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# Mishti Kukur

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## MISHTI KUKUR

In spite of the mange, I want to pet her. She's been lying in the powdery dirt road beside my mother-in-law's building in the Jodhpur Park area of Kolkata, India, but now she rises on her haunches as I move toward her. Distended nipples hang well below her ribcage, though there are no puppies in sight. The universal mutt, she has ears that neither stand nor droop. Her dull, short coat is brown or gray—or perhaps brindle, but this may be the effect of rivulets of dirt. Behind her everydog face, her emaciated body hovers. Like homeless humans, this dog's age is undeterminable, but I'm guessing she's younger than she looks. She harbors an odor somewhere between stale urine and putrescence. I offer the back of my hand to her parched nose.

*Keep your hands to yourself*, Rajiv had warned me thirteen years earlier on my first of two trips to Kolkata, back when it was still Calcutta, when we'd first gone to visit his widowed mother soon after we got married. *Don't touch stair railings, don't touch the hands of beggars* as you give them coins, and above all *do not pet the street dogs. It is not sanitary*. Rajiv had grown up in India, and had only gone westward for graduate school, where we'd met. But I, a white woman who'd never been outside North America, was ungrounded by these Calcutta streets, where stalls spilled over onto sidewalks and everyone was squeezed together. When you're so close to the bodies around you, the barriers to touch matter more. And when there's so much dirt, cleanliness becomes a moral imperative. So on my first two visits I did as I was told: I didn't touch the street dogs. I looked at them with interest, pity, disgust, and longing, while they watched me with circumspection, alert for food or danger, neither trusting nor untrusting.

Not touching Rajiv was even harder. Back home in the States, whenever we felt the brush of the other's shoulder, we instinctively slotted our arms into a tongue-and-groove fit. Some portion of my skin was almost always in contact with some of his, even if it was just a finger scrolling down a neck, a thigh nudging a thigh, a palm molding itself around a love-handle. But here in India, Rajiv told me, men and women did not touch in public. It made the nighttime touching, behind closed doors, all the more vital.

But now, on my third trip to India, Rajiv, as my mother-in-law puts it, “is no more.” This time, I’ve returned alone to Kolkata to visit Ma, along with Rajiv’s brother, Sujoy, and his wife, Joya, who are on an extended visit here for the summer. I’m still a privileged, first-world white woman, but I’ve been living in the liminal land of mourning, in the untouchable social space of widowhood. Grief, like culture shock, temporarily distorts the proportions of reality, skewing them into the cryptic streets of Kolkata, where nothing meets at right angles. Gradually you learn the new rules of reality and the new relations of your body to other bodies around you. Until then, grief is a trip to a third-world country. You don’t belong in the privileged land of robust opulence, your home country, but where is home now? You can’t find it even inside your own skin.

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India would be hard for me, I knew, and India without Rajiv would be overwhelming. So I decided I’d do here what I did at home when I needed to fend off depression and anxiety: focus on the dogs. I now had three of my own—spoiled spaniel mixes who barked at paper bags, ate toilet paper off the roll, and couldn’t even express their own anal glands. After Rajiv died, I’d counted on them to deliver reality in small, containable doses. Outside my house, too, I’d focus on dogs. Parties were bearable after his death only when a dog was in the house. Trips were kept from being impossibly lonely if I could find a dog to pet. When rolls of photos came back from the developer (in the days before the digital camera I got for this trip), half my pictures—I was surprised to find—featured dogs. Kolkata, I knew, would be full of dogs of all castes. I would keep my composure on this trip by studying them.

The hardest part of India would be facing my mother-in-law, whom I hadn’t seen since those unreal days after Rajiv’s death when, in one breath between moans, she’d thank me for my care of her son and then, in the next, tell me that if I’d fed him better, if I’d cooked fresh Indian food instead of letting him eat Chinese take-out during his last months, he might have lived. If I’d only had a hot meal waiting for him each evening of our thirteen years together, and monitored his eating better, as Joya did for Sujoy, he would never have developed colon cancer. If I’d insisted he spend less time at work and more time resting at home. If I’d given him children. If I’d been a more traditional wife. Hindered by her semi-deafness, my American accent, and the English I was confined to and which she couldn’t lip-read, I don’t know if Ma ever heard my attempts to defend myself.

“How is she?” I asked my brother-in-law when he picked me up from the airport, from which I’d emerged into some kind of night. We rode home through lampless streets.

Sujoy shrugged. “She never changes. India changes all around her, but always she is stuck in the past.”

“Still crying all the time?”

“Crying, yelling. Brooding. Feeling sorry for herself. She wants to be pampered in her misery. Always she is wallowing, wallowing. She will try to entice you. You must not indulge her.”

Ma’s building was scaffolded with bamboo poles for renovations. Outside the steps I saw, through the late evening darkness, the contours of a sleeping dog, now rising from its side to observe us. For a moment its eyes caught the moonlight. Then it drooped its head back onto its front paws. I wanted to linger down there with the dog, but Sujoy was already loading my suitcases into the “lift.”

Upstairs, Ma stood in the door frame, wrapped in a white cotton sari, trying not to smile. Her face seemed sunken, though her skin was smoother than I would have expected for a seventy-year-old woman who’d lost both her husband and her son. I made to kneel but she pulled me up with an “*Ah-ray!*” (the all-purpose Indian rebuke), so I moved in to hug her four-foot-eleven frame. She smelled of incense and baby powder, but below her sari blouse, I could feel sweat on the exposed skin of her back, cool and sticky. When I pulled back, she smiled, and I could see that she’d lost most of her teeth. That’s what her sunkenness was: her lips clutching toothless gums. Only three teeth still stood on the lower right side. Her smile lowered. “Why you have waited so long to come visit your Ma?”

I tried to apologize. “*Dhannobad.*” Then I realized I’d said thank you instead.

Ma ignored my failed Bengali. “Six years you have waited.” She turned my face to the light. Her tongue rocked her three remaining teeth back and forth as she examined me. “Why you are looking so pulled down?”

I tried to laugh. “I *have* been on an airplane for nearly two days.”

But Ma knew better. “You are looking so sickly-sickly. So many wrinkles you have gotten. You must use anti-wrinkle cream.” A lightning-bolt crease formed between her eyes as she continued her inspection.

“Yes. I *must*.” I failed to keep my sarcasm in check, knowing there were more imperatives to come. “I *am* forty-five years old now,” I reminded Ma. But I smiled to take the edge off my petulance, and felt my crow’s feet form.

She hobbled over her osteoarthritic knee as she showed me the daybed I would sleep on and where I could hang my clothes.

“Ma,” Sujoy said. “You are limping. We will call doctor about your knee.”

“Ah-ray, what doctor,” Ma answered.

“Yes, we will,” Sujoy said. “And you must lose weight.”

“I will go up soon enough,” Ma muttered to me.

In bed, after all human sounds receded, I heard a semihuman, or perhaps subhuman, sound, like a swallowed sob coming back up. Then I heard it again, and again, until it transitioned into a bark, then a yowl. It was the call not of the wild, but of the street.

Where do the street dogs go in the rain, I wondered as I dissolved into the lumpy daybed and an antimalarial medication haze. Though India was not yet into monsoon season proper, the rain came down hard that first night. Where is that mangy dog outside Ma’s steps going to spend the night?

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I woke up at four a.m. to the pouring rain, then drifted in and out of sentience as the rain gave way to shy bird chirps, then the brash caw of crows, and finally the bleats of street vendors. By seven a.m. I rose to the window and looked past its Art Deco grates. Barefoot dark women wrapped in bright saris bent their heads under an already drenching sunlight. Men appeared in undershirts and more drab lungis or dhotis. Both carried large loads of food or raw materials—even planks of lumber—on their heads with casual balance. A metal collector clanked his cans as he called out for more. A man on a bicycle chanted, I assumed, the prices and attributes of the live chickens he carried upside down by their legs, five in each hand. And then the car horns began, horns that would sound all day long, ruining the magic.

My brother- and sister-in-law were gone by the time I brushed my teeth with bottled water, slipped into my salwar kameez, and ventured into the common room. I poured more sterilized water into a coffee mug, popped it into the microwave, and then spooned my instant coffee into the steaming liquid. That was when Ma appeared in her billowing batik housedress, rocking from side to side to keep from bending her knees. I rose to hug her, but she stiffened. “Ah-ray! Still you are drinking coffee? You must not!”

“I know,” I apologized, and sat back down.

“No. You must not.”

Ma winced as I took a sip.

“So? They have left me,” Ma stated.

“Left you?”

“Sujoy and Joya. Gone for entire day. They have things to do. They have no time for their Ma. Always they are criticizing, criticizing, I don’t know what. I have my ways, they do not live here, they will leave me again.” She rocked her three teeth with her tongue.

“They’re only trying to help you,” I said.

Ma turned a frown on me. “But, Debby, you must not drink so much coffee. It is very bad for health. Do not drink.”

I tried to think about dogs as I finished the coffee, to keep Ma from killing my caffeine buzz. I was already sweating as I slipped into the kitchen to wash my mug, in spite of Ma’s calling to me to leave it for the maid. “I’m going for a walk,” I said, turning away.

“Ah-ray, in this heat!” Ma exclaimed. I closed the door on her muttering, “Always everybody is leaving me.”

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Outside Ma’s apartment building, the mangy, crusty dog lies where I found her the night before. I extend my hand. But instead of bowing under my palm—the behavior offered by suburban U.S. dogs—she cowers back. I expected feral—a lip-drawn snarl, maybe, or a low growl—but this dog is beyond docile, almost servile. She looks up at me from a lowered head. Her dirt-caked nose twitches as if trying to catch my scent, but she will not come closer.

Not petting dogs has always been agony for me, and I have indulged in every kind of human-canine flirtation to get a dog to accept my touch. But after Rajiv died, the need to touch fur, if not human skin, became almost mammalian, instinctual as a drive. Touch maintains your boundaries; it reminds you that you have an outline, a definition. The raw need for a defining touch, now denied, surprised me amidst my grief. Nobody, not even the grief support counselors, could have prepared me for this body hunger, the animal part of loss. Nobody warned me about the heavy emptiness of a chest no longer pressed, about the craving of skin suddenly deprived of touch, a dissolution that consumes the body like leprosy. It’s not lust, exactly, or desire, or even longing; it’s the way skin cries. Nobody talks about it, but widows know. Dogs know, too. It’s what makes suburban dogs leap onto

chests and laps against all training. It's why street dogs might, in time, forego their instinct for survival to bow their heads into a human palm.

Does everyone, not just widows, have this need for touch? Does Ma? And if so, how does she live without its fulfillment, the skin always in wait?

I will work on this dog, I decide. I will get her to trust me. For now, I just sit with her.

Over the next few days I stand as close to her as she'll let me. I squat. Without more than glancing at her, I murmur, sometimes in English, sometimes in what little Bengali I know: "*Kee-ray. To-mee kamon acho?*" (Hey you. How are you?) I take to calling her *Mishti Kukur* (Sweet Dog), careful not to accidentally slip into a similar term of endearment Rajiv and I regularly used for each other, "*Mishti Pode*" (Sweet Ass). The dog, cautiously, tolerates my presence.

"India is so spiritual," my American friends say. But they don't know my in-laws. Even Rajiv, around his mother, regressed to an ill-tempered, foot-stomping child, as they vied for dominance.

120 "What you have done with my plates?" Ma asks Sujoy one morning as we finish breakfast. "The ones with the sky blue petals?"

Sujoy rises to the accusation. "Gone." He dramatizes with a sweep of his hand.

"*Ah-ray?*"

"We have thrown them out, Ma. We have gifted you new plates."

"We?" Joya shouts from the bedroom. "Leave me out of it."

"But I prefer my old plates for everyday." Ma smiles defensively with flat lips.

"No. They all have chips and cracks in them. It is not sanitary."

"*Ah-ray*, not sanitary? I have used these plates for years. It is my home."

"It is not sanitary," Joya calls, concurring with her husband. "Germs can grow in the cracks."

"You hoard and hoard," Sujoy accuses her, emboldened. "We have gifted you such nice new items, but you refuse to replace. It is insulting. Yes, I would say that. It is insulting."

Ma looks to me for support, but I turn away. "What insulting?" she offers on her own. "I am an old lady on a pension. I must save. After six weeks you will leave. I am still here."

"Yes, I will leave. I will leave. Why should I stay?"

“Other widowed ladies live with their sons. I am all alone. But I will go up soon enough.”

“Here we go.” Sujoy throws up his hands.

“Rajiv did not treat me this way. So much disrespect you have for me. Rajiv—”

And now Sujoy is yelling in Bengali, and Ma is yelling back. I can’t understand the words anymore, only the rising voices. They turn to me from time to time for affirmation, Ma especially, forgetting that I can’t understand. Trying to read body language, I feel like my dogs at home, looking for a decodable sign amidst the general meaninglessness. I perk up when I can pick out a few Bengali words, just as my dogs liven with the recognition of “treat” or “walk” or “toy.” But mostly I go into rest mode, mentally stretching my chin out flat against the ground, as my dogs would do when Rajiv and I argued. On those rare times that Rajiv and I fought, though, Pretzel used to flee under the dining-room table until it was over. I decide to follow his example. As I pass by Joya’s bedroom, she mutters, “So much botheration all the time.”

I stretch out on my daybed in the guest room with *Travelers’ Tales: India*, the book I’ve been reading when I’m feeling particularly foreign. One writer says that for some Western sojourners, INDIA comes to stand for I’m Not Doing It Again or I’ll Never Do It Again. When the fighting flares up, I vow to myself that I’ll never return to India, except possibly for Ma’s funeral.

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Photographs of Rajiv are all over Ma’s flat. Formal portraits, graduation pictures, vacation photos. He joins pictures of his father in a collage of the dead. Sujoy and Joya (of whom there are far fewer pictures displayed) criticize this shrine, saying that Ma willfully dwells in death, and morbidly refuses to look to life. That she’s devoted her life to committing daily metaphorical *sati*. “You live only in the past,” they scold her. “You refuse to move on. Life must go on.” But they don’t know widowhood and loss. They only think they do.

I like Ma’s display. I’m glad to see that someone still acknowledges Rajiv’s absence. The rest of India has forgotten. The relatives who come over don’t refer to him. They ask me how I am “keeping,” and note that I am looking “pulled down.” But there’s no mention of the heaviness of loss that’s pulling me down. It’s as if Rajiv never existed, or as if his nonexistence is unspeakable. Ma’s display stands in passive-aggressive defiance.



But I don't step up to defend Ma or her shrine. Instead, at times like these, when I despair that the family is a kind of broken that can never be fixed, I resort to pulling out the photos of my Colorado dogs that I brought as part of my sanity pack. My father, before his stroke, used to be able to lower his blood pressure by imagining himself petting a golden retriever. I dream of spaniel fur.

"What are these?" Ma asks, catching me with my photos one day. "You must display."

She places my loose snapshots of Pretzel, Chappy, and Houdini around the house among the framed photos of Rajiv. She understands. We stand side by side, leaning in to look together at my spaniels. Our bare shoulders brush. Then I feel Ma pull back.

"And where are your photos of Raju? You do not travel with pictures of him? Only your dogs is it?"

122 Outside, the street dogs have receded into the shadows. I look for Mishti Kukur, but see no sign of her. It's so hot that even the dingy concrete buildings burn white. As I stride into the more commercial districts with their shops and stalls, I find more street life, if not liveliness, and a bit more English, at least on street signs. The vendors, shoppers, and laborers all move in measured steps. There's a certain kind of Kolkata walk, I've noticed, as if the dampness weighs everyone down. I'd congratulated myself on my first-world, well-cared-for body, but now, I notice, I'm gradually adopting this walk too, though not soon enough. Within two miles, I'm exhausted. Beyond hot and tired, I'm nauseated, and my gym-built leg muscles are cramping. I need to learn how to move with the heat rather than defy it.

The dogs have this walk too. Dogs don't run here. At most, they trot. But more often they slink, slouched, heads bowed to the sun. "There are no puppies here," I think. Not only have I not seen a single puppy, but I've seen no dog-play, no boisterous lumbering or bounding or scrapping to relay the sheer joy of having a body.

Lunchtime hits all at once. Tiffin boxes appear as people sit along roadsides in bits of shade and heat tins of food over low flames. The workers fill their plates with rice and just enough gravy to hold the grains together as they mold balls with their fingertips. I think of the small pat of rice I take with meals to support a ladleful of curry, and realize how greedy I've been. The pace of street labor lowers as men and women alike squat over their

food. Then I notice the dogs, hovering and watching the slow, steady eating of humans. My three dogs would be leaping onto laps, diving into plates; I often have to fend them off with out-thrust elbows as I try to carry a forkful to my lips. But these street dogs are calm, waiting, civil, almost as if trained.

When the eating is done and I can smell the post-meal puja incense, the dogs creep forward. Each seems to know whom to go to. Casually, humans drop leftover rice or mango peel or fish bones to their waiting dogs. Each human seems to have a different click or caw for his dog. The dogs bow gratefully into their food. I watch a cluster of three dogs, one black and two mutt-brown, feed in order of hierarchy, the black dog first.

Rajiv would have been able to tell me more about these interactions: Do the same people feed the same dogs every day? Do they give the dogs names? Do they “own” them? Or maybe the humans don’t own the dogs, or the dogs the humans. Maybe there is just a kind of belonging.

Does my Mishti Kukur belong to anyone? Does anyone feed her?

As the three dogs take their last licks, two spots of white appear down the road, whiter than any white I’d seen in Kolkata, where even the pages of new books seem to wilt and yellow overnight. These whitest white spots turn into two fluffy Chihuahua-sized dogs being walked on leashes by an Indian man in a polo shirt, flat-front pants, and Bata sandals.

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“Papillons?” I ask the man, stopping him in his tracks.

“Ah, you recognize? You are the first to guess correctly. Most people say Chihuahua.”

“I noticed the butterfly ears.” It feels strange to speak in easy English. “They’re beautiful.”

“My wife’s. Purebred.”

The little dogs yap, and when I squat to pet them, their tails quiver. “May I?”

“Absolutely you may.”

Their fur feels so soft in my fingers I could cry. How these little dogs tolerate such long fur in a place like Kolkata I can’t imagine. They must get bathed often, and brushed every day. As I pet the papillons, even letting them lick my face, the three street mutts approach from behind, and sniff the butts of the purebreds, smelling the residue of privilege. But as I move to shift my hand onto the black dog’s dusty head, the man shouts “*Chup!*” and mimics a karate-chop to scare off the strays. Then with a “*Challo!*” he and his unnaturally white papillons trot quickly on.

I'm beginning to identify the caste system among India's dogs, even as the country is trying to eliminate it among its humans. These two papillons are *brahmins*. I've also seen a few *ksatriya* or perhaps *shudra* service, police, and search-and-rescue dogs. There are also the *vaishya* and *shudra* rural working dogs, who guard, protect, hunt, and herd, and who, like their human counterparts, tend to be strong and lean, hungry-looking but not starving. Vastly more numerous, though, are these *dalit* dogs of the streets, literally untouchable with their mange and ticks and oozing wounds.

I walk through Kolkata's residential and commercial streets with my camera, documenting the class system of dogs, until I'm sick with heat exhaustion and dehydration.

On my way home, evening emerges in lengthening shadows. Rounding a corner, I come upon three tan dogs. Two, though mangy, are perched regally on a sand pile, as if posing for a photo. I take it. The third, who seems to have a touch of beagle in him, digs into the dirt to unearth a cool spot, then plops his belly onto it. This digging gesture contains more dogness—what I recognize as dogness—than I've seen yet in Kolkata, and I'm touched. I take his picture too, and capture his jaw relaxed into a grin. But when I step closer into their territory, one lets out a serious bark. It's the opposite of the yipping my dogs emit at my front door when the bell rings; those sounds are all energy and anxiety and excitement. This bark is calm, directed, purposeful, and efficient. I have no doubt what it means: *Do not come any nearer. Do not touch.*

I don't.

On the next block a blue heeler mix steps towards me, but as I try for his picture he trots past. "Ah-Ah!" I hear behind me, and the dog turns as I do to observe a man's hand gesture. The dog stands still for me to take the picture. Poor thing has yellow pus coming out of his eyes, and scabs across his thinning back. The man, skinny in his T-shirt and lungi, looks over my shoulder to see it in the viewfinder, then does the sideways head wag with a touch of pride and lets forth a string of Bengali, which I try to tell him I don't understand, but he only speaks louder. I smile and nod and mumble "*Jani na*" (I don't know), as Ma often does to me. Then, pointing to the dog, I ask, "Name? *Nam kee?*" But the man doesn't understand my attempt at Bengali, and makes his apologetic side-to-side head gestures when I try again. I want to ask the man if the dog is his, but don't have language. So I point to the dog, then him, then raise my eyebrows into questions. He's puzzled. Dog-you, I point, dog-you. "*Ah-cha-cha,*" he nods. I don't know quite

how my question has translated. Does he understand himself as owning the dog? Or is there simply a link between them, a hyphen, the line my finger draws from dog to man?

When I stumble back home, Mishti Kukur is waiting. I hold out my hand, and she makes to sniff it, but I can't hold back any more, and as I rush to pet her she pulls back, as if offended at my brashness. I call and chant, but she will not come closer.

The next day I realize just how much I overdid it on my reckless walk through Kolkata in the midday heat. I'm so sick that I can't go out, can barely stand to wear clothes, and take refuge in one of Ma's housedresses. I'm even walking like her now, slumped in her batik muumuu as if weighted down by a dowager's hump. We sit together in front of the television watching Hindi serials while Ma narrates and explains the back-story intrigues. "This lady, she is very fond of this gentleman, but he does not know, and she cannot tell, because both are engaged to others. This lady here, she is an evil one, a double cross. This gentleman, he is evil too, with mustache. You just see." She shakes her head disapprovingly as the music swells.

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When the serials are over and the news comes on in alternating Bengali, Hindi, English, and Sanskrit, Ma hobbles to the fridge, her large belly teetering over crackling knees. She takes out a tiffin box of gravy-soaked rice, rice she'd badgered me to finish eating at lunch when I couldn't eat any more, rice that Sujoy had yelled at Ma for storing instead of throwing out. Ma now scrapes the sticky grains onto a banana leaf. "Give this to your dog."

"My dog?"

"I see you from balcony. Poor thing must be hungry."

What else does Ma see?

"Don't tell Sujoy," she hastens. "He will go wild."

I squeeze her hand before taking the food out for Mishti Kukur. Inside this squeeze I feel the memory of another squeeze. In what would turn out to be the last few weeks of Rajiv's life, though none of us dared to think it at the time, Rajiv had taken to lying on the dining room floor with his feet up on a chair, to straighten the bones in his tumor-laden, radiated spine. His feet had become swollen from electrolyte imbalances and ached when he took off his compression socks. One day I walked in on Ma massaging Rajiv's feet in her lap as he lay below her chair, with Pretzel, our oldest dog, pressed against Rajiv's side. Ma murmured to her son as his moans lessened.

Then, feeling watched, perhaps, she looked up, irrationally guilty when she saw my face, perhaps recognizing my irrational jealousy. Thirteen years of competing for Rajiv's love all concentrated into this moment as I fixed my eyes on Ma. Then she astounded me: she offered me Rajiv's feet. Wordlessly, she gave up her chair for me, positioned Rajiv's feet in my lap, and, as Pretzel repositioned himself, showed me how to squeeze in the right rhythm, her hands squeezing over mine. I had forgotten this moment until now, though I'd remembered all her scoldings.

I squeeze the banana leaf in memory as I carry it outside, where the sun has washed all life into the shade. I call out for Mishti Kukur, until I hear a rustle. She sticks her neck out from her little cove under the building, then tests a front paw. Her nose is working, registering the gravied rice, registering me. I walk away from the banana leaf, and turn my back to show her I'm not claiming it. It's hers. She edges toward it, watching me intently without making eye contact. When she gets to the pile of rice, she pulls it, leaf and all, into her own private corner under the building overhang, and eats, watching me the whole time, as if she's confused because I've violated the social structure, as if she's so settled into her untouchable status that it's become instinctual to her. When she backs into the shade, I call to her for a while, but she doesn't come back out, just watches me peripherally through crust-lined eyes.

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Sujoy and Joya are out all day long now, having given up on getting along with Ma. When they leave early in the morning, to visit friends and shop and run errands for Joya's parents, they tell Ma not to wait up for them at night. They take multiple Kinley water bottles and leave. But I've been spending more time with Ma, having lowered my caffeine intake and settled into her pace. We eat dinners alone at nine p.m., when Ma gives up hope of their mealtime return.

"Why my own son cannot have dinner with his mother?" she asks one night, a few days before I am to leave. "Why is he so selfish? I tell you, Raju was not like that. Raju respected his Ma. He was not so childish."

"That's not entirely true," I offer. "Raju could be childish with you too, remember." But her deafness and her resolutely revisionist memory keep her from hearing me.

"He was a very loving boy, isn't it? Such a good boy, so loving. He never gave me any trouble."

“He loved you very much. But it’s not fair to compare Raju and Sujoy.”

“I have never!” Ma protests. “I do not do this thing, this compare. I have never. But I tell you, you say Raju he loved me, but Sujoy does not love me, I don’t think so. But I will go up soon, and then...” She fills in the pause with a chin thrust as she sucks in her three teeth.

“Oh, I’m sure he loves you,” I try again. “I’m sure of it. He just has a hard time expressing it. He gets frustrated. But he does love you.”

“I do not think so,” Ma says simply. She shakes her head, then sobs. “I don’t know why, God has been so selfish, so selfish. To take both my husband and my son. Both!”

I warm her hand in mine while she cries. She looks at me through layers of wet. “I know you are feeling pain, every day I am thinking about how you are all alone. But you have not given birth to him! You don’t know what it is to lose him to whom you have given birth. Nine months and ten days I have carried.” She floods again, but I withdraw my hand. I know she’s right, that her suffering is bigger than mine, but I do not like “this compare.” She fumbles for her handkerchief.

“I have been meaning to ask you.” Ma snorts back down her rush of snot. “When he was dying, Raju, he kept clawing at his wrist. Just like this. I could not figure out what. Then I saw, and I took off his wristwatch, and he settled. What was that? I have been meaning to ask you all these years. Do you know what it means?”

I nod. “They call it the death throes. I didn’t believe in it until Rajiv. It’s a phase that dying people go through, where they sometimes grab at their clothes or try to throw everything off them.”

“I don’t know. What is it?”

“Death throes,” I enunciate, separating the two words, but Ma just shakes her head.

“I don’t know. He would not let me touch him. He threw off my hands. When I tried to hold him he shouted *Debby! Debby! Debby!* Thrice, just like that. You remember?”

I remember. His last words. But he did not settle after that. He struggled, fighting with his clothes, his caregivers, with death itself. The life force was so strong in him, as it is in all of us, so recalcitrant and powerful even in death. Especially in death.

Later in that endless night of Rajiv’s dying, after he’d lost speech and possibly cognition, he was awake and thirsty, though unable to swallow. But

when I swabbed his dry lips, he closed them around the sponge end of the swab and sucked the water—hard. I knew that the sucking instinct is one of the first a baby presents, and one of the last a body lets go of. Rajiv was going back in time, back into his animal body, before language or loss. Then I'd realized that it was Ma's turn. I'd held out the swab to her, and she offered it to her baby son, as if in her own instinctual rhythm, dipping swab after swab in water and feeding them to Rajiv's sucking mouth.

"Do you remember the mouth swabs?" I ask her now.

"How he clung to life!" Ma is crying again, heaving, and when I offer her my arms she doesn't hesitate. When I first met my mother-in-law, and when I complained about her over the years, bristling at her free-flowing advice, it had never occurred to me that I would share the most absolute moment of my life with her, the moment when, as we each held a cold hand and Pretzel stirred at his feet, Rajiv gulped in a breath, then exhaled, then waited. We waited, too, for the next gulp. Instead, his face relaxed, the muscles completely at rest. Pretzel jumped down from the bed and crawled under the futon. Ma touched her hand to her son's cheek and said, with as much simplicity as wonder, "Absolutely cold."

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Now my hands press into the fat of her back, pushing her ample breasts into my training-bra-sized ones. I can feel her lungs empty and expand.

Outside a street dog is crying. Not whimpering but crying in complete dogwails: Owww-owww. I wonder if it's my Mishti Kukur. Behind this lone voice, the car horns honk on.

It's finally time to hug Ma goodbye. My suitcases are already downstairs. I offer Ma my arms, but she stays fixed. "And so, Debby, you will go back to your dogs and forget all about your Ma." When I pull her into me, the hug triggers in her a convulsion of tears. I can feel it starting from her gut, pressed against mine. "I will go up soon," she cries. "I will go up and be forgotten. You will remember your Ma? You will not forget?"

"I will miss you, Ma," I say into her right ear, the less deaf one. "I love you."

I don't know if she understands the words, but she calms some, and then pulls back to hold me by the elbows. "But Debby," she says, "you must not get any more dogs."

"You're right." I try to laugh it off, but already the word "must" is chasing away my tenderness. "I *must* not."

“No, you must not. It is too much. And also you must not let your dogs lick your face. It is unsanitary.”

“Yes, Ma,” I manage, approximating politeness. I know what she’s doing; she’s trying to mother me in the only way she knows: to treat the ones she loves as children to be scolded. And that’s what I become. Already I am determined, though the thought had not previously occurred to me, to get a fourth dog before the summer is out. And it won’t be something cute and small and cuddly, like my three cocker mixes; it will be something muscular and vulpine and vital, with a sharp nose and pointed ears and drive, something tough and third-worldly. A survivor.

Ma is sobbing now, in heaves. “Be strong,” Sujoy rebukes, as he and I board the lift. I wave at Ma as Sujoy closes the black metal gates and we descend below her bowing bulk.

The driver that Sujoy hired waits for me at his car with my bags as I walk around the building, calling for Mishti Kukur one last time. I need to say goodbye. I’ve got something special for her in my pocket. When I put on my jeans this morning, the first time I wore them since my arrival in India, I discovered a bit of Sausage in the front pocket, left over from a trip to the dog park back in Colorado. It’s stale, but still smells of artificial bacon flavor. I call at Mishti Kukur’s cove, and her head emerges, bowed below her shoulders. Her nose is evaluating. She makes eye contact, drops her eyes immediately, but, when I encourage her, looks straight at me. I hold out the Sausage. Her jaw drops into a tentative smile, and she pads towards me with only an instant of hesitation, as if she recognizes and even trusts me. After I hold out the Sausage, and she takes it from my hand, she retreats two steps, but only two.

“I’m gonna miss you, Mishti,” I say to her. “Will you miss me?” I hold out my hand for her to sniff. She keeps several inches between us, her nose so caked with dirt I don’t know how any scent molecules can get through. Then I remember the water bottle holstered in my fanny pack. I cup some water into my hand and offer it to her. She looks at it, then looks at me. I look away to show her I’m not interested, not threatening. She risks it, inches forward, stretches her pale tongue, takes a quick lap. Then another. I pour more water into my cupped left hand and, as she laps, slurping now, I set the water bottle down and touch her head with my right hand. Under my fingers, the dirt crunches as my pat turns into a stroke. *Wash your hands*, I imagine Rajiv’s



voice, joking and commanding. But this time I ignore it. My Mishti Kukur is starting to belong to me, and I to her.

And now I will abandon her. Will she remember me, look for me, wonder where I went? Will she find another human? Will she risk belonging again? From the car window, the first step of my long journey back to my very touchable dogs, I look at Mishti Kukur one last time. She's still waiting, watching me, as her small brown body recedes into the dirt.

We drive through streets and streets of dogs, myriads of untouchable dogs, a country full, mixing, as the landscape shifts from urban to semirural, with the rib-lined goats and cows and chickens and people. I want to feed them all, even as they recede from my alien touch, even as I fly from Kolkata to Mumbai to London to Denver and the skins of travelers get whiter and whiter, even as I am greeted at my own front door by three anxious dogs—no, not dogs, but full-grown puppies, never to mature into real adults—who jump on me wildly. When Ma was last here, in those days after Rajiv's death, she scolded them for such behavior, pushing them away with an "*Ah-ray? Bahjay kukur!*" (Bad dog!) But she is not here, and I, instead, encourage my untamable first-world dogs to bark and croon and wiggle and shake under my greedy, fur-starved fingers.