness. I headed straight for the door out, and had almost made it when Sharmila Auntie's voice stopped me cold. "Maliha! Finally, good. Your mother's been waiting for you. Where's that Aria? You both really should be helping just now, you know."

I shuffled over to a big sofa in an antechamber, where Sharmila Auntie sat next to my mother. "I'm sorry Auntie. Hi Mum. Where on earth is the table?" My mother sighed, and patted a cushion next to her. "Sit, please. Oh God, Maliha, this is such a mess. Do you know the Bharuchas are coming?"

I hoped these weren't the terrifying women who'd once overheard Aria and I laughing about someone's patchily fading dye job. "Are those the diamond people with the ridiculous egg dome house?"

She clucked, exasperated. "No silly, the Bharuchas, who always brought you lychees from Dehradun?" She glanced quickly over at Auntie, and continued. "They're bringing their cousin, actually... Maliha, do you remember Rohan Dutta?" I shook my head. Mum pressed on though, brows furrowed. Her hands picked at the loosely threaded shrug she was holding, worrying tiny holes in the fabric. "He lived in that white house by the railway colony in Bombay, you know-behind the fat coconut man?" I smiled thinking of that coconut man-he always flirted outrageously with my maid, and he'd once offered me three weeks of free coconut to put in a good word for him. I'd never paid attention to the house though. "Maliha-you don't remember his daughter Tara? Erm, she was in your swimming class?" I suppose I looked as blank as I felt. "Mum I don't know all these people, did she move or something? Will we see her today?"

One of my mother's hands went up to a shoulder, massaging. She winced. Oh no, she was going to ask me in a minute to rub her back. "No, no, she won't be here. Okay anyway, there will be six or so other children today, so you and Aria are in charge of that of course, hmm?" Ugh, we always ended up on baby watch. "Why Mum? Who are all these millions of children, and why can't whoever had them just keep them?"

My mother looked fairly homicidal now, and Sharmila Auntie disgusted. "Come on Maliha, don't be a pain please. Aria's grandmother reminded us that the oldies really look forward to seeing you youngsters, so we can't have a separate children's table this year. You'll all just be at an end somewhere

people can see you, coo a little and go back to their food.” Auntie cut in. “And all those nannies hanging around a main table - no way.” She shuddered extravagantly. My mother winced again as she hit a particularly sore muscle, and spoke quite sharply. “You like children. Are you just trying to send my blood pressure through the roof now?”

And then I said, “No no, I’m sorry, of course we’ll make sure fifty babies don’t move an inch or say anything for hours.” So Aria and I ended up that afternoon smothered in small squirming monsters.

It wasn’t so horrible though, really. Not even a little bit. All the children turned out to be old enough to understand threats of no dessert and naptime held over their tiny heads, but young enough to think we were ridiculously cool. The big table had been moved out under a green-blue canopy next to our pavilion, and covered in flowers. The food was served from the pavilion, so the whole table was free for the flowers and our plates. Aria and I sat there, at a far end, and interspersed periodically with “Wow!” and “Really?!” the chattering of one dimpled seven year old who was telling us her extremely embellished life-story in the hopes we’d approve. Priyanka had shown up, Sameer in tow, and sat down across from Aria. She was too busy tossing her silken locks at him to be part of our world, though.

The chatty girl was really getting into a long exposition of how she once saved her cat from a snake, terrifying this poor snake with her ferocious death-glare. She demonstrated said horrifying look, and my eyes flashed to Aria, who looked as much on the verge of exploding into hysteria as me. I forced my eyes back to my plate, trying not to burst out laughing by focusing hard on the mushy eggplant chunks congealing in their sop. Priyanka snapped me out of my concentration, leaning towards me to stage whisper: “Maliha! Oh my god maybe that’s what that weird man’s trying to do. Practice his death-glare on us!” I was confused, as always around Priyanka. “What man?” She widened her eyes at me. “That weirdo in the roadside *ghaati* clothes there silly!” I looked over, and there really was a guy, two places away from my mother, staring unblinking at our corner. He was dressed in the universal uniform of the Indian shopkeeper or peon, a polyester off-white button down and brown-grey wrinkly trousers. That was strange. As I watched, the woman next to him touched him lightly on the shoulder, and spoke. He looked away at her for a minute, smiled and turned to us again. The woman seemed slightly discomfited, but turned, managing to shrug it off.

After becoming aware of that odd man’s constant gaze, sitting there became increasingly uncomfortable. And Priyanka insisted on talking about him constantly. “Maybe someone brought their driver as a joke. God knows what they think are manners. Or he must be a bodyguard, he looks angry enough Maliha.” The children were all giggling at each other now, sneaking glances at him and jolting exaggeratedly away. Children can so quickly become cruel. “Don’t look at him!” I hissed at one who was being particularly indiscreet.

Then the meal was over, and I leapt out of my chair, clenching one hand at Aria's shoulder. "Let's go man, this is just too weird." We just stood there a moment, and then Aria gasped. "Oh no." I turned, and saw that the chatty girl had decided to prove her coolness once and for all. She had walked up to scary man and turned, looking for reassurance from the five other brats who were standing agape. Then she spoke. "Uncle are you a driver or a bodyguard? We were just wondering." Oh no. Why couldn't Priyanka control her tongue ever? And why had this girl soaked up her sourness like a sponge? He just sat there a moment, blinking up at her like he didn't understand. But of course this girl who lived in some strange other world couldn't leave it at that. "Why do you stare so much? You've never seen children or what? It's not polite you know. Do drivers' mothers not teach them proper manners?"

I could see as she spoke the rage building in his eyes, his hands clenching at the rim of his plate, why couldn't this girl just stick to making things up? And then, as this girl stood there, her best sneer in place on that stuck up child's face, he exploded into motion. She stood stunned now, red curry and fish bones clinging to her face and yellow satin dress, and he was crouched hands on his thighs beside her screaming.

They took them away, and Aria and I fled to our room, where we sat and talked about it for a long time. We giggled a little, remembering the death-glares. It wasn't really funny though, and sometimes I wasn't sure whether a laugh or a sob would be next. I went and found my mother in her room that night, when I knew she'd be alone. She liked to oil my hair for the night. I sat on the floor between her knees, and she began massaging the coconut smoothness soothingly, concentrically into my scalp. There was silence for a while, and then I spoke, hesitantly. "Wasn't that man so weird Mum? He must be completely mad." I yelped at the sudden yank I felt. She stopped rubbing, and I turned, my breath catching as I saw how angry she looked.

She stood up, shaking the oil still in her hands out uncaring on the rug. "I'm ashamed of you Maliha. Do you think I don't know that silly girl was parroting Priyanka? It makes me sick to see how you girls float around in your imaginary bubbles, treating everyone like they belong beneath your silk *chappals*."

I gasped desperately. "But I didn't even say anything Mum!" She looked no less angry. "You didn't stop it, either. I've a good mind to send you to boarding school, a nice old fashioned one where they'll teach you at least to boil water."

I was crying now, trying to breathe through my closed up throat. She was too furious to stop, though. "I see your father, and all these people here, thinking everyone not born in a manor is rotten fruit, something you hold your nose around and try not to catch rot from. You're all terrified of everybody, and convinced at the same time you're wrapped in cotton wool

armour, no? When you should be careful, you think you're gods, and the rest of the time you're scared to step out of your swimming pools." I threw myself around her knees, hyperventilating, sobbing, and gasping. After a minute I could feel the anger drain out of her, her legs relaxing from their unnatural rigidity. She bent down, and with one hand at my nape unlocked my arms from around her. With a sudden sigh, she sat down sharply on the rug next to me. I was still crying, and she was quiet a while. Then she looked at me, and bent sideways to press her face against my ear, not caring about the oil. "It's okay, Maliha sweetheart, really. I'm sorry, okay? Come, calm down, and then I'll tell you about this man hmm?"

Eventually I passed into that hypersensitive calm which follows hysteria, and sat quietly as she told me her story. "This man is that Rohan Dutta I mentioned, remember? His daughter-I don't know how you forgot her so completely, but that's for the best I suppose, despite all my yelling. His daughter didn't just move away. When Tara was six Rohan was mixed up in some fight over land in that creek area near Dahisar. Worthless land, but he refused to give up his claim, and it turned out some Bombay construction boss was involved. Tara just wasn't on the bus home from school one day." She was quiet a while, and we both just sat there, shicering with gooseflesh. Her voice came so hesitantly when she spoke again.

"His driver didn't come one day, so he was in a local train-it was rush hour, and he was squeezed in right by the open door. He was probably more worried about his briefcase falling out than himself, that man!" She tried to exhale a laugh, this horribly sad sound. "There was another local moving past them, and there in a doorway across he saw Tara. She was in rags, and there was a stump where her hand..." She shuddered hard. "He turned and shoved his way in, and pulled the emergency brake, but it was too late. He never saw her again." She was rubbing again now absently at my scalp. I sat there, muscles locked tight. "I met him once, just after, and he looked me in the eye and asked so desperately, pleadingly why he hadn't just jumped from the train and clawed his way to the girl..."

For the rest of that visit, I stuck to my mother like a burr when it was impossible to escape with a book into aloneness.