

1-1-2001

# Fetching water

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# Fetching Water

Essays by Neema Avashia

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## **Aftershocks**

On Friday, January 27<sup>th</sup>, at 9 a.m. Indian time, an earthquake rocked the state of Gujarat, India. Measuring in at 7.9 on the Richter scale, the quake killed well over 25,000 people, destroyed hundreds of buildings, and reversed much of the progress that Gujarat has made in the past 15 years.

On Friday, January 27<sup>th</sup>, at 3:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, I went to sleep in my house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and woke up again at 7:00 a.m. to get ready for class. I didn't have time to read the newspaper before I left home because I was too busy showering, packing my backpack, making my thermos of extra-strong, extra-sugary Kenyan tea in the half hour before I rushed to campus for my 8 o'clock class.

I shook—physically shook—all the way through my first class that Friday. My hands shook so much that I had to keep my fists clenched in order to steady them. My body shook so violently that I had to wrap my arms around my mid-section and hold on tight in order to keep from shaking. I shook without knowing why. I thought it might be because I hadn't slept enough the night before, or because I had put too much sugar in my tea, or maybe because I hadn't eaten in something like 20 hours. I shook for an hour and a half straight, and then, just as suddenly as it had started, the shaking stopped.

I finally had time to read the newspaper headlines at 10:30 in the morning, finally got news of the earthquake at 10:30—over twelve hours after the earthquake had actually happened. I read and found that the epicenter of the earthquake happened to be the town of Bhuj, where two of my aunts live, and that Ahmedabad, the city where most of my relatives live, was also badly hit.

As I battled panic, tried to get in touch with my mom, and attempted to find out more information by reading every article I could get my hands on, I began to do the least useful thing possible... I began to reflect.

For the past 6 months as I've worked on this thesis, I've asked myself the same question again and again: What does it mean to be an immigrant? Or, in my case, what does it mean to be the child of an immigrant?

I've come up with many answers. There's the simple dictionary definition—the one that says that an immigrant is anyone who leaves their native country to come to another country for social or economic reasons. There's the initial definition that I came up with—the one that says being an immigrant means that you're an exile, removed from the country and culture that are so important to defining who you are. There's the secondary definition that I came up with later—the one that says that being the child of an immigrant means that you learn to take what's best in the two cultures that you've grown up with, use it to create your own new culture, and leave the negative aspects behind.

But only in the week after the earthquake have I been able to formulate this latest definition of being an immigrant.

What does it mean to be an immigrant?

It means that you are always ten hours behind, and 10,000 miles away. Too far behind and too far away to ever be a real presence in the day-to-day lives of your family members.

It means that after you hear about destruction in your family's hometown, you race to a phone to call your mom to see if she's heard anything, and her voice trembles as

she tells you that she hasn't received any news yet because communication lines in and around Ahmedabad are down.

It means that you shake ten hours after the tremors have stopped. It means that you begin to cry ten hours after the cries have ceased. It means that buildings crumble, houses collapse, earth splits, people die, and you only read about those things in the newspaper ten hours later. It means that you watch video coverage on TV of things that your relatives are watching happen right before their eyes.

It means that you live in a world of “fors”, not “withs”. You live for your family in India, not with them. You pray for your family, not with them. You suffer for your family, not with them. No matter how much you want to be there, how desperately you ache to be beside them, how little you care about the obvious fact that you might have died had you been there, the fact of the matter is, you're here, not there...and that's the end of it.

Being an immigrant, or the child of an immigrant, means many things...but at its roots, and especially in times of crisis, it means living a life of disconnectedness and despair when it comes to the family that you've left behind. You will always be the American cousin, the American uncle, the American aunt. For children, you will be a faint memory—that nice person who comes to visit every two or three years and always brings toys and candy. For adults, you will be a more vivid memory, but barely anything more than that. You will be fun to have around, fun to entertain, fun to lavish with attention...but you will never be the person who they confide in completely, never be privy to the information necessary to understand the family politics that are constantly at work under the surface.

10 hours behind, 10,000 miles away, and more a memory than a reality. That's what it means to be an immigrant. That's what it means to be the child of an immigrant. That's the harsh reality that all of us end up facing when crisis strikes 10,000 miles away, and we don't feel the tremors until the morning after.

*Quiero la luz humilde que ilumina  
Cuerpo y alma en un ser, en uno solo.  
Mi equilibrio ordinario es mi gran arte.  
--Jorge Guillén, "Descaminado"*

I seek the humble light that enlightens  
Body and soul into one being, only one.  
My simple equilibrium of self is my  
masterpiece.

### **Exiliada**

“Why West Virginia?” people always ask when I tell them where I’m from.

That’s the most typical response. The second-most typical response comes in the form of a question, too: “There are Indians in West Virginia?”

When confronted with these questions, I can only shrug my shoulders or shake my head and try to explain that when my father was offered a job working as a physician at the Union Carbide Plant in Institute, WV, he took it. He took it based on one visit, made in August of 1974. Things like quality of education, diversity of community, and availability of cultural events didn’t really play into his decision. It was a job, and he needed a job. It was money, and he needed money. What else was there to consider?

26 years later, although the chemical plant where my father works has undergone multiple changes in name and management, “Doc” is still the plant physician—the guy who everyone sees for their physicals, their flu shots, their drug tests, their on-the-job injuries. 26 years later, my parents still live at 5303 Pamela Circle: A two-story, 3 bedroom, 2 ½ bathroom house with white siding, maroon shutters, and carpet that has been around since I was two. I should know—I learned to write my letters in it. The Cunninghams still live across the street from us; the Withrows, Mondays, Riecks, Carneys, and Castos still live down the street. The basketball hoops that Andy Carney, Lee Withrow, and I put up 12 years ago are still there, and our initials are still visible in the part of the street that had to be re-paved about 10 years ago. Brian Weaver committed suicide in 1993. Mr. Starcher was hit by a train and killed 9 months ago. Mr. Weaver died

of liver cancer 5 months ago. Mr. Turner moved into a bigger house, the Lunardinis moved to Pittsburgh. These are the kinds of changes that we see on Pamela Circle.

This is where I spent the first 18 years of my exile.

\* \* \* \*

For most of my childhood, I was one of those children who just didn't quite "fit in". I didn't fit in at school because I wasn't American enough. I spoke a different language, ate different food, and just *looked* different. I didn't fit within the Indian community because I wasn't Indian enough. I played outside with the boys during Indian functions, hair tousled and clothes awry, instead of primly sitting inside, dressed in my finest Indian clothing, like all of the other girls. And because I didn't fit anywhere, I did what a lot of other misfit children do—I created a world of my own in my imagination.

Until recently, I haven't had the words to describe the life I created for myself, or the struggles that I went through in trying to balance between being "un-Indian" and "un-American". I've read about it a hundred times in immigrant literature—this attempt to balance between cultures is a common theme among 1<sup>st</sup> generation Americans, and many seem to be obsessed with the need to write about their struggle. But despite all of this reading, I was never able to find words to describe the strong emotions attached to my own experiences with being the child of immigrants, being a minority in schools where the minority population was less than 5%, being different in situations where being different wasn't the right way to be. I knew what I felt, but I couldn't articulate it. .

Not having the words to justify my complicated feelings on this issue of identity was exceedingly frustrating. I didn't know the words in English to describe the struggle between cultures that I was trying to resolve, and I didn't have the vocabulary in Gujarati

to describe it, either. I remember trying to describe it to an aunt once by saying, “I’m not completely Indian, and not completely American. I’m whatever it is that falls in the middle.” *Vaache*. I kept repeating that word. Middle. But for someone who has never been *in* the middle, *vaache* means very little. This lack of language was made even more difficult because I couldn’t shake the idea that my feelings weren’t justifiable, weren’t valid, until I could name them. If I couldn’t put words to my thoughts, it was almost as though they weren’t real.

Fortunately, I have recently discovered the work of exiled Spanish poets and playwrights of *la Generación de 27*, and suddenly, in reading the work of Miguel Unamuno, Jorge Guillén, Federico Garcia Lorca, Alejandro Casona, Pedro Salinas, and Rafael Alberti, I’ve found the vocabulary I need to describe my life. These authors left Spain in the 1920s because they couldn’t bear to watch the country they loved—their *patria*—be destroyed by Francisco Franco. From afar—from Argentina, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Italy, America, France—they watched their countrymen struggle and suffer under fascist rule, watched the country split into factions of fascists, liberals, and indifferent, watched as the *España* that they loved so much was destroyed and replaced by a country full of turmoil. Taken away from their homelands, these writers could write very little that didn’t have undertones of exile. Almost every play had a character who was conflicted—facing the struggles that an exile undergoes. Virtually every poem was full of nostalgia for home and childhood, sentiments of loss and displacement, or criticism for the country in which they were being forced to make their home.

As a group, this generation of poets and playwrights is always classified as a group of exiles. *El exilio* is most often described as being displaced—physically,

emotionally, or spiritually disconnected from the aspects of life that are “native” to a person. This conception of exile deals with the sentiments of loss and fragmentation of self that occur as a result of this displacement, and cause a person to seek out new limits...or a new land...in order make herself whole again. In the case of these writers, their limits, and their new land, could not be found in existing realities. For them to be whole again, they had to create a new reality—a world that contained elements of the past and present, but only existed for them. They created this world in their minds, expressed it through their writing, and lived in it until the point when they were able to accept enough of the reality that they were confronted with to join it.

I read the poems and plays of these poets and playwrights, read about their frustration at losing their language, pain at being separated from their culture, and their feelings of fragmentation, and finally found the words that define me: *Desplazada*, *destierra*, *transplantada*, *exiliada*. My parents were *inmigrantes*—people who left their *país natal* for economic and social reasons. For 21 years, I have been an *exiliada*—someone whose displacement was forced by decisions outside my control. And like those writers, the fragmentation of self that I underwent led me to create a third world for myself—something neither Indian, nor American, nor Indian-American, but rather a combination of all three. A world without a demographic descriptor, with limits that I was constantly redefining, that contained elements from my past, present, and future, from my Indian heritage and my American upbringing, but wasn’t any one of the these in totality.

\* \* \* \*

Even though I was aware from very early on that I was not like most of the people who lived around me in small-town West Virginia, I didn't realize that my ethnicity made me different in any negative sense until the year I turned eight. Up to that point, I had played on my street every afternoon with the other children of the neighborhood, gone to school, swum on the swim team, and played softball and basketball without ever feeling strange about the fact that I was one of only two Indians to do so.

But one day during third grade, some track and field athletes from West Virginia State College came to visit my elementary school to show us some of their techniques. I was thrilled. At age eight, I had aspirations of being a discus-thrower, and so I waited in line with my friend John Michael to talk to the discus-thrower who had come as part of the group.

We were standing in the multi-purpose room talking while we waited our turn when a short, fat, red-headed boy with lots of freckles came up to us. He sneered, slapped me across the face, and said, "Get out of my way, nigger." I started crying...and moved out of the way.

The redheaded boy was named J. R. Hammond. 13 years later, I still remember his name and his face, although I'm almost positive he doesn't know mine, if he even ever did. Although my gym teacher Mrs. Evans was crying herself when she came to console me, J.R. didn't get in trouble for what he had done. I remember being told that he was too young to know any better. And I, ashamed, didn't tell my parents, so they couldn't push for him to be punished, either.

At eight, I didn't know what the word "nigger" meant. I only knew that it was something bad, and that when combined with that slap, it meant that J. R. Hammond

hated me. I quickly came to the realization that something about *me* made J. R. Hammond angry... That I was different, and that since different made me get slapped and called names, different was bad.

Suddenly, I didn't want to take Indian food to school for lunch anymore. I used to love taking my favorite Indian foods—lemon rice, *thepla*, *chakri*, and *upama*—to school in my lunchbox. This was no longer the case.

“Only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches,” I told my mom. She complied without questioning me. I ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every school day after that—from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade all the way through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

I felt embarrassed if I had to go into a store on the way to an Indian function and I was dressed in Indian clothes.

“I'll sit in the car while you go in,” I would tell my parents. Casting it up to being one of my strange quirks, they would leave me in the car and go about their business. And I would sit, and roast in the summer, and freeze in the winter, and be bored out of my mind for the 15, 30, or 60 minutes that they would spend in the store.

I would criticize my mother harshly if she spoke to me in Gujarati when we were in the presence of people who weren't Indian. “Mom, don't do that!” I would whisper furiously. “Speak in English. We live in America.” And so she stopped speaking in Gujarati when we were in public.

I pushed away every aspect of difference that I could. I probably would have bleached my skin if I thought it would turn it white. The way to not be hurt, I thought, was to make it so that I didn't stick out. And yet, I couldn't be *American*, either...at least, not in the West Virginian sense of the word. I tried... I played the sports, traded the

cards, read the comics, and ate some of the food. I listened to country music, played the guitar, even had a pair of cowboy boots—all part of this futile attempt to Americanize. But nothing I did seemed to make me feel any less out of place.

At one point, there was nothing I wanted more than a Bowery Boys t-shirt. Every “cool” person in my school had one—a red t-shirt with a blue “X” across the front, and the X had white stars in it. Some of them had lettering on the back that said things like, “The South Will Rise Again.” Not that I knew what that meant, of course. So I wanted one and wanted one and wanted one, but never got one. It wasn’t until years later, when I came to understand the significance of the rebel flag—what it represented during the Civil War, and what it represents today—that I thought back on those Bowery Boys t-shirts and was disgusted that I had ever wanted one. I started to visibly shudder when I came into contact with the people who wore Bowery Boys t-shirts, who draped rebel flags on their walls, or displayed them on their license plates.

But even though I grew to abhor these symbols of racism, I never learned to hate the people who displayed them with such pride. My initial tendency was to hate them...it was easy to point a finger at a group of people, and make a generalization that all of them were evil based on the clothing that they chose to wear or the paraphernalia that they chose to flaunt. But every time I would begin to make a generalization, I would meet a “redneck” who would break the stereotype that I was trying to form. Sometimes, because I was a friend of their sister’s or girlfriend’s, they would be nice to me. They would say hi at school, or sit with me at lunch, or give me a ride home...and then I couldn’t hate them. Sometimes they would even stick up for me when I was being harassed by another racist, and then I definitely couldn’t hate them. It seemed so contradictory...but I came to

realize that when people knew me on a deeper level than that of race (because they'd heard about me from their sisters and girlfriends, talked to me on the phone, worked together with me on homework), all of the rebel flag beliefs that they tried to espouse seemed to fall away.

\* \* \* \*

Neither Indian, nor American, years later, I would see the term “Indian-American” in the demographics section on standardized tests, but that wasn't me, either. I wasn't Indian, and I wasn't American. The only thing about the word that did strike a chord with me was the hyphen—the link between the two words. When it stands alone, a hyphen means nothing. In between two words, it speaks volumes about the struggle to pull two very different words together and make them into one.

\* \* \* \*

I played sports from the time I was about seven years old onwards. From 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I was the only girl in an all boys' basketball league, and loved the attention that I received because of it. When I went into a game, the crowd would yell and clap and stomp on the bleachers as though I were the star player. When I scored a basket, people were on their feet cheering as though I'd made a half-court shot, even if I'd only hit a lay-up. It was such a self-esteem boost every time. There I was, this scrawny little Indian girl, with big glasses, teeth that stuck out, and a long braid of black hair that went all the way down her back, who had to shoot “granny” style until 4<sup>th</sup> grade because she wasn't strong enough to shoot like a boy, and despite all of that, or maybe because of it, people loved me.

You can imagine my surprise, then, when upon entering middle school and joining the girls' basketball team, I found myself being booed by fans at away games. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, we went to play at Elkview Middle School, which is located in a town that city-people would describe as "the sticks". There, the crowd booed, threw ice, heckled, and mocked me and the two African-American girls on my team. When one of the girls tripped and busted her lip, a malicious snicker rippled through the crowd. And after the game, we went back to our bus only to find that some Elkview fans had urinated all over it.

That was only the beginning. For the next five years, I was called everything from "Mr. Miyagi" to "Speedy Gonzalez," was asked questions like, "Where is your papoose?" and "What tribe are you part of?", was harassed with calls of "Andale, andale, arriba!" and strange-sounding attempts at Japanese karate language. Certain schools were worse than others: Elkview, Ripley, Sissonville, Man. The days on which we were scheduled to play at those schools were game days that I dreaded. In those towns, my coaches wouldn't let me out of their sight unless a teammate accompanied me to wherever it was that I needed to go. They tried to make it funny—tried to help me laugh off the comments. "Right, Neema," they'd say when I told them about yet another Mr. Miyagi comment. "Because you really look like a 70-year old Japanese man, don't you?" Nonetheless, it stung.

I stopped crying when insulted by people, and started lashing out. When a boy sitting in a school bus leaned out the window and spit on me as I walked by, I went into the bus and screamed at him. When Robbie Ferrell would glare at me hatefully, I would glare back just as hatefully. When "stupid" people made "stupid" comments, I would

laugh at them. Everyone has a breaking point, and it only took a few hundred racist remarks directed at me before I finally reached mine.

\* \* \* \*

Things only got worse as I got older, largely because I was more conscious of the prejudices that seemed to crop up all around me. I didn't go looking for them, but they seemed to be intent on finding me and hurting me.

Senior year of high school, Miss Hayhurst's History class: Justin Canfield sits in the seat in front of mine. He has a voice like Jeff Foxworthy's (The "You might be a redneck if..." guy), a head that is disproportionately large for his skinny body, and an obnoxious personality. Anytime I make a comment that goes against what he believes, he proclaims to the class that I am "un-American", and moves his desk five feet away from mine. One time, I make the mistake of saying that I don't think communism is a particularly bad *economic* system, and that if implemented properly (without an authoritarian government in tow) it could be really effective in a country like India where the economic disparity between rich and poor is so vast.

"You believe in communism? That's un-American!" big-headed, sharp-nosed, stupid-looking Justin Canfield shouts, scooting his desk away.

"You communist. You pinko!" Ryan McCarthy, also known as Waldo (from "Where's Waldo", because that's who he looks like, only fatter) calls out.

Miss Hayhurst says nothing.

My other classmates, even those who are my close friends, say nothing.

For the rest of the year, any comments that I make, regardless of their content, find themselves being punctuated by the statements, “Yeah well, you’re un-American,” or “Yeah well, you’re a pinko. You don’t count.”

By this point in time, I’ve heard just about every derogatory comment that could be possibly be made about me, and my understanding of what it means to be different has evolved to a point of resignation. I accept that I am different, and that this makes people prejudiced against me. I accept that if I’m going to live in West Virginia, attend a high school that has such a small minority population that it is often called “Whitro” instead of Nitro, and speak my mind on controversial topics, people are going to lash out at me. I look different. I think differently. Based on WV standards of treatment, I “deserve”, in some sense, the treatment that I receive. I accept this...and count down the days until I can get the hell out.

\* \* \* \*

I told a professor about what it was like to grow up in West Virginia...what it was like to be spit on, slapped, threatened, and despised for who I was.

“Weren’t you angry?” he asked. “Didn’t you hate them?”

I wasn’t. I didn’t. My reaction when faced with prejudice was to blame it on myself...to internalize it instead of placing the blame on other people.

“It wasn’t their fault,” I protested. “They didn’t know any better.”

“That’s typical, Neema. Always the martyr...always taking responsibility for things that aren’t even your fault. Ignorance is someone’s fault...you’re allowed to blame them for it,” my well-meaning professor said.

“No...I can't. If I hated everyone who had a problem with me...every person who was ignorant...every person who treated me badly, I don't think I'd be able to get out of bed in the morning. Once you start hating one person, you start a chain... It's easier to hate the next person, and then the next person after that is even easier to hate, and eventually, you'll hate just about everyone. That's too jaded of a perspective for me.” I knew I wasn't getting anywhere with this discussion, but I continued to try to make him see my point of view.

“OK...but this way, you ended up hating yourself for no good reason. Which is better? Hating other people, or hating yourself?”

“Hating myself,” I said. “That's something that I can get over. I can struggle with it and come to terms with who I am, and accept that...even if it takes me a really long time. Hating other people isn't something that I think can be overcome.”

Some might call this skewed logic. Maybe it is, but for me, the thought of hating someone—despising them for any extended period of time because they've hurt me—leaves me cold. I feel like the moment you start to hate, it becomes more difficult to love. Your heart gets a little harder, a little smaller, every time, and you begin to lose your sense of wonder about the world, your appreciation for the good in people. The last thing I want in life is to end up like Dr. Seuss's Grinch, with a heart that is two sizes too small. If that's skewed logic, so be it.

\* \* \* \*

Every exile eventually comes to terms with his position in life. He gets farther and farther away from his past, and closer to his present, is able to piece the fragments of

himself back together, and finally is able to leave behind the world he has created for himself, and join the real world.

It may take years... It took me 13. 13 years full of struggling to appreciate who I was and where I came from, along with multiple trips to India, where I've learned what an amazing heritage I have to take pride in, and what wonderful relatives I have to love and look up to. But 13 years after J. R. Hammond broke my identity into fragments, I can finally say that I am comfortable with being an Indian-American. I can espouse individualism, hard work, rationalism, and feminism, and still touch my elders' feet out of respect, put my family first, and believe in the mysticism of Indian mythology. I can speak a mixture of Gujarati and English, switching back and forth so quickly that even I forget which language I am speaking. I can eat Indian food with a spoon, and pasta with my fingers, and wear an Indian *kurta* on top of blue jeans, or Teva sandals with a *punjabi*. But I'm proud of the mixture of cultures and lifestyles that I contain—proud of this new culture, new world, new way of life that I've been able to embrace. In a sense, I feel like Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

## Choking Women

*Arjun, one of the five Pandava brothers, went to an archery competition at a famous king's palace, won the competition, and returned home with his prize—the king's daughter. She was a beautiful, intelligent woman named Draupadi, and the object of many princes' desires.*

*"Mother," he called, upon entering the house, "look what I've brought home from the archery competition!"*

*From the other room, Arjun's mother gave him an order: "I'm busy right now, Arjun. Whatever it is, share it with your brothers."*

*Unwilling to disobey his mother, Arjun did not protest. Even when his mother realized that she had just ordered her son to share his wife, she did not recant on her previous command. Thus Draupadi became wife to five husbands.*

*(The Mahabharata)*

\* \* \* \*

I can spot a choking woman when I see one. My family is full of them. The words to describe them come easily, because I've heard them used in whispered conversations between relatives too many times to not remember.

*Fasaigaiya*

*Dabaigaiya*

*Soneri ni pinjari ma raheche.*

(They are stuck.

They are being pressed down on, smashed...oppressed, I suppose.

They live in cages made of gold...beautiful, but cages nevertheless.)

This is the plight of woman after woman after woman in my family. Whether stuck in an unhappy marriage, dominated by a ruthless husband or mother-in-law, or trapped in an apartment with marble floors and all the money they could ever desire, but none of the freedom, they are all choking. Some of them know it, some of them don't. It hurts to think of them as such, either way. Those who realize they are choking are tortured and bitter...those who don't are tortured and sad.

Women in India are the bastions of family responsibility. Men may bring home the money, but it's the women who make functional families. The fight for women's rights has taken hold in India, and that, combined with the need for two incomes to run a household, is slowly changing the norm, but even today the idea of woman as homemaker is a prominent one. There are women who spend their entire lives caring for, living for, doing for other people. In and of itself, I suppose this is ok. But when it comes at the cost of losing oneself, it's time to start asking questions.

As I've grown up, I have watched my female relatives interact with their fathers, husbands, and sons. I have watched them choke, and then watched as they have tried to prevent themselves from choking. And in all of my watching, the one resulting characteristic common to all of these women who I have observed, is bitterness. These sweet, talented, beautiful women who were never told that they were sweet, talented, and beautiful, who were never given their due for what they did for home and family, are now tinged with bitterness. Does this dominate their lives? Does it ruin their personalities? Of course not. But there's an edge in Uma mami's voice when she talks to Girish mama (her husband) or Ma (her mother-in-law), one of sheer exhaustion and frustration and nerves worn raw that makes me shiver to hear it. There is an ironic quality to the things that Manju foi says—sarcasm, I guess—when she is talking about her husband that is almost too biting to be funny. It would be funny if it were a neighbor that she was describing, but it's a little different when someone uses that tone of voice to describe the person who shares her bed. There's an aura of sadness and insecurity that surrounds Kuku tai, so pervasive that whenever I'm around her, I'm constantly worried that she is going to break down and finally let out the years and years of tears that have built up inside her. And if

watching women choke is difficult, looking at bitter women, women who feel as though they haven't truly been able to fulfill their desires and live out the life that they dreamed of, is even harder.

I fear that what I write here is going to make it seem as though I am anti-arranged marriage because many of these women seem to be choking as a result of their marriages. In truth, when they function properly, I have no problem with arranged marriages. However, arranged marriage is rooted in the concept of compromise. Ideally, two people come together and bend and mold themselves to fit one another's expectations and needs...and subsequently create a *new* life together. In the reality that I've seen time and time again, though, arranged marriage involves one person making his demands and lifestyle known, and then the other person bends, twists, and breaks to meet those demands for the sake of the marriage. More often than not, it's the woman who breaks. More often than not, it's the woman who chokes.

Realize, though, that there is a difference between strangling and choking. No person has his hands around these women's throats, slowly squeezing their life out of them. It really is a matter of choking... It's a matter of desires—from being able to sit down and read instead of having to clean house, to having someone else cook dinner that day, to being allowed to put up your own artwork on the walls of your house without being told that it “makes things look cluttered”—welling up inside of my *mami*, *foi*, or *didi*—welling up from the stomach, through the esophagus, right to top of her throat, and then being held there, unable to manifest themselves, while she responds to the demands of her husband/children/in-laws/husband's colleagues/children's friends... In the meanwhile, the desires being harbored in her throat continue to grow, getting larger and

more painful with every glass of water she pours for someone who comes to visit her house, every shirt she washes for her husband, every meal she cooks without receiving a word of thanks. Eventually, still in the confines of her throat, the desires expand to such size that they literally close off her passageways, causing her to choke the next time she swallows down another call for *garam, garam* rotli.

The pressure to be a devoted wife and daughter in Indian society comes from all sides. It comes from the mythology that you grew up with. It comes from your family, your in-laws, and your friends. It comes from, as Manju foi likes to describe it, “the air.” Why? Because the air is saturated with traditions, opinions, and rules, and when you inhale, you take all of those things in. And when you exhale? You lose a little bit more of yourself in making space for the things you’ve taken in.

These are my relatives. My aunts and cousins. Women who I have grown up loving, idolizing, wanting to emulate. To suddenly realize exactly what emulating them entails is frightening. I grew up on the same mythology that they did, was taught to act modest, demean myself, and serve others, in the same way that they were. Who is to say that, in the end, my life will be any different?

\* \* \* \*

*Sati was the granddaughter of Brahma, the creator of the universe. One day, shortly after her marriage to Shiva, the destroyer, Sati’s father decided to hold a great ceremony, but neglected to invite his son-in-law in order to humiliate him. Enraged at this insult to her husband, Sati “invoked a yogic fire and was reduced to ashes,” praying that she would be reborn and again become Shiva’s consort. By giving up her body to a fire voluntarily for the sake of her husband, Sati became the prime example of wifely devotion—an idea that later was twisted in order to say that a widow who gives herself up to fire upon her husband’s death is performing the ultimate act of devotion and should be venerated. At one point, the word “sati” came to mean self-immolation and ‘good woman’ simultaneously.*

\* \* \* \*

They speak to each other, and it gives me chills just to hear them talk. “Vaishnav,” is what Uma *mami* calls her husband. Not even Girish...not even enough affection to call him by his first name. She speaks to him and I sense exasperation. He speaks to her and I sense frustration and condescension. They only speak when necessary—only when talking about hospital matters or phone messages or social obligations. They don’t talk philosophy or family or current events. They don’t ask each other how their days have gone, or how they’re feeling.

If *mami* ever tries to offer insight when *mama* is discussing politics or economics with a friend, he gets angry with her. “What do you know? What do you read?” he’ll ask.

“You may think you’re smart, Vaishnav, just because you read all of your books,” she’ll snap back, “but for all you know how to read books, I’m the one who knows how to read people.”

She speaks with bitterness...with an edge in her voice that says, “I’m smart too, you know. I used to be asked to go onto radio shows to discuss politics and feminism and my views on current events. I used to be smart, and beautiful, and respected...and the only reason any of that changed is because I married you.”

\* \* \* \*

Last December, my Deval *kaki* gave birth to a second daughter—a pretty little girl named Mansi. When she returned to Bombay from her mother’s house in Baroda, where she had gone to have her delivery, Deval *kaki* found the typical congratulatory letters awaiting her. However, she also received some consolation notes. *So sorry you had a baby girl*, they said. *It’s really too bad, but maybe you’ll be more successful if you try again*. Deval *kaki*’s husband, Manish *kaka*, was furious. Consolation cards? Who was

upset about having a girl? Not him. Not Deval kaki. Not anyone in our family. And yet, here people were consoling us for the birth of a baby girl.

\* \* \* \*

*After Ram rescued his wife Sita from being held hostage by the ten-headed demon king of Lanka, Ravana, he was distrustful of her fidelity to him during her captivity. Jealous of Ravana, and convinced that Sita's purity had been tainted, Ram claimed that he could not take Sita back into his house until she had proven to him that she was pure.*

*Sita begged and begged, repeatedly proclaiming her loyalty to Ram, but to no avail.*

*"The only way I can believe that you are pure, Sita, is if you walk through fire for me. If you walk through fire and do not burn, I will know that you aren't lying, and that Ravana did not make you impure," Ram told her.*

*Sita was left no other option. A huge fire was lit, and, as the whole kingdom watched, Sita stepped into it. She stood within the flames, but did not burn. Her purity to Ram was proven...and yet, still Ram was uncertain. His mistrust was evident, and Sita realized that nothing she could do would change his mind. She prayed silently to the only mother she had ever known—Mother Earth. (Sita's father had found her one afternoon while plowing in his fields—she had been discovered in a vessel partially embedded in the ground, and because no one knew where she had come from, they decided she had been sent to them by Mother Earth.) And so Sita prayed, asking to be taken back into her mother's lap. Within moments, the ground cracked open, Mother Earth appeared, Sita climbed down into the ground to be with her, and the crack closed up. Sita was never seen on earth again.*

*(The Ramayana)*

\* \* \* \*

My cousin Kukutai's husband Keyur cheated on her, gave her pelvic inflammatory disease and subsequently an infection that almost killed her, and yet somehow made it seem like it was all her fault. I say this matter-of-factly because, given the time to go into detail, I find myself more and more enraged each time I talk about it. Tai and Keyur fight almost constantly. Their daughter Kamya is the one who shows the effects of their messed up relationship most obviously. She is high-strung, demanding, insecure, immature, and old for her age all at the same time. And yet, Kukutai can't, or won't, leave. I keep trying to understand why, and keep coming to the same kinds of

answers. Financial dependence, fear of societal castigation, desire for her daughter to grow up with a father, jerk though he may be...I went to visit her last summer, and could hardly sleep at night because I was so disturbed. I keep wanting to call Aai and tell her about it, if for no other reason than to get this messed up situation out of my head...but I think it would hurt her to hear it even more than it hurts me to keep it inside. So I hold on to it. The best explanation of the situation that I can give is to liken it to the water that comes out of the wells in Gondal. When you pump it out, it looks fine—clean and clear, just like you would expect water to look. It's only when you boil the water that you are able to truly see all of the impurities that it contains. So it is with Kukutai and Keyur. From the outside, everything looks fine...but let the situation get a little tense, and the problems just seem to come out of every corner. A woman who feels like no one cares about her anymore, and who has gotten pregnant again in the hope that having another child will solve the problems of an unfaithful husband and an unhappy wife. A remorseless man, unable to deal with his anger, who raises his hand as if to hit...only checking it, perhaps, because he realizes that someone from outside his family is in the room. A child who blurts out her family's problems at dinnertime as though she was announcing what she read in the newspaper that day. Everywhere I looked, something was wrong...and I was in no position to fix any of it.

\* \* \* \*

These choking women, my grandmother, mother, aunts, and cousins, surround me. They worry me, sadden me, scare me. I fear that they will only be able to choke for so long before they can't take it anymore, worry that I will only be able to hold off for so long before I being to choke like them. This choking is more understandable in their

cases than it will ever be in mine. After all, most of these women were brought up in, and still live in, a society where mothers are sent condolence letters when they have a baby girl, as opposed to congratulatory letters when they have a baby boy. And yet, despite having grown up in an entirely different society, I fear my fate will be the same. Why? Because our own behavior in relationships seems to mirror what we've seen in the relationships around us. It's syllogism, almost—those people who have seen loving, nurturing relationships are more likely to have loving, nurturing relationships of their own, while those who have witnessed negative relationships are predisposed to get stuck in similar ones.

Not only did I grow up in a household where my mother fulfilled my father's every beck and call, often at the cost of her own desires, but I was taught to do the same. Eventually, I was the one who got the water, turned on the fans, answered the doorbell, dropped whatever I was doing to play hostess to the next person who walked in the door. I used to struggle with it, and sometimes I would rebel, but choking is a state of mind that is indoctrinated from an early age. Really, what does this whole concept of choking come down to? It all boils down to one simple characteristic that is *bred* into Indian women—a tendency to put other people first at all costs. “Martyrdom” is what my housemates call it. *Swabhauv* is what my family members would say—it's just the way we are taught to be. We live *for* other people. We love to feed people, serve people, take care of people. It's a compunction, almost. Let me cook for you... Let me put that away for you... Let me do that for you... And of course, the double standard is evident here. We hate to inconvenience anyone. There's a complete and total refusal to let anyone do anything for you, even as you're giving your whole day/week/life to serve someone else.

Indeed, I am a walking contradiction when it comes to this subject. I see what is happening to my relatives and can't bear to let it continue...and yet perpetuate the same tendencies in my own life. When my sister got engaged this past September, my mom and I were so busy in the kitchen, and running back and forth making sure that the guests had enough to drink, that we missed large parts of the ceremony. Looking at the pictures later, my mom remarked, "Kumar put a ring on Swati's finger? When did that happen?"

How do you escape a fate that is a result of a characteristic has been so tightly woven in with the other elements of your personality? I can't change who I am to that great of a degree, and all of a sudden just *stop* caring for other people. At this point in my life, it would feel but unnatural, and unfulfilling. And though I've read Kate Chopin's The Awakening and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland, know the history of women's liberation and the feminist movement in the U.S., and vigorously espouse the beliefs of that movement, and fully understand the consequences of letting go of those beliefs, I don't know if that is enough. When the struggle is between internal modes of behavior and external belief systems, how do you assure that one wins out over the other?

### Mari Aai

*July, 1998.* My first trip to India by myself, and I'm spending two weeks in Gondal with my great-aunt, Aai. I wake up from my afternoon nap to the sound of rain drumming down on the tiled brick roof, and, unable to locate Aai in her three-room house, look out into the *falia* (courtyard) to see if she's gone to Piyush kaka's house. I don't even have to look that far. Sitting on the *otli*, the concrete platform located at one end of the *falia*, completely drenched, is Aai. She is sitting by the drainpipe, from which water is gushing at a tremendous rate, and is using the running water to do a load of laundry. *Only Aai...* Her white sari is translucent and heavy with water, her thick, gray hair is covered with tiny raindrops, and streams of water run down her face and arms almost continuously.

My presence in the doorway goes unnoticed for a few minutes, long enough for me to observe Aai's methodic efficiency when it comes to washing clothes. She pulls a piece of clothing out of one bucket (where it has been soaking in soap), places it on a wooden platform under the stream of water coming from the drain, and then works over it intently. Her arms move over the cloth in a repetitive, forceful manner, pulling up part of the cloth, then pushing it over, then pulling up another part, pushing out all of the dirt and soap. When one piece of clothing is done, she wrings it out, places it in another bucket with the other clean, wet clothes, and moves on to the next piece of dirty clothing. She doesn't seem to even notice the force of the rain that is pelting down on her, or the drops of water that travel across her face.

When she finally looks up and sees me, she smiles.

“Come and play, Neema!” she calls. “Sitting in the rain is so nice after all of this hot weather.”

I hesitate for a moment, calculating my clothing situation. I only have three *punjabis*, two of which Aai is washing, and I’m wearing the third. Clothes don’t dry that quickly during the monsoon season. Maybe I should just stay inside and watch.

As if reading my mind, Aai calls out, “You’ll dry! Just come!”

I step out into the courtyard and, as I make my way over to Aai, turn my face up to catch the sweet drops of rain.

\* \* \* \*

*December, 1999.* I’m on the train, on my way to Gondal to visit Aai. I take the inter-city from Ahmedabad to Rajkot, and as we pull into Rajkot station, I prepare to switch trains for the hour-long trip to Gondal. As I lug my bag to the doorway of the train car, I glance out and see Aai waiting for me on the platform. The train hasn’t stopped completely yet, so she moves out of view before I’ve completely registered that she is there. She wasn’t supposed to come to Rajkot. I was supposed to meet her on Gondal’s station, and yet, there she is.

As soon as the train pulls to a stop, I stumble off and hurry back in the direction from which we’d come on the platform. There is Aai, 100 yards away from me, dressed in yet another white cotton sari, hair pulled back in a braid, as always. I pause for a moment—something is different, and it isn’t just the plastic, brown-tinted glasses that she is wearing to protect her eyes because of her cataract surgery. Aai looks...older. Her eyes look sad, her face, tired. I run towards her, nearly tripping in the process. As soon as I am in front of her, I drop my bags and reach down to touch her feet. Overwhelmed by

emotion, I look anything but graceful...but at that moment, nothing matters but Aai's hand on my head, giving me her blessing. By the time I have straightened up again, I am crying. Aai puts her arms around me and whispers in my ear, "Welcome back."

\* \* \* \*

Of late, I've begun to think more and more about the ways in which Aai has impacted me, and about how it could be possible for me to feel that someone is such an integral part of my life that I cannot imagine *living* without her. It's a large claim to make, especially without solid evidence to back it up, and so I've begun to reflect on two questions: Why does Aai mean so much to me? And how has she come to be such an important figure in my life?

It's hard for me to determine the starting point of our relationship. My earliest memories of Aai only begin at the age of 12. Before that, I can conjure images of her, but no defining moments. I don't know why that is. I remember my Uma mami playing with me, singing to me, combing my hair, vividly from age three onwards...but Aai only takes shape in 1990, when she and Kirti kaka, her husband, came to the U.S. to visit us. Even then, my memory is limited to this one element: Kirti kaka and my dad both were terrible snorers, and together, made sleeping on the first floor of my house so impossible that Aai and I fled to the basement each night to sleep.

"Come, Neema," she would say. "We don't want to listen to their snoring symphony all night, do we?"

And so we would spread some blankets on the floor, put down two pillows, turn off the lights, and lay down to go to sleep. Aai would lay so close to me that I could feel her arm touching mine, could hear her slow, steady breathing, and could be lulled to sleep

just because of her warm, soft, constant presence beside me. And then she would sing *bhajans* to me—religious songs that I hardly understood, but loved to hear. Every night for three months I lay there in the cool, damp darkness of the basement, with Aai singing to me and patting my back until I fell asleep. Her favorite song was *Shantakaram*...and even though I didn't know what the words meant, by the end of the summer, I was singing them, too.

*Shantakaram, bhujagshaynam  
padmanabham suresham  
vishvadharem, gagan sadrusham  
megh varnam shubhanglam  
laxmikantam, kamal nayanam  
yogirbhir dhyna gamyam  
vandevishnu, bhavbhaya har  
sarv lokek nathnam.*

The lord whose face is peaceful/  
who is sleeping on coil of cobra/  
from whose naval the lotus is born/  
who is the supporter of whole world/  
whose fame is as grand as sky/  
whose skin is as dark as rain/  
who is the well-wisher of the whole world/  
who is Lakshmi's husband/  
whose eyes are like the lotus/  
who can be attained by yogis through  
meditation/  
who is the destroyer of worldly fear/  
and is the father of all the people/  
Lord Vishnu, I give myself over to you.

I was 12...almost 13...and at the stage where my mother had basically thrown up her hands in despair and given up on me. “Do whatever you want,” she told me. “I don't know what to do with you anymore.” I wasn't *bad*, necessarily...just angry and hurt, and too stubborn to tell my parents how I was feeling.

They would go out of town for one, two, three weeks at a time, leaving me by myself. “She likes being independent,” they would tell their friends. “I don't mind...really, I don't,” I told them the first time they asked if it was OK. After that, they never asked again—they just went. And I never told them that it bothered me. That I hated waking up every morning to an empty house, coming home to it after school, sitting at the dining table alone with my microwaveable meals... I somehow came to

believe that my parents were *tired* by the time I was a teenager, and that they couldn't be bothered with me...that they just wanted me to hurry up and grow up so they could take more vacations and not have to worry about how I was going to get to my basketball games, or whether my friends were "good influences" or not, or what I was going to do for dinner on the nights when they weren't home. And eventually, I came to resent them for this "tiredness" that I perceived.

The summer that Aai came to visit, the resentment I had let build up made me feel like I was suffocating whenever I was at home. During the course of my vacation, I spent most of my days at a friend's house. Her mother was hardly ever around, and her father lived in another town, and we basically had the house to ourselves most of the time. But whenever I did come home—usually at night to sleep, but sometimes not even then—Aai was there. I know she must have wondered at my behavior, and I know she probably pitied my mother this terror of a child that she had, who was sullen and silent in some moments, but could fly into a rage at the slightest provocation...but she never uttered a word to me. Just patted my back at night, and sang me songs that I still sing to myself when I need comfort. There was something so comforting about that act, that to this day, my favorite thing to do when I visit Aai is sleep beside her and have her put me to sleep. It was...and is...my only opportunity to be a child once more. To put my head in someone's lap and pretend that I'm three again, when you can do that and the pressure of someone's hand on your back, someone's fingers running lightly over your hair, someone's gentle voice singing you to sleep, is enough to make all of the wrongs in your world right. When I was feeling old and forced to be a grown-up at 12, Aai let me be a

little girl again. Now that I'm feeling old at 21 and *am* a “grown-up”, she still lets me be that little girl.

But it wasn't until the year I graduated from high school—1997—that I came to a full appreciation of Aai for what she is. For that matter, it wasn't until 1997 that I began to call her Aai, the word for “mother” in Marathi. Before that, it was always Veena *kaki*. But when Aai came that year, she came as a widow (Kirti kaka died in 1991), and somehow that changed everything. She was wittier, more talkative, more *present* (at least in my mind) than she had ever been before. The only explanation I have for this, other than my own keener sense of awareness, is that with Kirti kaka's death, Aai was finally free from 40 years of caring for someone else's every whim, having to live according to their every desire. Kirti kaka wasn't tyrannical; but he was definitely a demanding husband, even expecting that Aai would sew both his underwear and her own from the cotton that he spun by hand. Spinning cotton was *his* hobby, not Aai's. But she was the one who had to make the hobby worthwhile, whether she wanted to or not. So when Kirti kaka died, even though Aai was sad, she was also liberated. Finally, she could eat what she wanted, when she wanted to eat it. She could go for walks whenever she wanted to, read books at all hours of the day, clean the house only if she felt like it, and live out this newfound freedom in every aspect of her life. And even though the changes in her lifestyle may have been subtle, they transformed her.

That summer was full of a wide assortment of emotions for me, ranging from the elation of graduating and getting out of West Virginia, to fear and insecurity over what would become of me at college, and Aai was there for me through all of it. When my mother decided that helping out with a family friend's wedding was more important than

helping me get ready to go to college, Aai was the one who held me as I cried in frustration, who took it upon herself to make the quilt that I was to take to school with me, who joined me in referring to that family friend's wedding as the "stupid *lagan*" (wedding). When she and my parents dropped me off on that first day of college, I didn't cry at saying goodbye to them...but I cried when I bent down to touch Aai's feet...and I kept crying as she walked away, and was crying still when I ran after her to get one more hug before she left.

During that first semester of school, whenever I was upset (which happened to be pretty often), I wouldn't do the normal college freshman thing and call my parents crying, or ask for their advice, or even tell them what was happening. They were off in India for most of the semester, so I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to. I didn't tell them until much, much later that my best friend from first semester stopped speaking to me after I figured out that she had been abused throughout her childhood. I didn't tell them that I cried myself to sleep almost every night that semester, or that I was skipping more classes each week than I was attending, or that the only way that I got out of bed some mornings was because the janitor on my floor would come in and yell at me. But when I was upset, I would go to my room, cover myself with the quilt that Aai had made me, and put my head on the takio she gave me to accompany it, and strangely enough, within a few short minutes I would feel the same kind of calm that I experience when I am with Aai—this sudden and complete sense of peace that washes over me, regardless of how agitated or frustrated I am, with the simple pressure of her hand on my arm, or a few minutes of laying with my head in her lap.

When I told my sister about this strange “coincidence” she attributed it to psychology—to me transferring my feelings and experiences from the past into the present...and for a while I thought she was right. I made myself believe that I was comforted merely knowing that Aai had made the *takio* supporting my head and the quilt wrapped around me. It was easy for me to do that because I really don't see Aai very often--once every two years if I am lucky. So while a lot of my feelings for her have to do with time spent in her presence, she helps me most in the times when she *isn't* there. She is with me in my heart even when she isn't in person, and knowing this made it easy for me to connect my quilt with my sensation of Aai's continued presence in my life.

But that all changed as the year went on and I made close friends who would come to me with their problems. On more occasions than I can count these friends would fall asleep in my bed, or just lay on it while talking to me about life, expounding on their life philosophies, and discussing all kinds of other random late-night college dorm room topics. And without my ever telling them about Aai, or about my own experiences with the quilt and *takio*, they began to comment on how much better they felt after a few minutes with the quilt and *takio*. In fact, I began to suspect that some of my friends started coming to my room more for the opportunity to sleep with the quilt and *takio* than for anything that had to do with me. The running joke on my floor that year was that anytime you walked into Neema's room, there was someone sleeping in her bed, and more often than not, it *wasn't* Neema.

After I heard numerous remarks on the "magic" qualities of my quilt and *takio* I could no longer subscribe to the psychology theory. If I had been alone in my ideas I could have, but the fact that people who had never met Aai—who didn't even know of

her existence—were going through an experience similar to mine led me to believe that somehow Aai's presence must have seeped into the quilt and *takio* as she worked on them. Some small portion of her inner peace was diffused into them, leaving me with an everlasting reminder of Aai's presence, and an ever-present source of comfort.

Slowly, Aai began to take shape in my mind as much more than just my funny, calm, wise great-aunt. Here I was, this naïve college freshman, confused and crying every night over being hurt by my first *real* friend at college, over not being able to help her “get over her ghosts” and let go of her awful past, over having lost her to a situation completely out of my control, and Aai's mere *presence* was comforting to me. It was magical, and spiritual, and filled me with peace and understanding that I couldn't glean from reality at that time. So when people asked about the origins of my quilt, I began to say that my magical great-aunt had made it for me. Not just my great-aunt. My magical great-aunt.

Aai eventually found her way onto a pedestal in my mind. She was already a wonderful person, so it wasn't hard at all to put her up there. Combine a magnetic personality with a compelling face, a sagacious nature with the ability to make people calm, even when she wasn't physically present, and you have all of the elements necessary for making someone a saint in Neema's book. And that's what I did. She was my saint, she was what got me through some of my most difficult moments, and the more I depended on her, the more I loved her.

\* \* \* \*

The summer after my freshman year of college, when I went to India alone for the first time and spent two weeks with Aai, I was so full of love for her, so determined to

worship my saint, that even if Aai had been a mass murderer, I don't think I would have noticed at first. So many of her actions, so many things that she said to me, confirmed her saintliness in my mind to the extent that her place on the pedestal was made more concrete than ever.

I tried to explain what happened freshman year. Tried to explain concepts like abuse and being hurt by a friend in my elementary Gujarati, to tell her how hard the past year had been for me, and how much her quilt had helped me when I couldn't spend another minute crying *to* someone because they'd heard my sob story too many times, couldn't write another story about it because there were no ideas that I hadn't already put into words, couldn't run away to the park because it was freezing cold out. I tried and failed to achieve any amount of eloquence on the topic, but still she understood. She stayed quiet and let me cry when I needed to cry, and gave me advice when she thought I needed to be straightened out, and let me talk through my thought processes while she stroked my forehead, and just being with her made me feel better. And for a while, I thought that my belief in Aai's magical nature had been confirmed.

And so I spent 10 days of my two weeks with Aai blissfully happy to be in the presence of my saint, happier and calmer than I had been in over a year, dreading even having to return to the U.S., to college, to problems that I was trying desperately to forget. But on the 11<sup>th</sup> day, Aai and I went for our daily walk to the *bazaar* (market), and in the midst of a comment on something mundane, I suddenly realized that Aai was no longer standing beside me. Rather, she was on the ground near my feet, and she looked frightened and helpless and people were crowding all around.

Struck dumb by the sight of Aai on the ground, I stood by mute as bystanders knelt down to make sure Aai was all right, helped her stand up again, and offered to walk her home. All the while, I was silent, only able to see the same image flashing before my eyes again and again: It's a scene dominated by white and black—the white of *Aai*'s sari and the whites of her eyes contrasted against the dark black muddy street that she was laying on. And there I stood, towering above her, unable to do a thing to help her.

Despite the fact that *Aai* was fine and smiling once back on her feet, despite the fact that she virtually *demand*ed that we continue on our way to market, despite the fact that she still bargained for the best papaya, tomatoes, cucumbers, without a quiver in her voice, something about her appearance frightened me. Maybe it was the dark mud stains on her white clothing, or maybe it was the huge tear on the front of her *sari*, or maybe it was just that by falling, *Aai* had made me realize that she was mortal. Whatever the reason, that image of *Aai* on the ground still haunts me.

\* \* \* \*

During my most recent visit to India, my sister came to Gondal to visit Aai while I was already there. We planned to return to Ahmedabad together to finish out the rest of our trip, but, unwilling to let go of Aai so soon, we convinced her to join us...which meant that Aai's father, Rambhai, who was staying with her at the time, had to go to Ahmedabad as well.

Rambhai is a character. He's close to 90 years old, speaks British English without a trace of Indian in his accent, has a shock of pure white hair that stands straight up on his head, and is missing an eye due to a botched cataract surgery. (Only in India could a doctor get away with losing a patient's eye and not be sued for malpractice.) He treats

Aai, who is 65, like she is still 20. Like she still has the energy and ability to care for his every whim... And he likes to think that he can control any situation in which he is to take part.

So when it came time to make plans for the trip, Rambhai decided that we would save money by traveling to Ahmedabad in an unreserved car on the train. Essentially, we didn't buy tickets--we were just supposed to go to the station and hop into the unreserved car, and hope that it didn't get so crowded that we didn't suffocate.

Now, this would have been fine had everyone been in good health. However, Rambhai is 90 years old and can hardly walk. Secondly by the time we were ready to leave Gondal, my sister had picked up a stomach bug, was extremely ill, and could barely sit up straight. Thirdly, Aai was not in the prime of her life, either. This left one able-bodied person (me) to make sure that we and all of our luggage got onto the train safely...and frankly, I wasn't sure I could manage it. Despite my pleas, despite many whispered conversations in the kitchen with me doing the arguing and Aai trying to dissuade me, I couldn't convince Aai to change our tickets and get reserved seats in a car where there wouldn't be more people than there were seats. She didn't want to offend Rambhai.

Of course, when we got to the train station, sat down in the then-empty unreserved car, and found out that at a station about two hours down the track the unreserved car usually filled to overflowing, Rambhai began to panic. All of a sudden, it dawned on him that he wouldn't be able to handle an overcrowded train car. When the trains fill up at rush hour, eight people will crowd onto a seat that's only supposed to sit four. People press up against each other on seats, in aisles, hanging out of doorways,

trying to take up as little space as possible so that more people can cram in. The mingled smells of coconut oil and perspiration can be overwhelming, and the heat generated by so many bodies, oppressive. Not ideal traveling conditions, and even less so when two of the three people you're traveling with *can't* stand up for even fifteen minutes of a train journey.

And so, after we had settled everyone into an empty compartment, and after we had stowed all of the luggage, and after my weak, drugged sister had gone back to sleep, Rambhai complained that we should have gotten reserved seats, and demanded that we move to a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> class compartment. Aai and her nephew Shishir, who had come to see us off, had to run all over the station trying to find a TT (ticket-taker) in order to switch our tickets. Once they were switched, we then had to rouse my sister, take Rambhai by the hand, shuffle along with him at a rate of seven baby steps per minute, and drag all of our luggage down to a train car 20 cars away on the platform...all in the five minutes before the train left.

I was furious. Why had no one listened? Why had Aai been so blasé about the whole situation? What if the train had left before we were able to re-board it? Live and let live, the motto of Aai's life, had gone too far this time, and I refused to speak once we got into our reserved seats. I wouldn't make eye contact with Aai, wouldn't respond when she asked me questions. I just sat, sweating through my punjabi, sticking to the sky blue plastic seats, and fumed.

I kept my face turned towards the window, and pushed myself up against it, staying as far away from Aai as I possibly could. I focused on the landscape flashing by at a rapid rate—on the dry, clayey farmland, and the fires that farmers had set in their

fields, burning old crops to make way for new ones, and the tiny towns that were there and gone in the blink of an eye, and the little naked children who were playing in those towns, and the signs posted on both sides of the rail that said things like, “Monogamy is the only way to prevent getting A.I.D.S” and “Sex before marriage leads to A.I.D.S”, and “Buy Nirma dishwashing powder.” I sat and stared and tried to block Aai and Rambhai and all of the background noise out, but found that I couldn’t. Interspersed between my fuming and Aai’s pleas of “Neema, eat some sugarcane,” and “Neema, drink some water,” and “Neema, you can’t go this whole trip without eating anything,” I found myself feeling like a jerk. How on earth could I be angry at *Aai*? The person who had always made me feel so calm...the person who had taught me how to work through my anger instead of just letting it fester? I’d never ever gotten *angry* with her before. Frustrated, yes. But mad? Never. I kept having to brush away the tears that were welling up in my eyes from some mixture of anger and sadness.

The struggle between rage and guilt lasted for two hours...after which I couldn't be angry anymore. Aai had stopped trying to get through to me. The compartment was filled with an awkward silence. I knew that this was an anger different from the Avashia anger that Aai dealt with for 45 years. Instead of the explosion of rage that lasted five minutes and was then replaced by remorse, this was a silent, bitter, passive-aggressive kind of anger, and she didn’t know how to deal with it. I reached out and grabbed Aai's cool hand, covering it with my own. I didn't say that I was sorry, but I felt it, and when she squeezed my hand to signal that everything was all right, I knew that she felt it, too...and that was enough.

\* \* \* \*

I have theories about my Aai. Sometimes I theorize that she is magical—that this calm that she seems to exude is the result of some higher spiritual source. When I think these things, I can find examples to back my theory, like the time when Aai was in Bombay for her niece’s wedding, and her nephew’s wife, who was unable to have a child, came to her, having only met her once before, and cried out all of her frustrations. Aai merely saw a look of sadness on her face, asked her what was wrong, and that was enough. Within moments, the nephew’s wife’s head was in Aai’s lap, and she was crying out all of her anger at her mother-in-law, her worries about her husband’s inattentiveness, and her fears that she wouldn’t be able to conceive.

Or there was the time when my little cousin Rhea met Aai for the first time. Rhea was two, as stubborn as all of her other Avashia relatives, and just as prone to throwing frequent temper tantrums. It’s understandable, I guess. Her mother was really unhappy, her father was always at work, and her grandmother hardly paid any attention to her. She refused to eat the food her mother made her, refused to go to sleep until *she* was ready to, refused to stop watching music videos on TV and singing and dancing around the room incessantly. But for the three days that Aai was in the house, Rhea didn’t even think to cry, scream, or put up a fight when told to do something. “Aai” was the word on her lips at all times. She would be playing in her room by herself, and then would suddenly come out into the living room where Aai was sitting, touch Aai on the arm or cheek, or put her head in Aai’s lap for a few minutes, and then go back into her room. I watched this happen several times, and found myself more and more amazed each time. Stubborn, hyper Rhea was happy and calm for the few days that Aai was in the house. Once Aai

left, she was back to her old self again. Can a two-year old sense inner peace even better than a 20-year old, I wonder?

At other times, I don't think I even believe in higher spiritual sources. When your best friend loses her memory overnight, your most loved neighbor gets hit by a train and dies, and your favorite cousin, already depressed by her disastrous relationship with her husband, miscarries while pregnant with twins, all within the course of a few months, it's difficult to believe that there is any higher force at work for the good of the world. From this perspective, Aai is nothing more than just a good person, a loving person, a calm person, who tries to share that goodness, love, and calm with other people.

Sometimes I theorize that she is a saint—and that this saintliness is what makes her so wise. Aai believes, and tells me often, that nothing in life happens because *we* want it to. It happens because of some greater design, and for that reason we can't take the difficulties that life deals us too hard. We have to learn to deal with things, and then to let them go. She brought this point home to me again when I was telling her about how I can't control my temper even though I fight to do so every day. Aai helped me to understand that anger...and grief, joy, and all other emotions are natural expressions. They cannot, and should not be suppressed. The key to living peacefully is to experience every emotion fully, but then to let go of it when the time comes. Expressing the emotion is easy—I've gotten pretty good at that part. So good that Aai often teases me about the "wells" that seem to reside above my eyes. "Palakhe talavdi", she calls me as she traces circles on my forehead, right over my eyes, with her fingers. At the blink of an eye, a lake. But it's the letting go part that is hard to do. For some reason I *can't* let go. I don't know how to. I think it's a difficulty that a lot of us have. We don't know when...or

how...to let go. But somehow Aai has managed it, and in the process gained an inner sense of peace that very few people are able to achieve. And, if you believe in the power of heredity, then perhaps a little bit of Aai's calm comes from her ancestry, and from a great-great grandmother who was a *sanyasi*—literally a saint. There are still temples to this woman in *Kach*, the desert region of Gujarat. Interestingly, Aai's great-grandmother had a robe that was passed down through her family for generations. The robe eventually began to change form as the cloth wore out. First it became a dress, then it became a satchel, and now it is only a scrap of cloth, kept and valued perhaps for the same reason that I value my quilt so much—because somehow the great-grandmother's presence has found its way into that cloth in the same way Aai has found her way into mine.

Other times, I wish she wasn't quite so saintly, and that she'd stand up for herself when someone was being mean to her, or take issue when she knows someone is wrong, or get angry when someone is hurting her daughters. Sometimes her resignation to let life run its course is more frustrating than it is admirable. When I was flying into rages over the way she was treated by a jealous family member who disrespected her, Aai, the one who was hurt, chided me and said that the person should be thanked for serving as her guru—for teaching her how to handle a different kind of situation and deal with a different kind of person. While I admired her ability to put the situation into a positive light, part of me wished that she would have fought back. At least then the relative would have known that she couldn't treat Aai badly and expect to get away with it.

Aai's more "saintly" qualities sometimes make me forget that she is, after all, human just like the rest of us. In my head, I know that my Aai isn't perfect...and the more time I spend with her, the more I realize exactly how imperfect she really is. At night,

after she takes her dentures out, her face loses some of its beautiful structure, and sometimes I have trouble understanding what she's saying. In the wintertime, the soles of her feet turn black because of the dirt and muck on the streets, and the skin dries and cracks, making the bottoms of her feet look almost like the layers on a piece of coal—dark, rough, and jagged. She has the habit of making fun of people who she has mixed feelings about—to mock voices and facial expressions and sayings in a way that is funny, but also unsettling. She'll squinch up her face, make her voice go completely nasal, and start talking the way one of my less-liked cousins does, and I'll be on the ground laughing in moments. And yet, sometimes, in my oft-occurring moments of insecurity (the ones where I ask myself: Is it possible for someone to love me this much?), I wonder what kinds of imitations she might do of me, with my terrible accent and butchered Gujarati, when I'm not there. Sometimes when we go out together in the city, the way she treats beggars makes my stomach turn. It's no different than the way any of my other relatives treat beggars...but it's just that hearing harshness from Aai doesn't feel right. She gets this hard look on her face, and this steely tone in her voice, and she tells them to go away. And if they don't listen, she tells them more forcefully. And if they still don't listen, she will threaten to get them in trouble. And the contrast between that Aai and the magical Aai I carry around in my mind is so stark that I can hardly watch without feeling uncomfortable.

Even emotionally, the perfection that I used to believe in is gone. The troubles that her younger daughter has undergone in the past three years because of a cheating, lying husband have left her hurting and cynical on the subject of marriage.

“Never get married, Neema,” she tells me on a regular basis. “Live with whoever you want, do whatever you want with them, but *don’t marry them*. Don’t get stuck.”

Just as bitter as she is, only 45 years younger, I always give her the same answer: “Don’t worry, Aai. I won’t.” You don’t watch husbands cheat on wives, husbands pick fights with wives, marriages go bad, marriages break up again and again without getting jaded about the institution. At least...I don’t.

But even though I see these imperfections now, in ways that I couldn’t see them four years ago, or two years ago, or even six months ago, they have not diminished Aai’s magic for me.

She is still *Aai*. She still possesses an inner calm that she can transfer to others through her mere presence in a room. She still can tell when there is something wrong with me, and make me tell her what it is, sometimes even before I’m prepared to do so. She still makes it so hard for me to leave her that once I get in the rickshaw, the train, or the car, I cannot even look back to say goodbye.

\* \* \* \*

Four years ago, I would have told you that my love for Aai then was the most perfect kind of love there is. Pure, adoring, and innocent. Four years ago, I loved Aai as a saint with human qualities. Today I love her as a human with saintly qualities. And while the love of four years ago was beautiful, it was the kind of love that a child has for her dad before she realizes he’s a flawed individual, just like everyone else in the world. She thinks he’s the greatest, and that he can do no wrong, and that he could beat up the dads of every other child in her class. But even though it hurts the first time he falls in her eyes, the love she has for him afterwards is even stronger, because it is more honest. So

too has my love for Aai gotten stronger as I've realized how very human she really is. I don't love her despite her flaws; I love her because of them.

Spiritual beings always seem a little other-worldly—aloof and distanced from this mess that we call life. The deeper I get into this mess, the more I realize how much easier it is to love someone who is in the mess beside me, helping me through it, as opposed to someone who is looking down on me (even if in the most kindly manner) from above.

\* \* \* \*

Every day when I was in Gondal this past December, Aai would assign a task for me to complete for that day's meals. It wasn't forced; I offered, and eventually, it just became the norm. She would give me a huge plate of okra to slice, or tomatoes to cut, or garlic to peel, and I would sit on a stool in the kitchen doing my part, while she made the daal, rotli, and rice. Aai's knives were dull and worn, and oftentimes I would let out a groan of frustration as I hacked away at a piece of okra, trying to slice it evenly.

"My knives are like me, Neema," Aai would tell me, laughing at my irritated expressions. "Dull and old."

Finally, I couldn't stand it for a moment longer. I took all of Aai's knives out into the falia, found the knife-sharpening stone that Aai kept in the house, and sharpened each and every knife until it was sharp to the touch. Aai tried to convince me to just leave them alone.

"Why worry about it? They're just going to get dull again in a month anyway," she said.

I refused to listen. Looking back on it, it seems silly that I was so determined to sharpen those knives, and to buy Aai a new one as soon as I found a knife store. Then,

though, it was one of the only things I knew that I could *do* for her. Her mere presence helped me so much...and I didn't know how on earth to reciprocate that. On top of that, something about Aai's "dull and old" comment kept tripping me up. It was almost like I felt that if I sharpened the knives and made them new again, so to speak, it would be as though I was doing the same for Aai.

\* \* \* \*

Before dinner each day, Aai and I would crowd into her tiny kitchen to make fresh *rotli* for the meal. Nothing goes so well with Gujarati food as hot *rotli* spread with *ghee* (clarified butter), and I wanted to learn how to make them. Unfortunately, making *rotli* has no formula—it's not something you can pick up by reading a recipe book. Like all other Gujarati cooking, making *rotli* is a purely sensory experience. You know by feel when the mixture of flour, oil, and water is right. You know by feel when the rolled *rotli* is round enough, thin enough (but not too thin), smooth enough to be placed on the skillet. And acquiring that feel is something that most women begin doing at age eight.

Side by side, under the dim light cast by the small yellow bulb on the ceiling, we would stand in front of the four-foot long counter where the two gas burners resided. If I stuck my left arm out, I hit one wall. If Aai stuck her right arm out, she hit the other wall. Our sink was a bucket of murky water that sat outside the entrance to the kitchen. Our garbage can was the road that ran along one side of the house, and the cows and hogs, our garbage disposal. Julia Child would have thrown her hands up in horror.

For the first few days, I was enthusiastic about learning. I went into the kitchen, watched Aai make the dough and roll out the *rotli*, and then, when I was sure I knew exactly what to do, I tried my hand at it. Needless to say...my dough was too sticky, my

*rotli* were triangular more often than they were round, always too thick or too thin, but never just right, and no matter how much I practiced, I just couldn't master the technique.

One day, after rolling yet another oddly shaped *rotli*, I threw down the rolling pin in frustration and told Aai that I gave up.

"I can't do it, Aai. I'm *nakami* (worthless). I'm not ever going to be any good at this, and Ishani [a cousin] is always going to think she's better than I am because she can cook and I can't, and I hate that I'm so bad at these things."

Aai didn't say anything in response; she just picked up my *rotli* and put it on the skillet. As soon as it was baked properly, she took the skillet off and flipped the *rotli* back and forth over the gas to make it fluff up. This is the true test of a good *rotli*—if its two sides separate, allowing the center to be filled with hot air, you've rolled it correctly. By some miracle, my rectangle shaped *rotli* fluffed up better than any of the other *rotli* that Aai had made that day.

"See, Neema. You are doing fine. Who cares if they are round or not? As long as they taste good, no one is going to care about the shape," she told me.

Even when they didn't puff up...even when they were thick and chewy and tasteless, Aai would eat them and praise me for some part of the effort. She did it to make me confident, and while that didn't always happen, it did make me love her for trying.

\* \* \* \*

It was the biggest source of frustration for me—no one in India seemed to understand why on earth I was so inept at the skills considered most important for women. I couldn't cook Indian food very well, I couldn't sew, I didn't sing, I was a terrible artist...

“What do you *do* all day?” Ishani had asked me, after ascertaining that I was completely deficient in all areas that define womanly skills.

“I...study,” I responded, realizing for the first time exactly how hollow and useless those words sounded when put in a different cultural context. I could easily imagine what she must have been thinking at that moment: Study? All day? What on earth could you be studying that would take that long?

I wrote a poem about it once...about how difficult it was to grow up between two cultures where the expectations of women are so different. It’s a stupid poem, because I’m not much of a poet, but the sentiment behind it is clear:

Pity the woman, dark and homely,  
 whose talents lay in words and thought,  
 Who cannot sing, sew, draw, or dance,  
 whose rotli never fluff up as they ought.  
 Pity the woman, strange and clumsy,  
 Who does not wear her dupatta with grace,  
 Whose days spent studying give her no worthy skills,  
 Who considers a squalid village her favorite place.  
 Pity the woman, brought up in one world,  
 where intellect is of value, and home-making a bore,  
 yet measured by the standards of quite another,  
 where studies and high grades add no points to her score.  
 Pity this woman, torn between cultures,  
 between what she is and what she ought be,  
 between a world she is immersed in, and another she is clinging to,  
 Pity this woman, dark and homely, strange and clumsy, torn and lost...  
 Pity her, reader, for she is me.

More often than not, I feel inadequate and incapable when in the presence of my female relatives in India. It’s only with Aai that I can curse the uselessness of the *dupatta* (scarf that covers a woman’s chest), and not wear it if I don’t want to; that I can play cricket in the *falia* without worrying that someone will think I’m too boyish; that I can argue and question and wonder out loud without fear of being hushed.

\* \* \* \*

I have a picture of Aai at 16 that her brother took with a pinhole camera, and then colored in with watercolors. I can't look at it without being amazed all over again at how beautiful she was. There was...and still is...a nobility about her face—quiet dignity might be the best way to describe it—that just seems to accentuate the sweet smile, the ready laugh, the big, expressive brown eyes that betray her every emotion, the perfectly formed nose, and the high forehead.

Aai at 67 has lost some of that beauty to age and wrinkles. Her hair is gray now, and much thinner and shorter than it was 50 years ago. Her teeth have all fallen out, and given way to dentures. The skin around her eyes and cheekbones is loose, and skin under her chin has begun to sag, a phenomenon that her granddaughter associates with cows, who have similarly loose skin on their necks. The palms of her hands are dry and rough after 50 years of hard work and her stomach is a little softer around the middle than it probably was at 16. But the smile, the laugh, the gentleness of touch, and those eyes still remain. The eyes are what get me most. I can conjure the way they look in every mood...how big and bright they are when she is teasing me, how dark and sorrowful they get when she's talking about her younger daughter's troubles, how clear and piercing they can be when challenging me to be honest with her, and with myself, about the frustrations that plague my life.

\* \* \* \*

My paternal grandmother died before I was born. My maternal grandfather died when I was a year old. My paternal grandfather lived until I was 11 years old, but, still angry that my father left India to make a better life for himself, never once spoke to me,

touched me, bestowed one ounce of kindness upon me, or one smile in my direction. My maternal grandmother is still alive...but has always favored her eldest son's children over the rest of us, largely because she has lived with them all of their lives. If you want to find an older person who means something to me in my life—a grand-anything, you have to look to Aai.

Last summer I grit my teeth, took pen in hand, sat down for a good two hours, and wrote Aai a letter in Gujarati. The process was painstaking, my handwriting atrocious, the message simple. Dear Aai, it said. How are you? I remember you constantly. I'm doing well, and hope that you are, too. How is everyone in the falia? How are the cows and hogs and Sangeeta, the milkman's dog? Give everyone my love, and remember me always. From your Gondal-loving, *khadi* (homespun cotton)-loving, Aai-loving Neema.

The letter I got back in return is the most poignant one that I have ever received. Aai read my letter and saw in its simple words and crooked characters exactly what I had hoped she would see—love—and the letter she wrote me back was full of the same. When I got your letter, Neema, it said, I could hardly believe that you had learned Gujarati just to be able to write to your Aai. The love that you feel for me came through in your letter like rain does during the monsoon season...and I danced in it, elated, like a child.

Her daughters joke that I've become a third sister, and sometimes when I give Aai a hug unexpectedly, she'll call me her third daughter. Aai—like I said before, it means mother in Marathi. It is also the name that Manju foi (Aai's eldest daughter) took to calling her mother after living in Bombay for the first few years of her life. And because Aai has been a nurturing, caring figure to any person who has needed such a presence in

their life, it has become the name by which almost all of her relatives, whether she is their aunt, their cousin, or their sister-in law, refer to her. My father and his siblings all look to Aai in this light because their mother passed away when they were all fairly young. Ever since then, Aai has been the one to love them, to cook their favorite foods, and to remind them of the way they were when they were children. She became a second mother to them...and in a sense, now she has become a second mother to me.

\* \* \* \*

Last time I was in Gondal, Aai looked over at me one day as I was scribbling away in my journal.

“Do you know, Neema? I read a story once that a son wrote about his mother called “Meri Mummy.” For some reason, I think that you’re going to write a story one day called “Mari Aai.” My Aai. My great-aunt turned grandmother, turned guru, turned saint.

Strangely enough, I had been writing about her in my journal only a few minutes before she spoke. She had been napping, and I, having just woken up, had tried to sketch out her image in words.

*12-29-1999*

*It's 2:42 and I just woke up from my nap and Aai is sleeping on the patiyao. It's swaying back and forth just a little bit...only visible if you really look closely. She is sleeping on her side, a shawl covering her arms and just a little bit of her jawline. Her eyes closed, face relaxed, side moving up and down just a little bit every time she breathes. Her hair is a dark, dark gray...the color of the granite that I've seen in creek*

*beds at home...but when the sun shines on it a certain way, it looks like her hair is made of thin threads of pewter.*

*“You and me,” she said to me the other day. “We live in two different bodies, but we share the same soul.” This without ever reading Aristotle, or knowing anything about him.*

Have you ever loved someone so much...so intensely that the thought of ever being without them makes your life in the future seem miserable? Have you ever been so attached to someone that in your keenest moments of emotion, be they sad or ecstatic, their name is the first one on your lips? Have you ever felt so connected to someone that every time you look at the clock, you think about what they would be doing at that time where they are, every night before you sleep you wonder how they are doing, every time you are at a loss, you turn to them to seek fulfillment? Two bodies, one soul. This is how I feel about my Aai.

### Cooking With Aai

Before dinner each day during my last visit to Gondal (a small town in the state of Gujarat, India), my great-aunt Aai and I would crowd into her tiny kitchen to make fresh *rotli* for the meal. Nothing goes so well with Gujarati food as hot *rotli* spread with *ghee* (clarified butter), and I wanted to learn how to make them. Unfortunately, making *rotli* has no formula—it's not something you can pick up by reading a recipe book. Like all other Gujarati cooking, making *rotli* is a purely sensory experience. You know by feel when the mixture of flour, oil, and water is right. You know by feel when the rolled *rotli* is round enough, thin enough (but not too thin), smooth enough to be placed on the skillet. And acquiring that feel is something that most women begin doing at age eight.

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Aai's kitchen is smaller than the typical bathroom in an American house. Her pots, pans, plates, and silverware all sit on a green wooden shelf above our heads, her spices, oils, grains, and flours are all hidden away in a green cupboard recessed into the wall at our right. This kind of smallness has its advantages and disadvantages: On the plus side, nothing is ever so far out of reach that you have to turn your attention away from the stove to go and find it. On the minus, when two people crowd into a kitchen that small, both burners are on high, and the day is as hot as Indian days usually tend to be,

the onion that is being chopped will make both people's eyes water, the heat of the stove and the day will make both people sweat, and the kitchen will eventually be transformed into a spicy, steamy sauna.

Aai had offered to teach me how to cook if I wanted to learn. Having little else to do (besides write in my journal, nap, swing on the *patiyo*, go for walks, and talk with the neighbors) I agreed to try. For the first few days, I was enthusiastic about learning. I went into the kitchen, watched Aai make the dough and roll out the *rotli*, and then, when I was sure I knew exactly what to do, I tried my hand at it. Needless to say...my dough was too sticky, my *rotli* were triangular more often than they were round, always too thick or too thin, but never just right, and no matter how much I practiced, I just couldn't master the technique.

One day, after rolling yet another oddly shaped *rotli*, I threw down the rolling pin in frustration and told Aai that I gave up.

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Even when they didn’t fluff up...even when they were thick and chewy and tasteless, Aai would eat them and praise me for some part of the effort. She did it to make me confident, and while that didn’t always happen, it did make me love her for trying.

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A person looking in the kitchen window on one of those days would have seen the two of us and surmised that we were grandmother and granddaughter. That Aai, with her silvery-gray braid of hair, expressive brown eyes, gentle demeanor, and white sari, was my grandmother, and that I, forty-some years younger, with my short black hair, glasses, and drab green *punjabi*, was her granddaughter. They might have guessed that, but they would have been wrong. Aai is just my great-aunt—my paternal grandfather’s brother’s wife. There is no shared blood to hold us together. And yet I call her *Aai*, which means “mother” in Marathi, and she sometimes calls me her third daughter. I spend more time at her house when I’m in India than I do at my maternal grandmother’s, feel more attached to her than I do to the rest of my family combined.

\* \* \* \*

I love to eat, so cooking would seem like a natural next step for me in terms of culinary experiences. I also have this “thing” about feeding other people. It’s something I get from my mom, whose first question for anyone when they enter our house is, “What can I get you to eat or drink?” Unfortunately, the day when I don’t burn, overcook, or undercook my food is a rare one. We celebrate in my house when I actually cook my rice properly! To be honest, I don’t think it’s that I *can’t* cook... It has more to do with the

fact that in order for me to cook, it involves putting down my books, refraining from dancing around to the music on the radio, and staying in the kitchen for the entire time that my dinner is boiling, baking, sautéing, or grilling. That requires three virtues which I sorely lack: patience, concentration, and time. On the few occasions when I have managed to attain all three, albeit briefly, my attempts at cooking have usually been successful. So perhaps there is hope for me yet.

There are underlying tensions behind my lack of abilities to cook, however. First of these is a pressure that I am completely guilty of putting on myself: All of the women in my family cook. Most of the women in my family cook very well. To not having cooking skills implies that I'm not a "true" Indian woman, something which I refuse to accept.

It has always been a huge source of frustration for me—no one in India seems to understand why on earth I am so inept at the skills considered most important for women. I can't cook Indian food very well, I can't sew, I don't sing, I 'm a terrible artist. Put simply, when my list of skills is compared with the list of skills possessed by the typical Indian woman, I come up short every time.

During one visit to Madhu *kaka's* house (my father's younger brother), I mentioned to my aunt and my cousin that the food I missed most when I was at college was *bhajia*—potatoes, onions, peppers, and bananas all cut into thin slices, dipped in a batter made of gram flour and chili powder, and then deep fried. My mouth starts watering just thinking about biting into the spicy, crisp outside layer of the *bhajia* and then reaching the soft, steaming, bland potato, pepper, or onion inside. Growing up, my mom always made me *bhajia* for my after-school snack on rainy days, and the

association between gray, rainy days and piping hot *bhajia* has remained, even though I hardly ever get a chance to eat them anymore.

“If you miss them so much, why don’t you just make them at school?” Avni *kaki* asked.

I hesitated before answering. “I don’t know how to make them...”

“How can you not know how to make them?” my cousin Ishani asked. “It’s easy.”

At this juncture, I was subjected to a fifteen-minute diatribe on the process by which one makes *bhajia*, down to the most minute detail of how to peel and slice the potatoes. I sat quiet through the lecture, only interjecting towards the end that the problem wasn’t so much not knowing *how* to make *bhajia*, but more not having the time to sit down and make them.

“What do you *do* all day?” Ishani asked me, having now ascertained that I was completely deficient in all areas that define womanly skills. She gazed at me with a look of superiority so intense that it made me want to crawl out of the house right then, catch a rickshaw to the airport, and fly back to the U.S., where I could make stir-fried vegetables from a frozen package and would be praised for ‘cooking’.

“I...study,” I responded, realizing for the first time exactly how hollow and useless those words sounded when put in a different cultural context. I could easily imagine what she must have been thinking at that moment: Study? All day? What on earth could you be studying that would take that long?

Let’s not ignore the fact that her younger brother Kinnar spent almost all of his time holed up in his room while I was visiting under the pretense that he was studying for his college entrance exams, and yet no one was judging him for that, even though he

probably wouldn't know how to even turn on the stove if you asked him to. For an Avashia woman, studying is not an excuse for not knowing how to cook.

\* \* \* \*

These are the lyrics to a refrain that I have been hearing in the background of my life for as long as I can remember:

“Sit properly, Neema!”

“Sit like you are a girl.”

“Get your father water.”

“Speak quietly.”

“Don't express your opinion unless someone asks for it.”

These from my mother, who has also always found fault with my clothing—too baggy, too sloppy, too dark, too ragged, but never just right—my hair, my body, my personality.

“You would be so pretty if you would just pluck your eyebrows, Neema.” This from my fair-skinned, round-faced, aunt with the eyebrows so sparse that you hardly even notice them.

“Neema, you've gained weight.”

“Neema, you've lost weight.”

“Neema, your hair is too short, too messy, too boyish, too rough.”

“Neema, why do you want to dress like a boy?”

“Why don't you cook? Why don't you sing? Why aren't you creative and artsy like your sister?”

These from my aunts and cousins, women who weigh just the right amount, who are creative, who can cook and sing and dance, who do have beautiful hair, who manage to wear saris without getting tangled up in them.

\* \* \* \*

More often than not, I feel inadequate and incapable when in the presence of my female relatives in India. They possess a beauty and grace...a presence...that I never will. Maybe it's because I wear baggy pants and t-shirts instead of the elegant *saris* and *punjabis* that my aunts and cousins wear. Maybe it is because they keep their thick, shiny hair long and braided, oil it every few days to keep it smooth, pay attention to the way it looks, while I don't even remember to *comb* my hair some mornings. Whatever the reason, the difference between us is something that I am acutely aware of.

In some sense, there exists a perverse desire on my part to flaunt my failures. To walk around in public without a *dupatta* (scarf) on to cover my chest. To say that I like to play sports. To not cover my arms and face and get even darker than I normally am. If I can't be a perfect Indian woman, then why even try? And if people are going to find fault with me, then I'm going to give them lots of things to find fault with.

It isn't that I don't want to be a good Indian woman. I wish it were that simple. The problem is this: Being a "good" Indian woman comes with lots of consequences. It isn't just about knowing how to cook, knowing how to sew, how to dress, how to please other people. It is about making those things defining aspects of your life. In my family, at least, a good Indian woman cooks lunch and dinner for her family every day. She may find pleasure in cooking, but regardless, it is an obligation that she is supposed to fulfill. Not only that, but because hot *rotli* are such an integral part of the meal in Gujarati

cooking, the good wife and mother doesn't sit down to eat until she has fed everyone else in her family. This is what frightens me about completely giving in to my desire to be a better Indian woman. I am scared of being taken for granted. Scared that eventually, the things I loved would become such a burden that I would grow to abhor them. Scared that in trying to *be* this other kind of woman, I would lose sight of who I truly am.

But when I'm with Aai, I don't feel that way. I want to cook. I want to look feminine. I want to, because I know that I don't have to. I know that she loves me just as much when I'm playing cricket with the *sheri* (neighborhood) boys barefoot in the *falia* as when I'm sitting beside her on the *patiyo* shelling peas. Aai told me once that the fewer expectations we have of other people, the happier we will be. When you expect a lot out of someone, nothing they do will ever really please you. When you expect nothing, anything good that they do will make you happy. What she didn't say, but what I think might also be true sometimes, is that the less you expect of people, the more they will be willing to give to you.

\* \* \* \*

Recently I've found my feelings towards being an Indian woman changing. In the past year, I've begun the conscious effort of really learning how to cook whenever I go home. I watch my mom work her magic in the kitchen, watch her throw in spices, vegetables, and lentils almost haphazardly, watch as her final products look anything but haphazard.

I know now that when you make rice, you should put enough water in the pot such that your index finger is covered up to midway past the first knuckle. I know now that "enough salt" is the amount of salt that fits into the hollow of your palm when you cup your hand. I know that if you want your onions to be sweet, you have to sauté them

in oil long enough for them to get limp and translucent. I know what *rai* (poppy seeds) smell like when you throw them into hot oil. I know the hissing, snapping sound that *tal* (sesame seeds) make when they're thrown onto hot oil, and how they like to spit drops of oil back up at you when you add vegetables. I know what it feels like to have your eyes burn because you rubbed them after cutting a chili pepper. I know the way your throat gets scratchy and hoarse when you use too many spices in a closed space. I like knowing that my spice rack is full—that by throwing a little bit of grainy, potent *hing*, a little bit of yellow *haldar*, a pinch of dark brown, finely ground *dhanageeru*, and an infinitesimal amount of the fiery red *marchu* into a pan with oil, I can convert bland boiled potatoes into a *shak* that I will relish eating.

I have started to actually *enjoy* wearing Indian women's clothing. Up until a year ago, I would wear Indian men's clothing to special functions, just for the pure shock value attached to doing so. But a few months ago, I put on a deep red *chania choli* with gold beading on it, and for the first time, looked at myself in the mirror and was happy with what I saw. Here were clothes that flattered the parts of my body that should be flattered, and hid the parts that weren't quite so flattering.

Why the change? Why this sudden appreciation for skills I considered “too domestic”, for clothing that I thought was “too confining”, just a few years ago? Why do I suddenly want to incorporate elements of Indian womanhood—something that I've scorned so frequently and so vehemently—into my life?

Perhaps it is because I'm realizing that this has nothing to do with other people's expectations of me. It has to do with my expectations of myself, and with the vision that I have of myself in the future, not just as an Indian woman, but also as a wife and mother

at some point. I want to be able to cook Indian food for my family. I want to wear Indian clothes when we go to Indian functions—to be able to say, “This is who I am, and I’m proud of it.”

I want these things, but I have yet to resolve the inherent contradiction in this situation. I want to be an Indian woman selectively—when I want to be, and how I want to be, as opposed to having a way of life imposed on me by standards of Indian womanhood that I had no part in creating. That contradiction is still something that I am trying to work through.

\* \* \* \*

As dinnertime approached, Aai would try to push me out of the kitchen, plate in hand, to begin eating.

“Eat, Neema,” she would urge. “The food tastes better when it is hot. I’ll join you as soon as I’m finished in the kitchen.”

I always refused. “I want to eat with you, Aai. I don’t want to eat by myself and then watch you eat by yourself. I’ll wait, and that way we can eat together.”

Though we have different ways of expressing our stubbornness, Aai and I are equally bull-headed when it comes to not inconveniencing the other person. She refused to eat before she had made me all of the hot *rotli* that I wanted to eat, and I refused to start eating until she came and sat down with me. Eventually, we came up with a compromise. I would sit on the stool in the kitchen while Aai made *rotli*, both of us would make up our dinner plates, and then we would take turns eating the *rotli* that had just come off the skillet. Aai would make a *rotli* and put it on her plate, and then eat it as

she was waiting for the next one to cook, and once the next one was ready, she would give it to me.

It wasn't the perfect solution. The kitchen wasn't any bigger or better ventilated than before, so the room was still stuffy, and we were still sweating. Aai still had to eat standing up. I still spilled food all over myself because I didn't have a stable surface to put my plate down on. But it allowed us to eat together, to share and trade and laugh and tease as we ate our lunches and dinners, and that was really all that either of us needed.

### Words Unspeakable, Thoughts Unthinkable

The typical *Nagar* girl is fair skinned with a round face and a high forehead. She is well-versed in the skills traditionally attributed to Indian women—the arts of cooking, singing, drawing, dancing, putting *mehndi* on other girls' hands, etc., etc. She is intelligent and strong, but demure and quiet when the social situation calls for it. She is prized by members of her own caste, and by those of other castes. I can't begin to count the number of times I've heard Indian parents in our community at home beg my mom to find a good *Nagar* girl for their son.

Why do I know this? Why, living 10,000 miles away from the society in which it is the standard, do I know it, know people who match it, and feel inadequate when I don't live up to it? I'm not fair-skinned. My face is long, not round. My hair is short, rough, and flyaway, instead of long, oiled and neatly braided. I can't sing, dance, draw, sew, cook, or clean, and I definitely can't keep my mouth shut...even when the situation *screams* for it. And while no one has ever pointed these things out to me, I've known for a long time now that when it comes to virtuous *Nagar* girls, I'm about as atypical as you get.

I can't remember a time when I haven't known my caste status, when I haven't known what it means to be a *Nagar*. It has been an important demarcation for my family for many, many years... A way to set us apart, set us above, make us stand out. Right after being proud of being Avashias and Vaishnavs, they are full of pride for their caste heritage. "We Nagars," they'll say... "You won't ever find another group of people like us. So cultured, so intelligent, so good..."

It's such a contradiction. I live in a society that condemns caste distinction—that looks down on it as a form of prejudice no less severe than that of racism. And yet I was brought up to be proud of my caste—to appreciate how we came to be, and how that has affected who we are today. How does one reconcile such vastly contradictory ways of thinking?

\* \* \* \*

The origins of the Nagar caste go all the way back to Persia, from whence, thousands of years ago, some people had to flee due to religious persecution. They came to India...to Gujarat, and tried to find a way to integrate into Indian society. Examining the caste system, they determined that their education and economic status placed them in the same category as Brahmins, and requested that they be considered as such. Brahmins, of course, were a little hesitant to do this—they didn't want to lose their jobs as religious leaders to a bunch of Persians! So they struck a deal: These Persians would be considered equivalent to the Brahmin caste, but would not hold the same occupations as Brahmins. Henceforth, their caste would be connected with educational occupations—those of teachers, philosophers, etc.

Even today, the association between Nagars and education still exists. I met a man last time I was in India who took great interest in my background. “Where are you from?” was his first question. “What is your last name?” was his second question. “What caste are you part of?” was his third.

When I answered his third question with the phrase, “I'm a Nagar,” his reaction was instantaneous.

“Oh...a Nagar. There’s one thing I know about Nagars: they always have books, and their houses always have a *patiyo* (platform swing). Give a Nagar a book and a *patiyo* and he will never complain. He may not have any money, but as long as he has his books and his *patiyo*, he’s happy.”

I laughed at the accuracy of his description, and felt a strange sense of pride well up in me. Odd how, even though I *have* grown up 10,000 miles from this community, there are certain elements of my character that fit in perfectly with those of other Nagars. Give me a book and a *patiyo* and I’ll never complain, either.

\* \* \* \*

Bhimrao Ambedkar, a very vocal activist for *harijan* (untouchable) rights in the 40s and 50s, argued time and time again for the abolition of caste—for an end to the belief that Indian people live in a stratified society, initially determined by occupation, and now determined by birth. He believed that the only way that harijans would receive fair and equal treatment was if the labels separating them from others were destroyed...if a harijan and a Brahmin could marry, and no one would even blink an eye.

He’s right. But how do you eliminate a structure of social stratification that has existed for 4,000 years? You can make laws, impose rules, and punish anyone who goes against those laws and rules, but you can’t take people’s belief systems away from them. You can only show them, time and time again, that it is wrong to say that one caste is better than the other...that there is no basis on which to make the claim that Brahmins are better than Kshatriyas are better than Baniyas are better than Sudras, because today there are Brahmins who are carpenters, and Sudras who are professors. The entire basis of

caste—occupation—no longer functions. The only way you can make distinctions of caste is through people’s last names.

And yet my Manju *foi* still claims (and claims adamantly) that Nagars are more cultured than people of other castes, that Nagar men treat their women better than men of any other caste do, that Nagar girls are far more talented than any other girls she’s ever met.

How do I resolve this? I am a Nagar, and I am proud of that fact. Yet, by even acknowledging that I *am* a Nagar, I perpetuate the existence of a system that thrives on making subjective distinctions between “superior” and “inferior.” Do those distinctions stop people from getting jobs, or keep them down in the public sphere? No. Keep in mind, they’re distinguishing, not discriminating...at least, not anymore. There are laws and quotas (numbers of people from certain castes, especially those that have been oppressed) that ensure the presence of people of all caste groups in the workplace. But one could argue that a ‘racist’ in the U.S. is distinguishing among ethnic groups and not discriminating against them, either. They’re just *pointing out* difference...not keeping people down because of it, right?

\* \* \* \*

According to Nagar tradition, when a Nagar woman marries out of her caste, her name is removed from the family tree. Her existence as part of the Nagar community, as part of a Nagar family, is erased, eliminating any presence that she might have had in family history.

This is a tradition that continues today. My Mona *didi* married a *bania*—a member of the merchant caste. It didn’t matter that he was a doctor, or more fair-skinned

than half of the Nagars I know, or a wonderful human being. Out went her name. My sister is about to marry a South Indian man. When she does, and it gets back to the big shots in the Nagar community, her name will be erased from the records kept by Nagar historians. My sister, her children, their children, will no longer “exist” in the story of the Nagar community.

\* \* \* \*

I know the difference between a *cha-gam* (six village) Patel and a Jain Bania. I know their stereotypical characteristics...the way a cha-gam Patel will rule his child’s life, the way a Jain Bania is supposed to be cunning and shrewd. I can replicate for you exactly the expression on my mother’s face when she explains someone’s behavior by saying that they are a Bania or a Luhana, and know exactly what she is trying to convey when she makes the face. I visibly cringe when, on telling someone that I’m Gujarati, their automatic response is to say, “Oh, are you a Shah or a Patel?” (The two most common Gujarati last names.)

Without ever intending to, wanting to, choosing to, I have internalized the beliefs that I’ve been bombarded with for the past 21 years. Do I look at a Patel and think, “Oh. You must try to rule every aspect of your children’s lives and only let them marry someone who is from the five villages surrounding your own, even if you currently reside in Edison, NJ”? Do I consider myself to be any different...any better than... the *bais* who come to clean my relatives’ houses in India? No! But the fact that I even *know* the stereotypes...the fact that I can reel them off like I can reel off the common themes in Lorrie Moore’s short stories, disturbs the hell out of me.

\* \* \* \*

When I went to Indianapolis last spring to visit my sister, I was introduced to her friend Brian. Brian is American, but spent a year in South India living with a family. While there, he struck up a friendship of sorts with the family's maid, a Kannada Catholic girl named Suzie. He didn't speak much Kannada, and she didn't speak any English, and yet somehow, they managed to become friends. Even after Brian returned to the U.S., they wrote letters back and forth, using translators to help them understand what the other had written.

Brian went back to India last February...and when he returned in March, and came over to my sister's for dinner, he announced his decision to marry Suzie. It was amusing to watch the expressions that played across my sister's face, her boyfriend Kumar's face, their friend Hong's face...and to struggle to hide the one that I felt forming on my own face. All of us seemed to share similar feelings of confusion. Brian was marrying an Indian girl who didn't speak any English, probably didn't have anything more than a grade-school education, and couldn't have very much in common with Brian—American born, excessively educated, middle-class, Midwestern Brian. But he seemed happy...and assured us repeatedly that he wasn't looking for an intellectual companion in a wife. Just someone who was comfortable to come home to, nice to spend free time with, smiling, happy, and nurturing.

Later that night, as I lay in the floor of my sister's room, trying to sleep, I couldn't stop thinking about Brian.

“Swati?” I whispered, hoping that she was still awake.

“Yeah...” She was. Wide awake.

“Does it seem strange to you that Brian is marrying a *bai*? It makes me feel weird...but then I feel horrible for feeling weird about it. I wouldn't have a problem if he told me he was marrying someone that worked for a maid service here. Why is this different?” I asked.

“I don't know, Neema...but I've been thinking the same thing.”

“It doesn't make sense. Think of all of the wonderful *bais* that we know. I'd be thrilled if someone married a woman like Shobha [the maid at Girish mama's house]. I don't understand why this feels so strange.”

“I'm not sure, either. Maybe it's because we're worried that he's being taken for a ride, or that things might not work out.”

“Maybe...”

\* \* \* \*

Aai's sister, Jyoti *maasi*, fell in love with and married a Muslim man. Even though her family was infuriated by the fact that she had married out of caste *and* out of religion, Jyoti *maasi* was happy. Her husband was wonderful... Aai says that he doted on her in a way that renewed your faith in people's ability to love one another. So while he was alive, it didn't matter to Jyoti *maasi* that her family, with the exception of Aai, wouldn't speak to her.

When he died of a heart attack 10 years into their marriage, though, leaving her with two small boys, only a little bit of money, and no way of supporting herself, she was forced to turn back to a family that had shunned her. Luckily, they forgave her, and did everything in their power to support her until she could be financially independent.

Her sons are of “marrying age” now—23 and 26—and the search for wives has begun. It was underway when I last went to India...when Jyoti *maasi* wrote my Bhavna *foi* a letter, telling her to look for good girls for Shishir and Samir. Caste, she said, was no bar, but she would prefer Nagar girls if it was feasible.

“Poor boys,” Bhavna *foi* said. “This isn’t going to be easy.”

“Why?” I asked, confused. “They’re such good boys...what would the problem be?”

“They’re half-Muslim, Neema. No Nagar family is going to want their daughter to marry someone who is half-Muslim. Very few families in general, Nagar or not, are going to want their daughters to marry someone who is half-Muslim.”

“But that’s ridiculous,” I protested. “Why should it matter? They’re smart, have good jobs and great personalities, and are attractive. They aren’t Muslim...they’re Hindu. So what if their father practiced a different religion?”

“That’s the way it is, Neema,” was the only response I could elicit.

\* \* \* \*

I’ve grown up in a society where people who focus on difference, and make distinctions of superiority and inferiority are considered to be bigots. By those standards, I would probably be called a bigot...or, if nothing else, the child of, cousin of, niece of bigots. And yet, I consider myself (and others consider me) to be a really open-minded, class-blind, color-blind person. None of those words seem to fit the description of a bigot, do they? And my family? People would laugh if anyone even *insinuated* that my parents were prejudiced, or that we had a superiority complex.

But put us in the context of another culture. A culture where these distinctions are at the basis of the societal structure. A culture where these differences are pointed out on a daily, if not hourly, basis. Making caste distinctions is a norm. When such distinctions are made by my family, they're not meant in a derogative manner, so much as they are a way of creating group identity and community pride. In that culture, we're not bigots. I'm not strange for being aware of my caste, aware of its good and bad qualities, even proud of it to a degree. That is normal.

How on earth does one resolve this?

\* \* \* \*

My not-so-distant future includes plans to spend at least a year living in India, and ever since I've started thinking about these issues of caste and class, and of my reactions to them, I've become more and more concerned about how I will function within the confines of Indian society. True, I understand the basis of caste distinction; have even been guilty on occasion of beginning to make such distinctions before I realized what I was doing, and then castigated myself accordingly. But that doesn't mean I approve or agree in any way. If I did, I wouldn't be in this state of turmoil to begin with.

I suppose my fundamental problem comes in that I'm not sure of whether it is possible to be *aware* of caste without in some way automatically oppressing someone else. In the U.S. we call making distinctions between ethnic groups supremacy, or balkanization, or just plain old racism. Maybe it's because Americans are so determined as a society to make sure that no one should be anything "other"—anything "un-American." Or maybe not. There may be some validity in the argument that forcing people to "homogenize," at least to some degree, functions to make a more unified

country. Indians who come to the U.S. have serious issues because they're so stuck on being a Patel or being Tamil or being Hindu that they can't see past those distinguishing characteristics to the overarching connection of being *Indian* that all of them possess. It took my sister's fiancé's family two years of arguing, struggling, questioning, before they would agree to let their son marry someone who wasn't Tamil. Their reasoning? They wanted him to marry someone who would preserve their heritage and their language. In fact, they were so desperate to marry him off to a Tamil girl—any Tamil girl—that the last girl they showed him before he told them about my sister didn't even *speak* Tamil. She just understood bits and pieces.

“What is it with these people?” my sister had shouted. “Here I am willing to learn to speak, read, and write Tamil if that's what they want; probably more cultured than any other Indian girl they'll find, and yet they're so stuck on Kumar marrying a Tamil girl that they'll settle for someone who hardly knows the language?”

Luckily, Kumar's parents got over their objections when they met my sister, and realized that she loved their son, and that their son loved her. Other couples aren't so lucky. Their parents don't give in to silly notions of love being more important than maintaining culture. Imagine if the entire population of the United States was made up of people so focused on dividing, subtracting, adding, multiplying to make sure that their culture, their language, their way of life is maintained. One on hand, it could lead to chaos. On the other, it could lead to a society where finally, every culture would hold equal import, receive equal representation, and be held in equally high regard as the others. It's hard to tell.

The number of ways in which Indians choose to divide themselves is absolutely befuddling: They separate by religion, by region, by caste, by sub-caste, by language, by dialect, by gender, by age, by resident status, and probably in other ways that I don't even recognize. And I can't stand to watch it happen. There were at least fifty times during the past two years when I wanted to pick up the phone and call Kumar's parents and scream and yell and curse at them in the hopes that it would make them see how ridiculous they were being. (Please neglect the utterly illogical nature of such an approach. I was in a highly turbulent emotional state!) I wonder what will happen if, when I go to India, I hear someone make a negative comment about members of another caste. I wonder if I will be able to keep my mouth shut and accept what is being said as what it is—the result of an entirely different social and cultural context than the one I was brought up in. Or will I not be able to stay quiet? Will I have to speak up and say that I think what they're saying is wrong—that it lacks logic, lacks evidence, and lacks respect for human beings as exactly that—human beings, plus or minus culture, caste, religion, or any other demarcation.

Pride or shame. Division or unity. Diversity or homogeneity. The values of two very different cultures scream at me to choose between them—to pick on or the other instead of trying to meld the two together in an effort to make sense of it all. Now. You tell me: How do I resolve this?

Your destined lover  
 you'll discover  
 in a frightening flash  
 so keep your heart awake  
 night and day  
 because the meeting  
 may be fleeting as a lightning flash  
 and you don't want to let it slip away..."

--Ella Fitzgerald, "This Could Be the Start of Something"

### **The Pragmatist's Approach to Marriage**

My cousin Vishvesh just got engaged. He met a girl in India on Monday, December 18<sup>th</sup>, met with her again on Wednesday, December 20<sup>th</sup>, got engaged to her on Thursday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, and flew back to the U.S. on Friday, December 22<sup>nd</sup>. We heard about the engagement on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, via a two-line email from Vishvesh's dad...which told us very little other than that Vishvesh was engaged:

"Vishvesh is engaged to Rujul Majmundar. Everything is OK."  
 -Haresh

The getting engaged part wasn't what surprised me—Vishvesh has been obsessing about this whole marriage issue for well over a year now. Understandable, as his mother brought it up to him just about every time he got on the phone with her, got a letter from her, went to India to see her. He's 27—well past 'prime' marrying age for a good Nagar boy, and it was time for him to get a wife, build a life, start a family.

We talked over the idea of marriage many, many times. At one point, he sent me a list of 'pros and cons to getting married', and asked me to help him think it through and decide what to do. At another, we spent three hours on the phone going round and round on the issue of marriage, and what he should look for in a girl, and what things were important to find in a life-partner. I don't think I was ever much help... The same over-

analytic gene that exists in Vishvesh's DNA exists in my own, and if anything, I think the questions that I ended up posing confused him even more.

What's the most important thing to look for in a wife when the traditionally accepted most important thing (love) isn't part of the equation? Should it be that she's able to stand on her own two feet financially? Should it be that the husband and wife are intellectually compatible? Should it be that she is accepting of me as I am—that she won't mind if I have a beer every once in a while when I'm watching a football game?

With these questions weighing on his mind, Vishvesh went off to India this November, fairly certain that he wouldn't return without being engaged. "I don't think Mom will let me come back until she knows I'm going to be married," he told me at one point.

I hoped that he'd be proven wrong, but wasn't particularly surprised to find that he hadn't been. What surprised me was the quickness with which he made his decision. Two dates, three days, and then bang—they're engaged. It didn't make sense. How could you possibly be certain that this was *the one* after two meetings? How could you be sure that this was the person you wanted to wake up beside every morning for the rest of your life when you'd hardly spent any time with them at all? Sure...arranged marriages don't necessarily take into account similar hopes and dreams, but my goodness—sometimes I don't even know if I *like* someone after having met them twice. Imagine having to know whether or not you could *love* someone after having met them twice. And after spending close to two years agonizing about the particulars of getting married in general, didn't a decision made on the marriage specifics (as in, to whom) in just two days seem like a little bit of a snap-decision?

Two days. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Couldn't stop being amazed, befuddled, excited, and frustrated by the thought of Vishvesh engaged to a girl he'd only known for a total of two days. Finally, I said something to my mom about it:

“Well, he had to make a decision, so he made one,” mom said.

“What decision? Who said he had to decide to get married?” I asked, on the defensive immediately, although the cause I was fighting for had already been lost.

“No one... He himself, maybe... He was lonely, Neema. And in this society, it's not OK to be lonely. It's not normal to be alone. So he decided to do something about it.”

“People buy pets because they are lonely, Mom. They join clubs. They read books. People don't get *married* because they are lonely.”

It is a rare, rare, rare moment when I will admit that my mother is right about something... But this time, I have no other choice. Upon further reflection, I think she's right. Vishvesh lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin—probably the most typically white, suburban, midwestern town you will ever come across. He works 50-60 hours a week, plays ping pong and soccer in the town rec leagues, goes out drinking with his buddies from work, sometimes drives into Chicago on weekends. But when the workday is over, or the season ends, or the bar closes, or there is too much snow on the ground to drive, he's alone.

Singleness may be an acceptable way of life in the U.S., but it is certainly not an actively promoted one. How many movies have you seen in the past year about single people who are happily single—fulfilled, content, and thriving—and don't need a romantic interest in their life to make them complete? We watch these movies—these “Jerry Maguire” type films where one person says to the other, “You complete me.” Or

these “Sleepless in Seattle” types where people take one look at one another, or touch once, and suddenly, they just *know* they’re meant for one another. And in the movies where there is a single character, “High Fidelity,” for example, he is full of angst, depressed, and concentrated on doing one of two things: either getting a girl, any girl, or getting his girlfriend back. And then of course, there’s Valentine’s Day. Please don’t get me started on the evils of Valentine’s Day, and the evils of capitalist bastard businessmen who have turned Valentine’s Day into something so commercial and so limited to couples in romantic relationships that St. Valentine wouldn’t even understand why the day was named after him to begin with. Two is the perfect number in this society...and if you’re only one, then you’re lacking.

So maybe it was this combination of factors...a nagging mom, a lonely life, a feeling that it wasn’t OK to be single anymore...that led Vishvesh to finally break down and say, “Yes, mom. I’ll meet the girls that you pick out for me, and if I like one, and she likes me, we’ll get married.”

I can understand the resignation. You get tired after a while... Tired of cooking for one person and always having leftovers. Tired of coming home at night and having no one to share your stories with. Tired of laying down in bed and having no one to hold, and no one to be held by. Friends are wonderful, but at some point, you begin to desire something more. You begin to desire it so deeply that after a while, you’re willing to do just about anything to change your situation.

Vishvesh “saw” five girls during his month-long trip to India. For those of you who are amateurs to the concept of arranged marriage, seeing a girl typically entails going to her house, meeting and chatting with her parents, and then spending one to two

hours with the girl, during which the guy and the girl basically lay all of their expectations for marriage, all of their interests, all of their flaws, out on the table. There's no hedging, no attempt to fake, when you know you've only got a limited amount of time in which to decide. If the girl likes you, the parents will call back to set up another meeting or ask if you are ready to get engaged. If she doesn't, you won't be getting a call of any kind, so don't sit by the phone waiting for a yes or no.

Two days after he flew back to the U.S., I called Vishvesh to get details on the whole situation. My mom had called his mom in Bombay, and the response that she got when she asked about the girl was rather vague... "He's happy, and he said he wanted to marry her, so we're happy..." It wasn't the most comforting thing to hear when I was already anxious. I waited until I couldn't hold out any longer, and then I called.

My first question after, "Hi, how are you?" was, "So did you just close your eyes and pick one, Vishvesh, or do you really like this one?" In the background, my mom gave a gasp of horror at my frankness. On the phone, Vishvesh laughed.

"No, Neema, I didn't just close my eyes and pick one. I liked all of the girls that I saw! I liked the first one, the second one, the third one... I didn't like the fourth one, because she couldn't make any decisions for herself, but the rest of them were fine." So why did it take until #5 for a marriage to finally be decided? "None of them would say yes," he said, half-wonderingly, half-disgustedly. "None of them wanted to come to America." People complain about getting rejected when they ask someone to go out on a date with them... Imagine this: You're not saying, "Hey, want to go out sometime?", you're saying, "Hey, want to spend your whole life with me?" The rejection has to be much more difficult to swallow. And for Vishvesh, it was even more complicated. He

drinks...not a lot, and not often, but every once in a while, he likes to have a Sam Adams or two while watching football. And drinking, for Nagars, is a no-no. (We'll ignore for the moment the fact that the state of Gujarat, which is supposedly "dry" has the largest liquor consumption rates for all of India, and the fact that I personally know several upstanding Nagars who do a lot more than just drink a Sam Adams while watching a football game.) So the dilemma for Vishvesh was a complicated one: Should he not mention the fact that he drinks, and just hope that he'll be able to convince his wife to see that his actions are OK once they're married and in the U. S.? Should he be straightforward and tell the potential bride that he likes to drink occasionally, and risk alienating her because of that? Should he quit drinking altogether so that it becomes a non-issue?

He decided to go the straightforward route, and suffered the consequences. The first three girls that he'd liked all didn't just not want to go to America—they also thought he was "too Westernized." Why? Because he drank.

"Even my relatives acted weird about it," he told me. "I told them up front when they were suggesting girls, because I thought they should know that before making any decisions... And whereas before they'd all been saying, 'Oh, Hareshbhai and Bhavnaben's son should have no problem finding a wife,'" suddenly their eyes got big, their smiles disappeared, and they weren't quite so sure anymore.

"It's probably better that they said no, anyway. What if they had said it was OK, and then had problems with it after we were already married?"

True... But what of girl #5? Had she not minded? Was she comfortable with Vishu drinking the occasional beer? And never mind that, what was the whole story on her? How did they meet, what was she like, how did he feel about her?

According to Vishvesh, he had basically given up on finding a wife during his trip to India, and was hoping to spend his last week at home just spending time with his family. But on that fateful Monday, he was going to a party in a part of Bombay called Andheri, and his mom suggested that he visit one more girl while he was there. Her parents had called, and the family seemed keen to meet him.

And so it began. He went to her parents' apartment in Andheri, and sat and talked to the family for about 20 minutes, after which he asked the girl, Rujul, to take a walk with him. The walk lasted an hour and a half. What did they talk about?

Vishvesh told Rujul about his job, about Green Bay, about his life, about his drinking. He told her about what he expected from marriage (intellectual companionship, shared responsibilities in the house and raising of family, enjoying each other's company, trust, etc.), what he had to offer (honest, hard-working, straight-forward, making good money), what his flaws were, and then turned to spotlight on her. At the end of the conversation, these were the things that he knew about her:

Rujul graduated from IIT Poona (one of the best universities in India) with a degree in Polymer Engineering. This was good. It meant that she had to be bright and hardworking.

Rujul was taking a software course. This was good. It meant she could hopefully get a job in the U.S. once she came over. (Vishvesh worried that his wife would be lonely and unhappy if she had to just stay at home all day.)

Rujul said that she liked ghazals (a type of Indian music). This was good. Vishvesh liked ghazals, too.

Rujul said that she didn't particularly like to read. This was not-so-good. Vishvesh loved to read. But maybe it was fixable over time.

And in general? She seemed quiet and nice. She lives simply, and her parents have raised her with values very similar to those with which Vishvesh was raised. Looks weren't one of the qualifications that Vishvesh wanted to consider when finding a wife, so those don't matter, but I doubt that he was in agony looking at her. He was ready, but she needed some time to think about it...and her parents wanted to make sure that the couple's star signs matched without any problems.

Star signs? It's called *graha* in Gujarati, and it involves going to a *brahmin* with the birth dates of both people, and seeing if their star signs match up. I'm not all that sure of the details, but it has a little bit to do with numerology, a little bit to do with astrology, and a little bit to do with how much money you give the *brahmin*. Let me put it to you this way: For 200 rupees, your *graha* will definitely match if you want them to, and definitely *not* match if you don't want them to.

Miracle of miracles, the *graha* for Vishvesh and Rujul matched. Her parents called on Tuesday night and said they were in favor of the marriage, as long as Vishvesh and his family agreed to it. Wanting to be sure that he was doing the right thing, Vishvesh asked to see Rujul again. So on Wednesday afternoon, they had lunch. They ate, they talked, they learned more about one another...and by the end of lunch, everything had been decided. Thursday there was a small religious ceremony held to make the engagement official, and Friday Vishvesh flew back to Green Bay.

So that was the story. Five days, two dates, and suddenly, they're engaged. And Vishvesh sounds confident that he's made the right decision, sounds nervous when he doesn't hear from Rujul at least once a day on e-mail, sounds excited when he talks about going back to India in May to get married.

It was only after I put down the phone that I found myself asking questions that I thought I had resolved a long, long time ago. I had determined that arranged marriage was not for me. I just wasn't comfortable with the idea that it involved throwing two entirely dissimilar people (like my mother and father) into a legally binding relationship, and forcing them to spend their lives together, whether they were right for one another or not. I love my parents, and I'm glad that they're my parents, but as a married couple, I honestly don't understand how they've made it for the past 30 years. My father is impatient, and my mother is constantly trying his patience. My mother is sensitive, and my father is constantly hurting her with his harsh remarks and insensitive comments. They're like sandpaper on wood—they wear each other down, but only by creating massive amounts of friction between them. With that as my primary example of an arranged marriage, I haven't been able to cultivate much faith in the concept. So I've hypothesized that arranged marriages rely entirely on compromise, that women of past haven't been financially independent, so they've *had* to compromise (most of the men that I've seen certainly haven't!), and that today's Indian woman, being financially independent, will be much more likely to get a divorce if she finds that her marriage isn't working, because she'll have the money to support herself.

That was my theory, and I eliminated arranged marriage as an option because of it. And I watched a lot of sappy romantic comedies, and cultivated these crazy notions of

love and romance, and yet have seen very little evidence that proves such things truly exist. People in ‘love marriages’ fight just as bitterly, hurt just as cruelly, as people in arranged marriages do, so what does that tell me? Maybe Joni Mitchell was right: “All romantics meet the same fate someday/cynical and drunk and boring someone in some dark café.”

Maybe it’s all a big hoax. Maybe Vishvesh has the right idea—close your eyes and pick one: your chances of things working out are probably just as good that way as they are if you’ve known someone for an extended period of time. After all, what can you tell about a person in two years that you can’t tell about them in two days? You’ll know whether you find them attractive, whether you’re intellectually compatible, whether you have similar takes on life... Those are things that you find out in a few conversations, right? My sister, about to get married to a guy who she has been dating for two years, a guy who she is definitely in love with, seems to think so:

“I can’t wait to find out more about Vishvesh’s fiancé... I hope he’s happy. I’m excited that she’s really smart. It is an interesting contrast—2 years vs. 2 days—although our two years was that long because of many complicating factors. I think both of us had a good sense of how we felt about each other/priorities/ dreams/interests/compatibility by 2-3 months of hanging out together. And since all of that important stuff was so right, the goofy stuff about each of us that we weren’t sure we could accept about each other paled in comparison, and we just have decided to put up with those things. So philosophically, I can see how people could arrive at the decision Kumar and I did in a shorter period of time.

And there are no games to be played, no miscommunications of intentions or misinterpretations of feelings, no pressure to dress in certain ways to attract the opposite sex, no need to present yourself as anything other than what you are. Whether you choose an arranged marriage, or a love marriage, either way, the end results are the same: You end up with a companion for life (or maybe less, depending on how long it lasts), you

create a family together, you grow together as a couple because of shared experiences, shared emotions, etc., etc. And if it doesn't work, and you don't mesh, then it ends.

And yet, something about it doesn't sit right with me. Have I just been completely indoctrinated by Western culture? People all over the world have arranged marriages, and they seem to work out just fine. Where did this whole concept of "love" as a pre-requisite for marriage, as opposed to a sentiment developing *through* marriage, come from to begin with? I mean, really... Do you honestly believe in something like love at first sight? I think there might be *lust* at first sight. I think there might be "I want to jump your bones" at first sight. But love? Love isn't the knee-buckling, dizzying thing that so many people describe it as...at least, not in my book. Love develops over time, and then endures. Love is what makes you jump out in front of a train to save someone you love. You won't do that on first sight, will you?

Vishu's wedding date is set for May 13<sup>th</sup> in Bombay, after which he'll come back to the U.S. with his new wife. They'll set up house together, fall into a routine, eat together, live together, sleep together. Sometimes they'll fight about silly things; sometimes they'll fight about important ones. Sometimes they'll laugh at the wrong point in the story, sometimes they'll laugh exactly at the right moment. Sometimes they'll find each other fascinating, and other times they'll bore each other to tears. And if the eating, the living, the sleeping, the fighting, the laughing, the fascinating, and the boring happen in the right combination, then they'll grow together. And if it doesn't, well... I suppose if the approach to the beginning of a marriage can be pragmatic, then so can the approach to the end.

“Of love it may be said, the less earthly the less demonstrative. In its absolutely indestructible form it reaches a profundity in which all exhibition of itself is painful.”

--Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native

### **Laad**

Lately I've found myself contemplating the difference between the 'American' concept of love that I've been exposed to in the outside world over the past 21 years, and the Gujarati conception of love that I've been brought up with by my parents. The word for love in Gujarati is *prem*, but you hardly ever hear anyone say it. Sometimes, as a highest form of praise, a son or daughter, niece or nephew, will be described as *premal*, which means loving. But in general, when people talk about love in Gujarati, they limit their conversation to specific actions. They talk about *laad*—a word used to describe the most intimate bestowments of affection. When my dad spends \$5 to buy me blackberries during the winter, that's *laad*. When my mom wakes up at 5:00 a.m. on the morning that I'm to go back to school in order to make enough food to hold me over for a week or so, that's *laad*. It's hard to pin down, but when you're privy to it, you always know you've been the recipient of *laad*.

Compare that to love. Love? People here say that they love spaghetti in the same tone that they would use to say that they loved their wife. There's hardly a differentiation. This word that denotes the strongest bond between two people has also been used to describe the appreciation that people have for movies, for books, for fast food. I'm as guilty of it as the next person... But even as I do it, I wonder if these multiple uses of the same word somehow alter the strength of meaning behind it.

In my family, love is shown not spoken. In theory, having to *say* that you love someone, or hug or kiss them in order to convey that message, cheapens the strength of

emotion that a relationship holds. People should just *know* that they are loved. Why? Because my Manju foi forces me to eat five times a day, even if I'm not hungry. Because Pranavbhai will make me coffee every morning, despite the fact that he doesn't really cook much, and I'll chug it down, despite the fact that I hate coffee. Because my dad will buy me raspberries in the middle of winter, just because he knows that I like them. Because my Uma mami refuses to let me pay for anything—any single thing—from a rickshaw fare to a set of new clothes, when I go to her house. They call it *laad*. It translates very easily into love.

We are not a hugging family. We are not a kissing family. We are hardly even a touching family. There are cousins who I see maybe once every two years, and the most we ever do is shake hands. The times in my life when my parents have said, "I love you," are so rare that I can virtually recall each and every time. Supposedly, we are a doing family. We are there for one another. We put each other through school, support each other through deaths, marriages, cheating husbands, treat each other's children like our own, regard our cousins as brothers and sisters. This is how we love each other. At least, this is what I've been taught to think is how we love each other.

Sometimes it has been hard—you grow up in a house where love is such an unspoken sentiment, and then you go over to a friend's house, and their mother is constantly hugging them, their dad is constantly saying, "I love you," their grandparents are saying, "I'm proud of you," even when there isn't necessarily a lot to be proud of. You watch David's parents kiss him before they go to sleep each night, watch Mel's father give her a big hug after every basketball game, watch even Kathleen's strict, disciplinarian parents concede that they are proud of her every once in a while, and know

that you are begging with your eyes for some of that affection to be bestowed on you. To an extent, it works. When you're over at their house, David's parents start kissing you on the cheek before they go to bed at night. When you have a good game, Mel's dad will give you a big hug, muss up your hair, and slap you on the shoulder to show that he is proud of the way you played. When you do well on a project, or get a good grade on an exam, Kathleen's parents will tell you that they're proud of your effort. But it's not the same...other people's parents are not your parents, and other parents' actions don't compensate for the ones missing in your own house. And suddenly, you begin to feel little voices of insecurity echoing in your head. Do your parents really love you? If they do, why don't they ever say so? Are they really proud of you? If they are, why don't they ever express it? Maybe they don't... Maybe they aren't... How are you supposed to know? Your insecurity grows so large that it begins to blind you...it obscures your vision of the things that your family is *doing*, and forces you to focus on what it is that they aren't *saying*. And that absence of words, that absence of the kind of reassurance that you need, continues to gnaw away at you.

You end up dichotomizing. The Indian part of you, that dominates when you're at home or in India, remains 'less overt', or at least, that's what you think. Even then, your relatives in India describe you as *lagnishil* (sentimental), and hug back awkwardly when you give them a hello or goodbye hug. They mean it in a nice way... They tease lovingly when they tease you about having a *kuo* (well) behind each eye. But the teasing is enough to set you apart as different...as a little bit more emotional, more liberal with your affections, and free with your emotions, than the rest of them are.

You can only imagine what they would think if they saw the ‘American’ part of you, when it dominates. Then you are constantly hugging your friends, constantly saying that you love them and that you’re proud of them.

You swear to yourself that when you have children, you will hug them and kiss them and tell them that you love them in addition to doing everything you can for them. You promise that you will give them the best of both cultures, instead of skewing one way or the other. But you worry... Does saying it cheapen it?

And yet despite these fears of a love cheapened by its visibility, you yourself crave touch. You steal hugs in the same half-mischievous/half-innocent way that a little child will steal candy. You crave verbal reassurances. You always want to know where you stand, what the status of the relationship is.

Still, you find that you are most unexpressive with the people you care most deeply about. It is easy to tell new friends that you care about them, easy to hug the silly, fun friends you’ve made... But the ones who you find yourself connected to on deeper levels often find you distant and inaccessible.

Over time, your parents change. They get older, you move away, they start getting sentimental and reflective in their old age. They realize that maybe they weren’t so good at the action part, or that maybe you weren’t so good at understanding what they were trying to convey, so they try to make up for all of those lost sentiments... Maybe they’ve begun to realize that there really is something magical about human contact. Maybe they are beginning to understand that there really is something to be said for speaking out when you feel emotionally bound to someone, instead of just hoping that your actions convey the strength of your emotion. But it doesn’t work now. Hugs are uncomfortable, I

love you and I'm proud of you seem fake. You try to respond, but the action of hugging and the speaking of the words I love you too feels nothing but disingenuous. You try to hide it, but the awkwardness of your actions speaks for itself. Then they accuse you of being hypocritical—good, like all Avashias, at 'foreign policy'—at being nice to people outside the family—but awful when it comes to interacting with family. Your mother is especially bad about it. "You never hug me," she says, casting it up on you time and again, making you feel like a terrible daughter. "You hug all of your friends, you even hug your friends' parents, but you can't hug me?" How do you defend yourself? You are only behaving with them the way they have behaved towards you for 21 years. How can they fault you for following their example? Perhaps it is because you, too, have failed to convey the message effectively.

So at the age of 21, just when you think that you've figured out who you are and how you tend to behave, you're thrown into upheaval again. Be more expressive towards your family. Be more emotional. With these mandates in mind, you take a deep breath and begin again.

### The Falia

“*Bachao! Bachao!*”

“Save me! Save me!”

My great-aunt Aai and I look up from our books to turn to each other and laugh. No worries—no one is being beaten or murdered. It is just that Kushali, our over-dramatic six-year old neighbor in the *falia* is at it again. It’s nine in the morning, she has to be at school by 10, and she is screaming in protest as her mother forces her to brush her teeth and yanks a comb through her tangled reddish hair. This happens every morning. It’s part of the daily routine in the *falia* (courtyard) at Aai’s house in Gondal. It’s one of the things that I remember most vividly when I am not there.

The *falia* serves many purposes in small-town life in India. It’s a center for social gatherings, from things as simple as late-night chats to things as complex and elaborate as rituals celebrating rites of passage, wedding ceremonies, and funerals. It’s a center for household chores ranging from doing dishes to washing clothes to mending broken appliances. It’s the place where meetings and partings occur, where joy and unhappiness are expressed, and where laughter and anger are evoked. The *falia* serves as a place where memories can be created, and connections made. For me, these are connections to my family, connections to my culture, and connections to a part of my life that I sometimes lose touch with when I spend too long in the U. S. It’s at those times when I’m losing touch when I wish for a *falia* most...

\* \* \* \*

It’s a hot evening in India—not the muggy kind of heat that I’m used to, but a dry, penetrating heat—the kind that sucks every bit of moisture out of your pores. Sitting in the house is unbearable, even though I’ve been swinging on the *patiyo* (platform swing)

trying to create a breeze in the house. I can feel little beads of sweat rolling down my stomach, and my cotton *punjabi* is sticking to my skin. The heat is suffocating—the single overhead fan and the two tiny windows in the house are doing us no good. Earlier my great aunt, *Aai*, had poured water all over the stone floors in an effort to cool the house down, but the relief from the heat that we got was only temporary. Finally we can't stand it any longer. *Aai* and I look at each other and simultaneously say one thing:

“Let's go out into the *falia*.”

We step outside through the main doors of the house and find ourselves in the *falia*—a stone-paved courtyard in the middle of four inter-connected houses—only to find that a mass exodus is underway. People who have made the same decision that we have come streaming out from each of the houses, bringing folding chairs to sit on, newspapers and books to read, *saris* to embroider, peas to shell, and homework to do. Together we gather on and around the *otli*, a low, concrete platform located at one end of the *falia*, and strain our necks, trying to catch any slight breeze that might be blowing over the *falia* on this summer evening.

There's something exotic about the *falia* on a night during the monsoon season. It may be the heavy-sweet smell of jasmine that fills the air, or it may be the unripe papayas and that sway gently on the trees hanging overhead, or it may be the pearly-gray clouds that roll in slowly signaling that respite from the heat may be on its way. Whatever it is, this exotic element seems to make my senses even sharper. I am intoxicated even more than usual by the smell of the deceptively simple-looking jasmine, annoyed even more by the sharp bite of a mosquito that seems to enjoy feasting on my sweet, foreign blood, and

pleased even more each time I bite on a tiny, ruby-like pomegranate seed whose juice squirts into my mouth, staining my tongue and teeth bright red.

I survey the scene around me, and even my sense of sight is pleased to see so many people that I love all in one place, all doing things that they enjoy. Aai is reading one of her philosophy books, Piyush *kaka* is settled back in his chair with the newspaper, his daughters Poorvi and Hirva are putting henna on their hands, the little girl from next door, Kushali, is playing school with some of her friends, Kushali's mom, Alka, is picking over vegetables for dinner, and Kamala *ben*, the only one of us with nothing to occupy her time, strikes up a conversation with anyone who briefly looks up from their past-time. It's such a comfortable setting! Everyone is occupied with his own work, but we are all spending time *together*. And no one is so determined to finish what they are doing and move on that they can't spend time just talking. In fact, if anything, we all talk more than we read, play, or work.

This is the typical Indian *falia*—a gathering place, a joint living room of sorts, with one small catch—it's outside. But sometimes that makes it even nicer. What could be better than sitting outside late on a hot summer night talking with relatives and neighbors who might as well be relatives, watching the stars appear one by one in the sky, listening to the sounds of the town die down one at a time, and sharing stories and thoughts that take us so long to tell that we go to bed much later than we intended? What is more fun than using colored powders to draw huge pictures that cover the expanse of the *falia* on special occasions? The *falia* is not only an integral part of daily life in small town India, it's also one of the reasons why relationships between neighbors develop into relationships that are like family.

Take *Piyush kaka* and *Aai* for example. *Aai* had to sell her house after my great-uncle, *Kirti kaka* passed away, and she didn't really want to move away from *Gondal*, the town where she lives. *Piyush kaka*'s family and the Avashia family have been friends for a long time, so he offered to let *Aai* live in one of the houses in his *falia* that was empty at the time at ridiculously low rent. *Aai* has offered to move out any time that *Piyush kaka* needs the house, but he refuses to hear it—tears come to his eyes every time she mentions the idea.

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Different nights bring different activities to the *falia*. One night during my last visit, we all sat on the *otli* telling jokes and stories until bedtime.

Kushali, of course, had to have her share of the attention. Flashing us a toothy grin, the red-headed, fair-skinned, freckled wisp of a child shouted for us to be quiet because she wanted to tell us a joke.

“If you have one boy and one monkey, then what does that mean?” she asked Hirva.

“I don't know, what?” Hirva replied.

“An ear!”

Everyone laughed at Kushali's joke, in spite of the fact that it wasn't particularly funny (and didn't even make sense, for that matter). Beaming at this praise, she sat silently and listened for a while, waiting until she thought of another joke to entertain us with. Inwardly, I marveled at the little girl's boldness—at her confidence in telling a joke and thinking that everyone would appreciate it—and at the supportive environment of the

*falia*, where people had given her enough self-esteem boosts to allow her to foster this confidence.

Piyush kaka then launched into a story about his childhood...about my father's childhood...and about the time they spent together as children. I've heard the story a hundred times over now, but I never tire of hearing it, and he never tires of telling it.

Leaning back in his white and blue striped lounge chair, Piyush kaka glanced over at me and shook his head. "I can't believe that time has gone by so quickly. I can remember playing in this same *falia* with your dad and his brothers and sisters when we were young. Those Avashias...they were fun to play with, but one mention of food and they were gone! We used to be playing games, and Bhavna, your *foi*, would come running and call your dad and his brother, Madhukar. She'd say that their mom had hot *rotli* waiting for them, and it didn't matter if we were in the middle of a game, or if we had just started, or if it was right about to end—they'd go running to eat." I laughed, and thought to myself that not much has changed between generations of Avashias—if I hear that mom is making hot *rotli*, I go running too.

At one point, Hirva rattled off several *hathi* (elephant) and *kidi* (ant) jokes—funny mainly because of the ludicrous images that come to mind when you hear them.

"So *hathi bhai* was walking down the street one day when he ran into *kidi ben*.

'*Kidi ben*, where are you going?' he asked.

'I'm going to the tailor to have a dress made for myself,' she replied.

'Oh...I see. Well, if you have any material left over, would you get the tailor to make it into a pair of pants for me?' *hathi bhai* responded.

The list of *hathi* and *kidi* jokes was long...but by the end of the evening, I had a joke to tell myself. Piyush kaka's second oldest daughter, Jalpa, had just recently gotten engaged to a man whose last name was Hathi. Laughing, I looked over at Hirva and made the remark:

“Hirva, now that Jalpa is marrying a *hathi*, all you have to do is find yourself a *monkodie* (very common Nagar last name, and also a type of large black ant) to marry!”

There was a momentary silence after I made this crack that unnerved me. But seconds later, laughter bubbled up from people's stomachs with such force that they couldn't hold it in any longer.

“Good job, Neema!” Saroj kaki said, patting me on the back. “Now we know you're really fluent in Gujarati!”

My face was flushed with pleasure, and I felt a little like Kushali probably does when they laugh at her jokes. And more than that, I finally felt like I had been accepted as a part of this community.

\* \* \* \*

My relationships with my neighbors in the U. S. are wonderful. Most of my neighbors at home on Pamela Circle are an extension of my family—as much of one as Piyush *kaka* and his family are. Mr. and Mrs. Withrow look after me like I'm one of their own children, always inquiring after my health and the status of my love life, always saying that I look prettier every time they see me, and that it's a pity that no boy has discovered what a treasure I am. When I lived at home, Mrs. Carney used to buy groceries that no one in her house would eat, but that she knew I liked; Mr. Starcher was always willing to fix the hundreds of things that I break; Nicky Lunardini depended on

me to play basketball and go bike riding with him. These are my adopted uncles and aunts, grandparents, and brothers and sisters. And we spend our summers and our evenings out on the street together playing games, drawing chalk pictures, telling stories, and having fun. But we all worked very hard to make the atmosphere of Pamela Circle like the atmosphere of the *falia*. The free exchange of ideas, tools, and food, and the relaxed interaction between people didn't happen as naturally on my street as it seems to in the *falia*. We had to work at it, while I think in the *falia*, much of what happens *just* happens. And my street is actually a rarity—most people I know haven't had experiences like this. In a neighborhood there are closed doors that must be knocked on, and opened, before any type of exchange can even begin; in a *falia*, your neighbors are in plain view whenever you step out of your house. I wonder what having a *falia* in every neighborhood would do for community relationships, family values, and all of these other things that politicians, preachers, and moralists alike say that our society is lacking today?

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This is not to say that the *falia* is void of politics and problems. Indeed, perhaps *because* of the close-knit community that exists within it, conflict seems to be happening under the surface at all times.

Kushali's mother, Alka, seems to be at the root of many conflicts—when she can't deal with her daughter, she sends her over to Piyush kaka's house, and expects Hirva and Jalpa to babysit. Kushali eats almost all of her meals with Piyush kaka's family (their food, not food that she brings from home), and I don't think I've ever heard her, or her mom, say thank you. And Piyush kaka, Saroj kaki, and their children are too kind-

hearted, too non-confrontational, too giving to ever refuse to watch or feed the little girl. But people can only be taken for granted for so long before they start to feel it, and even though no one refuses, you can sense the frustration that they all feel with having to watch Kushali when they all have other things that they need to be doing.

Financial struggles also play a role in *falia* life. Sometimes Kamala *ben* won't pay her rent for months on end...and Piyush kaka never gets up the nerve to ask her for it, so he just takes what he can get when he gets it. And this past time when we went to Gondal, the well in the *falia* was broken, and I knew Piyush kaka didn't have the money to get it fixed, so I asked my dad to pay for the repair work. I asked because I thought that it was too much for Aai to have to go and fill up water from the *khado* (ditch) every fourth day...but when dad approached Piyush kaka about it, P kaka took offense. He cried, in fact, upset that we would think he wasn't taking good enough care of Aai. Initially, he refused to take the money, but after much convincing by dad that it was for Aai's sake, Piyush kaka agreed to let dad pay for half of the costs, and he would cover the other half.

So yes, there are problems. But what community doesn't have problems? What group of people who care about each other doesn't fight, doesn't take each other for granted sometimes, doesn't make mistakes? The conflict is just as integral to keeping these people together as the joy is.

\* \* \* \*

On my last visit to the *falia*, I was there for two weeks. Two weeks of days spent playing cricket, eating sugarcane, washing clothes, fetching water. Two weeks of nights spent telling jokes, singing songs, listening to stories, having *mehndi* (henna) put on my

hands, sleeping on the roof. When it was time to leave, I carried my bags across the *falia* and paused before opening the doors, looking back one more time, as if to capture a moment...a place...a time in my mind, so that I could come back to it, live in it, savor it, even when I wasn't physically there. And then I pushed the doors open, stepped out onto the street, and closed the doors behind me.

A pile of hogs slept on one side of the street. Sangeeta, the milkman's dog, was snarling at me from a corner. I hailed a *rickshaw* that was coming up the street and waited for it to pull up in front of me. As I loaded my bags in and tried to contort my body to fit into the tiny space left on the seat, the *falia* doors opened. Out came Kushali, Alka, Piyush kaka, Hirva, Jalpa, Chintan, Kamala *ben*.

"Come back soon, Neema," Piyush kaka said. "Come back whenever you want."

"I will," I said.

I waved once, gave the rickshaw driver directions to the station, and then sat back in the seat and waited for him to drive away. I didn't look back. If I had looked back, I wouldn't have been able to see for the tears in my eyes, but I didn't try to look back. Looking back means that you regret leaving because you're scared you'll never be able to go back...and I know I'll be going back to my *falia*.

### **Sleeping in Gondal**

Nighttime in Gondal means sleeping on the *agassi* (roof) on hot summer nights. It means carrying blankets, pillows, *gadla* (mattresses) up the narrow, winding concrete steps, and dropping them in a heap in the corner while you sweep away the day's dust, and make the ground clean enough to put down bedding. It means laying out the mattresses (thin, hard mattresses...these aren't Serta Perfect Sleepers) all in a row, covering them with soft, worn cotton sheets, putting a flattened pillow at the head of each, and leaving a thin cotton *setranji* (blanket) at the foot.

It means staring up at the stars in the dark sky above you as you lay in bed, and learning to pick out the constellations as if they were familiar faces in a crowd of strangers.

It means dropping off to sleep to the sounds of Hirva, Jalpa, Chintan, and Kushali (your neighbors in the *falia*) singing, talking, laughing, snoring.

It means waking up to raindrops spattering on your face at 3 in the morning and having to gather up all of the bedding, hurry down the narrow stairs, and then remake your beds inside before you can go back to sleep again.

Or, if that doesn't happen, it means waking up at 4:30 to the *mullah* chanting morning prayers over an intercom at the mosque that's over a mile away from the house. And if you manage to sleep through that, then it means waking up to the sound of a *koyal* making its annoying coo-oo-ing sounds at 5 in the morning, or, if you're lucky, waking up at 6 in the morning to the sounds of Nana *kaka*'s nasal voice as he sings his morning prayers. But no matter what, by 6 a.m. you will be awake, folding your bedding under a whitish-gray sky that is still waiting for the sun to fight through the clouds, listening to

the sounds of the morning—water running, pots clanking, vendors setting up their carts for the day, mothers and children fighting as they get ready for school, and of course, the usual hogs and cows up from their night's respite.

Sleeping in Gondal is a social act equal to that of sitting out in the *falia* telling stories and jokes after dinner. It isn't something that you do by yourself, in the dark, in the privacy of your own room. It is something to look forward to every night—hurry up and get the dishes done, sweep the floor, change into your pajamas and brush your teeth so that you can go up to the *agassi* and socialize before everyone falls asleep.

Mind you, these aren't the ideal sleeping conditions if you're intent on getting your eight hours every night. You wake up in the morning and your back aches from spending the night sleeping on concrete, with just a thin layer of cotton between you and the ground. You wake up to the sun in your eyes at an ungodly hour of morning, and can't seem to block out the light no matter what you put over your head, or how you contort your body. Sometimes you will wake up to the sound of hogs grunting, rickshaws revving their motors, vendors chanting about their goods, and if you're born and brought up in America, you'll wish for your soft mattress, your warm blankets, your dark, quiet room, your soft, beeping alarm clock. But I read somewhere once that there's no softer pillow than a clear conscience, and if you go to sleep on the *agassi* for enough nights at a time, the peace of mind that you feel inside will make it so you don't even care about the fact that you can feel every bump, every tiny pebble, every groove in the concrete beneath you.

I have always thought of my life in Gondal as being less complex than my life at college seems to be, but I'm beginning to think that a lack of complexity is not what

differentiates the two. At college, most of the work that I do is mental, and often its purpose is unclear, so the exhaustion that I feel when nighttime rolls around is that of someone whose brain has been stretched, squeezed, and stuffed to its full capacity. I go to sleep with migraine headaches some nights, don't get to go to sleep at all on other nights, sleep only a little bit on most nights...and no matter what I do, the feeling of being mentally *tired* never seems to go away. And eventually, mental tiredness seems to find its way into all of the other aspects of my life. It makes me too physically tired to go and exercise on a daily basis, too emotionally tired to deal with complicated relationships, too intellectually tired to learn anything that isn't required for class the next day. In Gondal, the work that I do is physical, the purpose is always very clear (we fetch water so that we have it to use, we go to the market to buy vegetables so that we can eat them), and the exhaustion that I feel is limited to that of achy muscles and tired bones. Each day, there is water to be fetched, laundry to be done, cleaning to finish, cooking to do...but there is also time to read the books you have bought, to write in your journal, to swing on the *patiyō*, to nap on the cool, smooth stone floor, to play cricket in the courtyard. It is imposed time, almost—imposed by the sleepy contentment that you feel after eating a big bowl of rice with lunch or dinner, and by the overwhelming lethargy that hot weather seems to bring with it—and it exists for everyone, visitors, housewives, children, maids, and working people, alike. Even Piyush kaka, who works full-time at a local bank, comes home for lunch and spends some time relaxing before he goes back to work. So, when you go to sleep at night, your body is tired from the physical labor that you have done, but your mind is at ease because you have spent each day doing both the things that are necessary to your existence, and the things that you enjoy, instead of the reading, writing,

studying, and stressing that is forced on you when you are at college. And when you wake up in the morning, your body is well rested, your mind is refreshed, and you're ready to go out and do it all over again.

This is what sleeping in Gondal means to me. Or at least...it has meant that for me on almost every trip to Gondal except for this last one. This time, Aai kept having to climb back down the narrow, winding concrete steps in the middle of the night, in complete darkness, to go to the bathroom. This time, I couldn't help but be frightened that she might make a misstep, might fall in the dark, might get hurt during one of those trips down the stairs. I figured it would be easier for us just to sleep inside, but I didn't want to let Aai know that I was worried about her, so I made the excuse that this time, it was a little too cold in the morning to sleep outside comfortably.

And so, when everyone else went up to the *agassi* at night to sleep, Aai and I would put two *gadla* down on the living room/bedroom/dining room (since it's all the same room) floor, spread a sheet over them, throw down some blankets, turn out all of the lights except for one tiny bulb in the corner ("So our friend the mouse won't bother us," Aai would say.), and lay down to go to sleep.

It wasn't the social outing that sleeping on the *agassi* had always been for me, but sleeping beside Aai for those two weeks in Gondal introduced me to an entirely new aspect of what it means to go to sleep at night with someone laying beside you. There is an intimacy about it...the simple intimacy that can exist between two people who care about each other...that I think is only accessible through this situation. There is something to laying beside someone in the dark, so close to them that you can hear every intake of breath, you can sense every rise and fall of their chest, you can feel the warmth

that their body gives off, that allows you to feel closer to them than you ever can by talking to them in broad daylight.

I've always been scared of the dark... As a child I would have nightmares so frightening that they would drive me to my parents' room every night, begging them to move over so that I could crawl into the warm space that they vacated and spend the rest of the night in their bed with them. As I've grown older, the nightmares haven't gone away; I've just learned to try to focus on something positive and force myself back to sleep. But when I'm in Gondal with Aai, I don't even *have* nightmares. I fall asleep to night sounds...to Aai breathing, to bits of chatter that come from people passing the house on the street side, to the occasional honk of a rickshaw, the not-occasional-enough howls of Sangeeta, the milkman's dog, the even more frequent grunts and squeals of the neighborhood hogs. I wake up in the middle of the night only to close the wooden shutters in an effort to block out the cold air, then fall asleep again until the mullah cries, or Nana *kaka* starts to sing, or the stupid *koyal* coos one too many times, or it is time to go out to get water to fill the tanks. And when it's time to wake up, I don't reach for a snooze button, or beg for five more minutes of sleep. I get up, put away the bedding as Aai makes *chai* (tea) for breakfast, and look forward to the day ahead.

Contrast this with the way I fall asleep in Pittsburgh, in a darkened basement room where every shadow, every footstep, every creak is a person lurking. Contrast this with the way that I wake up in Pittsburgh, in a room that is still dark because it gets no sunlight, heart beating fast because I've been jolted awake by the high-pitched whine of my alarm clock, wishing that I could burrow back under my quilt and fall back asleep until graduation rolls around... Contrast sleeping in Gondal with sleeping in Pittsburgh,

and you will understand why it is that a picture frame of photos taken in Gondal hangs right above my bed, why it is that when I close my eyes at night and try to imagine myself in a happy place, Gondal is the place that I see.

### From Khala-Khatta to Coca-Cola

There's a heightened state of consciousness that I think most of us begin to suffer from around the age of 18. Within this new state of consciousness, the world stops looking quite so rosy, the days stop being quite so sunny, and life takes on a darker tone. It happens, I guess, when you start thinking about the world outside your tiny little life, when you start reading the newspaper and every other article is about some act of violence being committed, some person being cheated, some other person being hurt, when you meet people who are just plain mean, and you can't find justifications for their meanness. When internalized successfully, that consciousness gets tempered over time, and you learn to balance between naïveté and excessive worldliness, learn to maintain your sense of wonder without being a hopeless romantic. But in its first blush, the awareness that this new consciousness brings about can be extremely painful, and the way in which it makes you see the world can make you just a little bitter.

I went to India at nineteen, and even though Indian *smelled* the same (that strange combination of car exhaust, fried foods, sweat, and people that is uniquely Indian), *looked* the same (still crowded, still too much traffic, still cows wandering all over the place, still heaps of garbage on the side of the road, still bright, colorful, and *live* in a way that America never will be), *felt* the same (still hot, still sticky, still making me sweat in places where I didn't even know sweat glands existed—on my tummy, behind my ears, on the top of my nose) as it had on my six previous trips, something in the atmosphere had been altered.

I went to India at age nineteen and witnessed many things that had previously escaped my notice. I noticed that when my Uma *mami* talked to Ma (my grandmother),

she spoke angrily, her voice full of frustration at Ma's 'meddling', as she called it. I noticed that Girish *mama* and Uma *mami* don't talk to each other. When they talk, they talk *at* each other, and they talk in such terse, bitter tones that it's difficult to imagine them laying down beside each other at night to sleep. While I was there, they didn't even do that. We all slept on different parts of the agassi—*mami* at one end, me in the middle, and *mama* the other end.

I saw cracks in the walls of Anupam, dust piling up in the unused rooms. My mom had to scour the bathroom in our room with acid in order for it to be clean enough to use. The room was shut up for over a year, and even after a week of cleaning, there was still filth to be found in the corners, grit on the floor, dirt on the windowsills. Piles of old papers overflowed in corners of the house, lizards ran along the walls high above our heads, and the whole house had taken on a musty odor that brought to mind a closet opened after years of being shut. This was incredibly hard for me to deal with, because outside of my childhood home on Pamela Circle and *Sitaprasad*, the house in Gondal that belonged to the Avashia family for close to 100 years, *Anupam* has been my favorite house since childhood. My mind is full of memories that all go back to Anupam, with its white adobe walls, iron-grated windows, and garden flanked by almond, *chiku*, and mango trees.

Thinking back, I can remember sitting on the porch swing there and eating *jambu*, and feeling my tongue get numb... Sitting on the balcony and laughing as I watched the furry gray monkeys sit in the mango trees and eat up the mangos before *Devibhaiya*, the gardener, had time to pick them... Playing cards with Ma (my grandmother) and *Anandbhai* (my cousin) every afternoon, even though Ma cheated at cards and had to go

to the bathroom every 15 minutes... Standing in front of the house watching Raju, the *dhobi* who had his stand right outside the gates of Anupam, iron the wrinkles out of people's clothes with his big, heavy, black iron that was full of pieces of fiery coal... Riding with Anand**hai** on his scooter at night and going to the other side of Baroda to get chocolate ice cream from his favorite ice cream store, the only place I've ever been where they give you your scoops of ice cream in a glass... Waiting in the car with *Chacha*, the driver, while *mami* went into the *bazaar* to pick up *shak bhaji* for dinner. I remember liking *Chacha*'s big silver watch that he let me look at, and his black hat, and the white suits that he always wore, but never understanding why he wouldn't come into the house to eat his lunch. I only learned later that it was because he was Muslim and wouldn't enter a Hindu's house. Letting Uma *mami* rub coconut oil into my hair at night and play with my hair and pat my back until I fall asleep. I loved the way she called me *nani* Neema. Her little Neema.

Most of all, though, I remember khala-khatta. *Mami* used to make it for me every day at the same time when she, Ma, and Girish *mama* had *chai*. I didn't really like *chai*, so I got to drink khala-khatta, this purple-ish black, sweet and sour drink made of a concentrate mixed with water, that kind of tastes like Kool-Aid, only is much better than Kool-Aid. Every day at four o'clock, *mami* would ask me the same question: *Neemaji, chaar vagiya. Khala-Khatta joyeche?* Neema, it's four o'clock. Do you want khala-khatta? And every day, I would say yes.

We would sit at the long, white dining room table and drink our drinks as the fans whirred overhead, idly watching the *dhobi* exchange freshly ironed clothes for the money that customers brought him, cows eat out of the garbage heap, and rickshaws teeter past

the house through the dining room windows. *Mami* always made some *nasto* (snack) to go with the *chai*. Sometimes she fried sun-dried potatoes, which end up tasting like big, oily potato chips. Sometimes she mixed *mumra* (puffed rice) with onions and tomatoes, lemon juice, oil, and hot pepper, and poured the whole mixture into a big silver bowl, and I would eat more than half of the contents. 15 minutes would pass, then 30, then an hour, and still we would be sitting at the dining room table, staring at the few drops of liquid still left in our glasses. All made lazy by the heat of the day, all just wishing that we could just take a nap.

I used to take pride in the fact that khala-khatta was my drink. *Mami* kept it in a special place on the shelves above the counter just for me, and she only brought it down when I was going to have some. Everyone else drank *chai*, or *limbu ni pani* (lemonade), or *sherdi no rus* (sugarcane juice), but khala-khatta was all mine.

But on this trip to India, my focus was on many more aspects of life at Anupam than just food. *Mami* has had the walls painted once or twice, first an awful mint green, and then a more suitable off-white. *Ma* has to go to the bathroom every 10 minutes now, instead of every 15. *Chacha* died, and the new red-eyed, seemingly drunk driver (*Krishnakant bhai*) can't even begin to compare; *Devibhaiya's* son *Gurubhaiya* tends the garden now; *Raju* retired and now his children, *Maya*, *Chanda*, and *Bhagvandas* (all grown up) push the same heavy iron over the wrinkled clothes.

And yet, it wasn't just India that had changed... I had changed, too. I was older. I had a year of college education under my belt, and I thought that qualified me to offer an opinion on many, many subjects. I was wrong...but at that point, I was still stubborn and

outspoken, and refused to keep my mouth shut when I had the opportunity to offer a dissenting opinion.

“*Hai...* I can’t get used to this. My *nani* Neema isn’t *nani* anymore,” my mami said one day while she was cooking. I was in the kitchen fighting with my mom in not-so-low tones when she said it, and it made me stop in mid-sentence and forget the entire point of the argument.

There was nothing I wanted to do more than protest—than say, “Mami, it’s not true. *Nani* Neema is still very much here, and she’s aching to come out. Just because I look grown-up doesn’t mean I feel grown-up. Just because the parts of me that you see coming out are the ones where I’m older, more-outspoken, less innocent doesn’t mean that the little girl who you used to play with isn’t in here somewhere.” There was no stronger urge within me than to sit down beside mami that night after dinner, put my head in her lap, and say that part of me wanted to always be *nani* Neema. More than just part, sometimes...

Growing up hasn’t been all bad, though. When I go to India now, with this stronger awareness of place, I am more taken by the smell of jasmine at night, and the way it can make you feel dizzy with pleasure just to take fill your hands with the flowers, hold them up to your nose, and take a deep breath. I am more aware of the mixture of happiness and annoyance that being woken up at five in the morning by a loudly-cooing *koyal* can bring after you’ve spent a night sleeping under the stars, on the hard concrete floor of the *agassi*. I’m more attuned to mami’s wry sense of humor, to her keen insight, to her sympathy when I’m frustrated with my mom. I see the sweat that forms on Maya’s forehead more clearly now, see that pushing the heavy iron requires effort, that the red

hot coals are heavy, that doing this kind of work in 100 degree weather must be torture. The vision of India is no longer just pleasant, but at least it is more complete.

On this trip to India at age nineteen, I started to drink *chai* in the morning. It woke me up, and I liked being able to sit down with *mami* and *mama* and share in an experience that they're having. But the first afternoon when we were home for tea, I waited for *mami* to ask me about my *khala-khatta*, and she didn't. She put a cup of tea down on the table at my place at four o'clock, and, not wanting to cause problems, I drank it. I went into the kitchen afterwards, looked up on the shelves above the counter, and didn't see the plastic bottle full of purple concentrate in its usual place. I found Pringles left over from a visit by *mami*'s nieces and nephews. I found cookies and chips mixed in with the more traditional snacks of spicy *bhakervadi* and crunchy *chakri*. I went to the fridge and opened the door, looked up and down the shelves for the bottle full of *khala-khatta*, but it was nowhere to be found. The only liquid in the fridge besides the many bottles of cooling water was a 2-liter bottle of Coca-Cola, stuck between a container of homemade yogurt and a pile of limes. I looked for *khala-khatta* at the table every day after that, but never found it at my place. *Mami* didn't mention it even once during my stay, and I didn't even know how to begin asking her where it had gone.

### Inventing My Family

On my grandmother's head there are maybe 50 strands of white hair, total. Patchy spots of pinkish skin mar the brown scalp showing through the thin covering of hair, and the tiny braid at the back of her head that she plaits so carefully every morning gets both thinner and shorter every time I visit. The skin on her face is lined with wrinkles, and the defined shape of her jaw line has slowly been erased as she has ceased to wear dentures.

*Ma* does not walk...she shuffles. When she needs to go from one part of the house to another, she pushes her club-like feet into black rubber sandals, leans on a sturdy wooden stick, and pushes one foot in front of the other, slowly traversing the space between her starting point and her destination. More often than not, these trips are from the living room to the bathroom, or to the veranda, or to the gallery, or to the kitchen. *Ma* has not been upstairs in the house where she lives (*Anupam*) in the twenty-two years that I've been alive, does not leave the house unless it is unavoidable.

When I was younger, *Ma* would sit in the living room most of the time, taking part in conversations when guests came to visit, reading the newspaper, playing cards with me. She stays by herself most of the time now, sitting on her bed in the darkened gallery, or out on the swing, for hours at a time. I asked my mother what she thought *Ma* was thinking about during those lonely hours, and she told me that *Ma* recites *slokas* (Hindu prayers that are the equivalent of the Catholic "Hail Mary" and "Our Father") continuously throughout the day. "She knows so many that she can go an entire day without repeating, *Neema*," my mom told me.

I watch my grandmother with a strangely detached sense of both amusement and pity, searching for a way to connect with her, but always coming up empty. Sometimes

we will make eye contact and she will give me this smile—this toothless, gummy, benevolent smile, and it hurts so much to see it because I feel so detached from her. She is my mother's mother—I have some of her blood, her genes, her character within me, and yet I don't even know her well enough to tell you what of mine is hers.

Even though she is nearly blind in one eye, Ma still reads the newspaper every day. She sits in the sunniest corner of the house when she does this, her glasses perched on her face at a haphazard angle. I wondered whether she might have broken her glasses accidentally, or whether she might be in need of a new prescription, but when I told my mom that I thought Ma needed to have her glasses fixed, she just laughed at me.

“Don't worry,” she said. “If they're crooked it is because Ma wants them that way.”

How many 22-year-olds know so little about their grandparents that they still need to have their behavior explained?

When I was little and spending vacations at Anupam, Ma, my cousin Anand, my mother, my Uma *mami* and I would play cards every afternoon for a few hours, and Ma would *always* cheat. She'd take extra turns, pretending that she had forgotten, lie about her cards, sneak peeks at other people's cards... She would also get up to go to the bathroom something like every 15 minutes, and then, even if we were in the middle of a hand, we would have to wait...five minutes, 10 minutes, sometimes even 15 minutes before she would return. But as I got older, and as Ma got older, even that ceased. As her health deteriorated, and she withdrew more and more into her own world, even the limited shared experience that I had with her was eventually taken away.

We have only had two real conversations that I can remember: In the first, I was nineteen and she was talking to me about the fact that I should get married. Because she didn't have her teeth in, I didn't understand what she was saying for the first few minutes, so I kept nodding my head and saying, "Ha," which means yes. And when I did finally catch on, she was saying, "Yash is a good boy. You would be happy if you married him." At that point, I stammered out a protest that I was much too young to be thinking about marriage, and ran off to get my mom so that she could reaffirm that I was much, much too young to be thinking about marriage.

In the second, I was 20, and Ma made me sit down beside her for a few minutes right before I was to leave Baroda. She put her hand on my arm and said, "Marry whomever you want to. You've been brought up in the U.S., and these Indian boys are not going to be right for you. Just make sure that you are happy with whomever you marry, and I will be happy for you." I laughed, told her I wasn't planning on getting married for a long time, touched her feet and received her blessing, and then left the house.

Ma has been old, forgetful, and distant for as long as I can remember. Her strongest attachment has been to the grandchildren who lived with her—to Girish mama and Uma mami's children, Anand and Mona. Even when she came to visit us in the U.S. eight years ago, Ma spent her whole visit wondering about Anand and Mona, missing them, wishing she was with them. My sister and I would complain to my mom that Ma didn't care about us, and my mom could do little more than try to explain, over and over again, that the relationship between Ma, Anand, and Mona was one of people who have lived together—*saathe rayhela*. Those two words were supposed to explain exactly why

Ma was so distant towards us, and yet so attached to her grandchildren in India. And in a way, they did. After all, it is pretty difficult to develop a relationship with someone when you only see them for a few weeks once every two years, isn't it?

\* \* \* \*

I envy people whose families live close to them. I am jealous of the advantages that proximity allows them. I get angry when I hear about family members who live close to one another but still only see each other on holidays. I transfer my bitterness at lacking so much of my family onto people who do have families, but don't appreciate them.

As immigrants, and children of immigrants, we leave our families behind, and then spend the rest of our lives trying to fill in the gaps that leaving them behind has caused. You don't have a grandfather? Spend enough time with a neighbor down the street and you'll eventually see that he has filled in that gap. Missing a brother? Talk to your cousin for hours on end, listen to him be frustrated about living in small-town Wisconsin, and accept the brotherly advice that he likes to give, and you'll eventually consider him not a cousin, but a brother.

Growing up, I wanted my extended family close by more than anything. Only two of my uncles and two of my cousins even live in the same *country* as I do, and I'm lucky if I see them twice a year. The rest of my family lives in India, relegated to only being visited once every few years, when time and money permit. So I grew up envying the classmates and friends who went to their relatives' homes on weekends, vacations, and holidays. I wished for a huge family like my friend Kathleen's, where there were six siblings, and always people to fight with, play with, and confide in. I felt guilty when my friend Mel cried about her grandfather's death. When my paternal grandfather had died, I

hadn't cared. Stubborn and proud, and still angry at my father for leaving India and his responsibilities as the oldest child to seek better opportunities in America, my grandfather had never once looked in my direction, never once expressed any concern or care or affection for me. When we went to visit him, he made a point of paying extra attention to my cousins, of hugging them, and letting them drum on his bald head or sit on their shoulders, but I don't even remember hearing him ever say my name. The only emotion I could ever conjure for him was one of bitterness, and bitterness rarely makes me cry.

The lack of real family presence in my life caused me to resort to alternate means of assembling a family. I looked at the empty spots in my life—the missing grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins—and filled those spots with the people who lived around me. Mr. and Mrs. Starcher became one set of grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Bupp, the others. I went to their houses to play as a child, invited them to my most important celebrations as I grew older, and grieved as though I'd truly lost my grandfather last year when Mr. Starcher passed away. The Carneys and Withrows became my uncles and aunts, their children were considered my cousins. I used them as an outlet for all of the unexpressed emotions that I could not direct at my family.

I have continued to do this as I've grown older. There are some blood relatives who I love dearly, and I don't withhold that emotion from them. But even after leaving Pamela Circle, and leaving the Starchers, Withrows, and Carneys, I have continued to seek out people who will fill in my gaps.

\* \* \* \*

The Grandfather:

Mr. Starcher, my neighbor, my father's best friend, magician, mechanic, landscaper, and Mr. Fix-it for all of Pamela Circle, was a part of my life from very early on. We lived at 5303 Pamela Circle, he lived at 5318 Pamela Circle. He worked in the metal shop at Union Carbide, and my dad was the plant physician. He had every tool known to man, and my dad had every medicine available on the market, so over time, they worked out a trade-off. Mr. Starcher helped us whenever we had a problem that required technical knowledge, and dad helped Mr. Starcher whenever he or Mrs. Starcher had a problem that required medical knowledge. Together, the two formed a perfect example of the Pamela Circle bartering system at work. No one kept track of favors done, rides given, food eaten, tools borrowed, lawns mowed, or driveways shoveled...we all knew it worked out evenly in the end.

My first memory of Mr. Starcher dates back to when I was 18 months old. Looking out the living room window of our house, I saw Mr. Starcher standing in our front yard talking to my dad, and beside him, his old bulldog terrier Duke. Mr. Starcher saw me looking at him, waved his hand and called out, "Hi, Neema!" Thrilled to see him, I ran out the front door and across the front porch towards him. In my hurry, I neglected to walk down the stairs, and instead chose the Warner Bros. cartoon approach—I ran straight out off the porch, into the air, and then fell down headfirst onto the sidewalk. No serious injuries resulted, but thus began Mr. Starcher's impact on my life.

As I got older, Mr. Starcher became my "go-to-guy" for virtually every occasion. He showed me magic tricks when I needed to be cheered up. He procured the spare key to my house every time I managed to lose mine. He raised and lowered my basketball hoop each time I whimsically decided that I wanted to be at 12 feet instead of 10, or 10

feet instead of 12. On summer evenings, and even into early fall, I would go down to Mr. Casto's house and sit on the porch with Mr. Starcher and Mr. Casto, listening to them talk about politics, gardening, dogs, car maintenance, and whatever else. After I left for college, he was always one of the first people who I visited when I came home. I would walk down the street and find him out in his front yard, watering the flowers, or wiping down his truck, or playing with Butch, and we would stand in his driveway and just talk.

As a child I longed for grandparents who were present in my life, instead of these people who I saw in pictures and met for a short while once every three or four years. Mr. Starcher was present. He paid attention to me. He made me happy, kept me safe, and never treated me like I was a child. I loved him for it...and I think somewhere along the way I just replaced my grandfathers with Mr. Starcher. I never told him that, and I'm not sure I ever did it consciously, but I always knew that were I to have a *real* grandfather, I would want him to be like, look like, talk like Mr. Starcher.

The sister:

To juxtapose a picture of my and one my freshman year college roommate, Q, you would never predict that we would be close friends. She is very much "New York"—a cell-phone using, Steve Madden shoe-wearing, Brooklyn accent carrying daughter of Chinese immigrants. I, on the other hand, am very much "West Virginia"—my favorite outfit is a flannel shirt, baggy blue jeans, and Timberland boots, I have been unsuccessful in losing much of my 'hick' accent, and I am utterly suspicious of cell phones, pagers, and any other electronic device that makes you reachable at all times.

But we have lived together. Twice, actually. Once by fate, when the room-assignment gods threw us together in a cramped triple room with a third roommate who

smelled, and then again by choice during our junior year. And as my mother would say, the relationship between two people who have lived together is inexplicable in both its strength, and its complexity. *Saathe rayhela*. Those words echo in my head every time I think about Q. When you live with someone in close quarters, there is very little that you don't learn about one another. So I have seen Q at her drunkest, when she would come home, sit in bed and laugh for ten minutes without ceasing, and then suddenly fall asleep, and she has seen me at my most depressed, when I couldn't even force myself out of bed in the morning to go to class without being ordered to by the janitor who cleaned on our floor. We have lain in our respective beds crying as we listened to Sarah McLachlan's "I Will Remember You," on repeat, and danced around our room giddy with excitement to "Summertime" by the Sundays. We tickle each other, yell at each other, tease and nag and hug, share the most insignificant details of our lives as much as we do the big events. Now that we don't live together, we don't see each other often as we used to. Because our friend circles are so different, we rarely hang out together on weekends. We talk on the phone maybe once a week, try to get together for lunch or dinner at least twice a month. But if either of us needs the other, whether for support or for silliness, there is no hesitation to seek the other out.

So what if the externals don't match up? Look further into our relationship, and it's not difficult to understand why we have already determined that I am to be her children's *khai-ma* (Cantonese for godmother), and that once we make our millions, we are going to open a children's bookstore together in New York City. I did not go to college looking for another sister, but when I found Q, I realized that there was indeed a space for another sister in my heart, and that she was the one who filled it.

\* \* \* \*

My aunt Manju *foi* and I had a conversation about family the last time I went to visit her in Ahmedabad. She lives in an apartment complex where the buildings face one another, and are only separated by a dirt road only fifteen feet wide. We were sitting on her porch swing watching her neighbor hang the day's wet laundry to dry, and she asked about my friends at college, and I ended up telling her about Q, and how strange it was to have a friend who felt like a family member.

She shrugged, then gestured towards the three apartments closest to hers (the one beside hers, and the two across the road), saying, "It's not so strange. Look at me. These are my sisters. This is my family. My blood family may be made of Avashias, but the people who really know me, and who I really know, are the people who I live with, and see on a day-to-day basis. They are the ones who hear all of my frustrations, who are the first to offer help when I need it, who know the smallest details of my life. They are the ones who I look to for support first." *Saathe rayhela*. We are back to that phrase again.

\* \* \* \*

Who is your family, really? Is it the people who were there when you started out, or the people who are with you along the way? Is it the aunts, uncles, and cousins who live 10,000 miles away, or is it the friends and neighbors that you've grown up beside, and in the process, grown to love?

Maybe I have romanticized the notion of family because I've grown up without very much family around me. Maybe I have higher expectations of what a blood relationship should mean than are reasonable. I suppose I feel as though I should love all of the people who are a part of my family, and that moreover, I should feel connected to

them—not just love them because they’re related to me, but love them because I *like* them. I know that the family members who I have adopted to fill in my gaps are people who aren’t blood relatives, but feel to me like what a blood relative should be.

\* \* \* \*

What is it that makes family relationships, however we define them, unique? Why is it that family bonds can remain so strong, even though the other people that we love come in and out of our lives with such transience? Perhaps it is that the people who we consider to be family are those who see us as dynamic characters moving through life, and changing in subtle but significant ways as we move. Our families continue along our journey with us, so they are forced to note the changes that we undergo, even when they don’t necessarily want to. Many of our relationships occur in moments—we have intense relationships with people that exist during a certain period of time, whether it is elementary school, high school, or college, and then we leave that period of time, and oftentimes also leave behind the friendships that were created then. Why? Because relationships created in an enclosed space and time often cause the people involved to see one another as static characters. And once we leave that space, we remain frozen in one another’s minds, to some extent. The relationships that transcend space and time are the ones where the people involved can continue to grow together, even as they change. Those are the relationships that begin to feel like family.

## Fetching Water

In the middle of July this year, a water main broke on Centre Avenue, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, just about two miles from my house. My housemates and I knew that something was wrong early on in the morning when the water pressure dropped to almost non-existent levels, and brownish water started spurting out of the pipes, but panic only set in after I got a phone call from a friend telling us that the main had broken, and that we'd be without water for the greater part of the day.

The questions started as soon as I put down the phone.

How will we shower?

What will we drink?

How will we cook?

How do I flush the toilet?

My initial reaction was the same as everyone else's. What stupid people! How could they manage to *break* a water main? How did they expect us to go about our daily business without water? Within a few minutes, however, I had managed to put the entire situation into perspective. What is being without water for 12 hours when there are members of my family several thousand miles away who go without water for days on end?

\* \* \* \* \*

The first sounds I woke up to after my first night sleeping in Gondal last December were those of the mullah crying out his morning prayers. *Allah oh Akbar. Allah oh Akbar.* From 5 a.m. to 6 a.m., a continuous stream of words, praises, prayers

flowed out of his mouth, interrupting the sleep of everyone who lived within a mile of the mosque...Muslim or not.

The *second* sound I heard that morning was that of running water—water splashing on the street, water coursing through the ditches that bordered the house, water being poured from one container into another. This was the sound that pulled me up off the bed on the floor and led me to the door. I put on a sweatshirt, rolled up my pajama bottoms, slipped on my *champal* (sandals), and stepped out into the *falia*, the courtyard at the center of four inter-connected houses, where Tarla kaki was scooping water out of a bucket with a pitcher, and then pouring it into a large, black plastic barrel. A closer look revealed that the barrel was covered with a sieve-like cloth, that there was a tube running from the barrel into Piyush kaka's house, and that the water was being pushed through the tube via a small motor.

The water situation in Gondal has never been ideal. Even when my sister and I were small, when we visited Gondal, we were prepared to pump water into buckets from a manual pump, bathe out of a bucket, brush our teeth in the courtyard, gulp our water down and not complain about the metallic, mineral-rich taste, etc. But at that age, not having running water was romantic, and pumping water from a well for two or three days was fun. Only now do I realize that my old idea of romance and fun equates worry and exhaustion for the people of Gondal.

In the years since Aai moved out of *Sitaprasad*, her previous house, the water conditions have only deteriorated. Two years ago, the well in the *falia* where she now lives was going dry, so some water was brought from a well across the street, and some came from square ditches on the side of the road that fill with water from a nearby dam

on occasion. This “ditch water” was murky, but once Aai swirled the small, seemingly magic *fatakdi* (alum crystal) around in the water, all of the sediment settled to the bottom and the water became clean and potable.

This past December when I visited Gondal, almost all of the wells in Nagar Sheri, were dry. Even ditch water was only available once every three or four days. “No rain. No rain,” everyone mutters in explanation. It’s not just a drizzle that Gujarat needs. Gujarat needs monsoons. The trouble is, most of Gujarat’s rain is provided by the South-West monsoon, which comes up from the southern tip of India, and if it peters out before reaching Saurashtra (which resides on the very northernmost, westernmost tip of Gujarat), then the people of that region are left without water for yet another year. If there is no hard rain, no water seeps into the ground far enough to fill the wells. If no water gets into the ground, the water supply that people have been drawing from for years on end—until there is virtually nothing left in the pipes—can’t be replenished. Consequently, Gujarat is the third-most drought-prone state in India, with over 12 billion hectares of drought-prone land contained in its borders. According the Central Water Commission, the criteria for identifying a drought-prone area are as follows:

1. The annual rainfall is less than 75% of the norm in 20% of the years examined by the commission.
2. Less than 30% of the cultivated land is irrigated.

And so it was that I found myself waking up at 5:30 a.m. on one of the “water available” days in drought-prone Gondal to fill two large water storage tanks, one huge barrel, and every bucket, steel vessel, clay pot, and jug available in the *falia* with water. The water we filled that day had to last until the next time water flowed into the ditches, whether that was two days later, four days later, or a week later. If it ran out, the only

way to get more was to buy it. You read right—to buy it, and not just the little plastic bottles of spring water that you see in the U. S. at the grocery store. When the water conditions reach that point of severity, 50-100 gallon tanks of water have to be purchased and trucked in each week to provide people with adequate water for daily functioning.

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When I first went out into the *falia* that morning and asked what I could do to help, Aai said, “Nothing. Just sit and watch. You’ll never see anything like this in America.”

But sitting and watching only lasted long enough for me to figure out the process, after which I joined in as well. I couldn’t sit around and watch my 65-year-old gray-haired aunt, dressed in an old cotton sari wrinkled from the night’s sleep, carry buckets back and forth in her thin arms without wanting to get up to help.

The process of fetching water was fairly simple to grasp: Each person took two buckets to the nearest ditch (about one block away), filled them, and then brought them back to the *falia* for Tarla *kaki* to pour into the barrel, or into one of the many containers scattered all over the *falia* and *osri*. Each person, that is, except for Piyush *kaka*’s daughter Jalpa. Jalpa had it a little tougher than the rest of us. Her job? To push a bike, balancing a bucket on each handle and a huge steel *beda* on the seat that probably held four gallons of water all on its own, to the ditch, fill all of her containers with water, and then push the bike back, attempting not to lose water along the way.

Back and forth we went...squatting down and fill our buckets, then carrying them back, buckets banging against our legs, water splashing onto our clothes, and adding to the trail of puddles which had formed on the street from other people’s spilled water. We

emptied our buckets and then head back for more. It was dark out still, the pre-dawn air was almost chilly, and aside from us and a few other early risers hoping to avoid the mad rush of water seekers that occurs after 7:00 a.m., the only other creatures on the road were the hogs and cows—and even they were sleeping. Each time I passed the hogs, I had to stop and laugh. Hogs have no concept whatsoever of personal space. They sleep piled one on top of the other, on top of the other...sometimes with 10 or 12 hogs in one pile. The picture that met my eyes, however, was even more bizarre. At the top of one pile of hogs slept Sangeeta, the milkman's dog. One mangy cur sprawled out over a squirming, snorting, brownish-pink heap of hogs—it just seemed *odd*. The theories about Sangeeta abound. Some people theorized that she believed she was a hog—a reverse “Babe”, if you will. Walking with me to the ditch that morning, Aai expounded on another theory, laughingly suggesting that Sangeeta might be part of an “inter-caste marriage”.

As the amount of water in the ditch got lower and lower, Jalpa had to roll up her pants, take off her *champal*, and walk down a narrow set of stairs, descending into the ditch to get at the water that was closer to the bottom. Sometimes more aggressive women would push my buckets aside, forcing Jalpa to fill theirs before they would move away and let her fill mine. Sometimes I would spill half a bucket of water in my attempts to avoid a family of hogs or a wandering cow while walking back to the *falia*. Sometimes Saroj kaki (Piyush kaka's wife) would try to take my buckets away and make me go back to the *falia*, insisting that I shouldn't be doing such work. Each time, the excuse was different—I was too young, or I was a guest, or I wasn't strong enough. Through it all, I continued to go back and forth, intent on fetching water.

Finally, all of the tanks, barrels, pots, pans, and buckets were full. But this water was murky in a way that the fatakdi and the cloth filter couldn't fix. It came from the Bhadur dam, some 70 miles away from Gondal, and had to have been the last dregs of what was left in the reservoir—usable, but definitely not drinkable. Hence, we used it for washing clothes, bathing, mopping, and cleaning, but got our cooking and drinking water elsewhere.

We also got a few *bedas* (vessels) of water from the *mochi*'s (shoemaker) well each day. Every morning at 8:00 a.m., Jalpa walked over to the *mochi*'s house with four *bedas*, waited in line with other women from the neighborhood, and filled up water for her family and Aai. I peeked into a *beda* once after she brought it back, and saw clean, clear water sloshing back and forth in the vessel. I then watched in amazement as she poured it into the tank where we had only an hour ago poured the last of the water brought in from the ditches.

Stunned, I was unable to refrain from asking why good water had just been, essentially, thrown away.

Jalpa looked at me, surprised that I even had to ask, before answering. “Because it is water from the *mochi*'s well.”

“So...?”

“So it can't be used for drinking or cooking.” She said it as though the answer was obvious, and yet I couldn't figure out why this “good” water was being mixed in with the “bad” water.

I was left to my own devices to figure that one out, though. As best I can tell, the *mochi* comes from a lower caste—either that of the *sudras*, or that of the *harijans*

(formerly known as untouchables). And even though caste no longer “exists”, and even though most people would claim to be very open-minded and very accepting of others, regardless of caste, I had just witnessed the perfect example of the Indian caste system at work. My American “class-blind” sensibilities made it difficult to watch this happen every day for the next two weeks. To them, using the *mochi*’s water was unthinkable. To me, the unthinkable came in a different form—that even in situations as desperate as this one, the supposedly illegal caste system still was creating barriers. I couldn’t fathom the idea that precious water was not being utilized properly because the owner of the well that it came from was of a lower caste. I couldn’t fathom that people could even *think* about caste when the *mochi* was filling their *bedas* with his clean water. This is especially true when the alternative—the water that came out of the ditches—was grayish-brown in color and speckled with mysterious flecks of black and white matter, carried the unpleasant odor of stagnant water, and probably was full of enough germs and amoebas to make for a very exciting microscope slide.

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“How can you possibly bathe in that water?” a cousin asked, face wrinkled in disgust, after I returned from Gondal.

Odd as it may seem, if you close your eyes, clean water and dirty water feel just the same. But in some sense, she was right. Given the choice, I prefer my hot, clean shower to the bucket of particle-filled water that Aai heated up for my bath every morning. You get used to the half-rank smell...and to the half-slimy feel...of the water after a few days of gritting your teeth, but I won’t lie. It was never any enjoyable experience. But I didn’t go to Gondal for the sole purpose of taking baths, or drinking

water, or doing anything water-related, for that matter. I went to Gondal to visit my Aai. Dealing with Gondal's water situation is just something that I accept as being part of the package. If she lived in Ethiopia, and all she had to eat was rice, I'd go there and eat rice. Love is a pretty powerful acclimatizing force.

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In any case, because of the whole issue with the *mochi's* water, drinking and cooking water were a little more difficult to come by. Every night between 7:00 and 8:00 p.m., Dr. Dharia's family, who owned the only working well in the neighborhood, attached a hose to a motor, and people were allowed to fill two bedas each. No more. And the motor was turned off at exactly 8 p.m. When I first reached Gondal, people were beginning to line up their bedas at 4:00 p.m. Over the course of two weeks, 4:00 p.m. became 2:00 p.m., which then became 12:00 p.m. Regardless, by 6:45 p.m., the line of silver, gold, and copper colored bedas stretched alongside the length of the house and around the corner, and a line of women had formed that was as long as that of the bedas. They dress in bright saris, cotton nightgowns, simple punjabis, range in age from something like five to 65 years, and all guard their bedas with a look on their faces that is some mixture of frustration, exhaustion, and "don't mess with me" attitude.

In aptly named "water wars" all over the state of Gujarat, people are being beaten, shot, killed over water. It hasn't happened in Gondal yet, but Piyush kaka said it would eventually...and after watching the proceedings for a few days, I was pretty sure it would, too.

Right now it's only women and Piyush kaka (the only man who is willing to do "women's work") who stand in line. Right now it is only Nagars—a Brahmin subcaste

which considers itself far above petty fights over water. But wait. Just wait. As more men trickle into the line, as people of other castes find their way into the line, things will get dangerous.

Already there is bickering—

“Fill my bedas up first. Fill them up first! I’ve been standing here for 20 minutes, and she just put her bedas down, and you’re filling up hers first?”

“She’s filled up six bedas today when she should only be filling up two. We’ll have to tell Neelaben to be more strict about who gets water and how much they get.”

The shrill voices get louder and louder, more and more angry with each hollow *CLUNG* of empty bedas being moved forward, and each *THRUM* as water hits the empty bottom of a beda and then fills it up. Only when all of the bedas have been filled, and all of the women have taken their water back to their families do the voices on the street finally fade away.

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This has been going on since September, and will continue to go on until at least July, when the monsoons start. It can only get worse from hereon in. But lack of rain isn’t the only reason why the people in Gondal don’t have water... In fact, there are some who claim that the state of Gujarat receives enough rainfall in a year to provide everyone with an adequate water supply. These people argue that Gujarat’s main problem resides in the lack of facilities for water storage available—there aren’t nearly enough dams and reservoirs to hold the amount of water necessary, so most of it runs right into the ocean instead of being put to good use. Enter the Narmada Dam project, also known as the Sardar Sarovar project. The Narmada Dam project (partially funded by the infamous

World Bank) entails creating a number of dams along the Narmada river which will provide the state of Gujarat with enough water storage facilities to ensure that Gujaratis have a constant water supply...no more water cuts, no more worries over drought, no more water wars. The perfect plan, but for one factor: In building these dams, areas of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh (neighboring states) will be flooded, displacing many of those states' poor and/or indigenous peoples. Imagine the quandary—if the dams aren't built, the people in Gujarat are going to continue living like Aai and Piyush kaka in Gondal, spending their mornings fetching water, spending their days using water that isn't fit for consumption, or any other kind of use, for that matter. And yet, if the dams *are* built, entire communities are going to be destroyed, in states that aren't going to see any benefit of the project.

Opponents of the Narmada Dam project claim that building dams isn't the solution to this problem. In fact, they claim that adequate water storage *already* exists in Gujarat, but that those supplies of water are being piped into the big, industrial cities and completely bypassing the poor towns and villages that scatter the countryside along the way. Others simply believe that the Indian government isn't taking the steps necessary to solve this water crisis. India's National Water Policy of 20 years ago *promised* that “adequate drinking water facilities should be provided to the entire population both in urban and in rural areas by 1991. Irrigation and multipurpose projects should invariably include a drinking water component, wherever there is no alternative source of drinking water. Drinking water needs of human beings and animals should be the first charge on any available water.” It is almost 2001 now, and Gondal is most certainly *not* the only town in Gujarat, or in the rest of India, where drinking water is still not readily available.

The Indian Water Ministry claims that a lack of financial resources led to the scaling back of their drinking water supply and sanitation programs. Where they had initially hoped to achieve “population coverage of 100 percent water supply facilities in urban and rural areas, 80 per cent sanitation facilities in urban areas and 25 percent sanitation facilities in rural areas respectively by March 1991,” this lack of money led to a 10% cutback in their goals. Now, instead of 100% of Indians supposedly receiving water supply facilities, only 90% would. But those numbers don’t put it in the right perspective. The population of India is now close to 1 billion people. 10 percent of that is 100 million. The *entire* population of the United States is only 300 million. The number of people being cut out of this program in India would be equivalent to me saying that the entire Midwest was no longer going to receive clean water! And yet, in India’s most recent Five Year Plan, was there any mention of increasing the amount of funding being given to water improvement programs? No. Meanwhile, the Indian military continues to spend hundreds of millions of rupees on testing nuclear weapons.

But the reasons for why there isn’t water in Gondal, whether because of weather, politics, or a terrible string of luck, really don’t seem to matter. Even though they worry that there isn’t enough water, and fill their conversations with weather reports, talk of water wars, and grumbling about people who hog more of the water than others, people tend to display an unsettling sort of complacency and resignation to their situation. It doesn’t faze them that during the week prior to municipal elections, water was available every day, mainly because politicians were using the water as a way to manipulate voters. Piyush kaka joked about the irony of the situation, making fun of the politicians who thought that this “generosity” would win them votes. “Just wait until the day after the

election,” he said, “and we’ll be back to the same schedule as we were before—going to the ditches to get our water every four days.” *Khado ni puja*, he called it—going to the ditch was the equivalent of going to a temple to pray to the gods. The same amount of effort, the same amount of importance. But all in all, it seemed as though people took the situation at face value—it was what it was, and they needed water, and they were going to get it in whatever way they could. I guess there aren’t too many people who will complain, though, when in comparison to Amreli, a town in another part of Saurashtra, where water comes only every 7<sup>th</sup> day, and even then has to be brought in on *trains*, Gondal is pretty well off.

With so many theories floating around as to the reason for the current water situation, and so many passionate people arguing on every side of this issue, it’s hard to know who’s telling the truth, who to believe, who to support. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: You have to wonder...here’s a country with enough money to build and test nuclear bombs, but *not* enough money to make sure that every Indian has an adequate supply of clean, potable, easily accessible water, regardless of the way in which that is to be achieved.

When I was in Indiana last March, I heard a news brief on NPR in which people in Illinois were fearful that, unless massive amounts of rain fell during the spring, their wells might possibly go dry. To them it was outrageous, unbelievable, and a matter of great concern. To people in Gondal, it’s commonplace. In the U.S., we’re so accustomed to having uninterrupted access to water that we’re virtually paralyzed without it. You turn on a tap, water comes out. It’s as simple as that. Some of us even have Brita jugs to filter out any stray microbes that weren’t eliminated in the extensive sanitation, chlorination,

and flouridization processes that water companies use to make our water supply potable. Water, to us, is a colorless, odorless liquid, vital to life, but rarely in short supply. This whole concept of shortages and buckets and ditches and manual pumps is so far back in America's past, that no one remembers it. Our rivers and lakes have always been full enough to keep us in good supply of water—even in California, the limitations during a drought are on things like watering the lawn and washing the car, *not* on how much drinking water you receive per day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Earlier this summer, my housemates and I went to Wal-Mart to pick up some supplies for our house. When we met up in front of the checkout area, Marcus had picked up a big plastic swimming pool for us to use on hot summer days. Initially, I was fine with this. But then I glanced idly over at the box and read on the label that it took 285 gallons of water to fill up the pool.

285 gallons. My first thought: How many times would it take Aai, going back and forth from the ditches with buckets, to fill up 285 gallons of water? My second thought: How many different ways could that 285 gallons of pristine water be used if it were sent to Gondal, instead of sitting in a pool in my back yard, only to be dumped out and refilled again every time we used it.

I turned to my housemates and disrupted their excited conversations about the pool, only to say, "I won't buy this."

"Well...why not?" Marcus asked.

"Because it's too much water, Marcus. Because we'd fill this pool up with 285 gallons of water, and we'd use it once, and then we'd throw that water out. Because all I

can think about is how many trips to the ditch and back it would take for my great-aunt to fill up 285 gallons.”

“OK... I’ll put this back now,” Marcus said.

That was the last time anyone mentioned getting a swimming pool for our house.

\* \* \* \* \*

I’m sure my housemates would say that I’m a little bit obsessed with water...not just because of the swimming pool, but also because of the way that the first question I ask my mom almost every time we talk is, “Has it rained in Gondal yet?” Place me in a different context, though—in the context of India, where *everyone* is obsessed with water, and my behavior doesn’t seem all that strange. Water came up in virtually every conversation I heard between relatives, showed up every morning in the newspaper, and was featured almost every evening in the news.

As of July, the water situation in Gondal and other parts of Saurashtra has been alleviated. The monsoons came this year, raining enough to hopefully renew the wells for another year. A new well was found in Piyush kaka’s falia, eliminating the need for them to get water from the ditches, and also allowing them to share this water with their neighbors. With water being such a precious commodity, you wouldn’t think people would be as willing to share it as they are. But wells dry out, and when they do, the people who own them have to stand in line for water at another well just like everyone else does. Until the Indian government decides to actually ameliorate the water situation through the building of reservoirs, water sanitation facilities, and pipelines to remote areas, well... There’s a saying in India that when a person is pretty much doomed, she

has a *talwar*, or sword, hanging over her head. One might say that all of Saurashtra has a *talwar* hanging over its head, and that a year of good rain only postpones the inevitable.

### **The Things We Keep, The Things We Leave Behind**

I do not have my mother's feet. The tops of her feet are lined with wrinkles and dark blue veins, the soles of her feet are dry, cracked, and tough. Her toes are misshapen; her nails are dark in color, and rough in texture. But my mother's feet tell a story. They tell her story. The tough soles speak of the hot ground that she walked on barefoot as a child in India, the hours that she spent playing shoeless in the neighborhood with her friends, the way that wearing *champal* (sandals) for too long can cause your heels to crack and bleed. The scars are reminders of the thorns that worked their way into her feet as she weeded her rose garden in West Virginia, of the time when she got glass in her foot and had to sit for an hour waiting in pain as her squeamish younger daughter worked to take the glass out, but had to stop every five minutes to "take a break" because the blood and the sound of the needle on glass was too much for her. My mother's feet are one representation of her life story. What follows is another.

\* \* \* \*

When my mother left India in 1970, she left behind the subtleties of Indian life. She carried with her the obvious—the language, the clothing, the food, the religion, the knowledge of rituals, the things that anthropologists use to define a culture. But she left behind the deeper elements of what it means to be Indian, because some of those could not be carried with her. She kept her language, kept her morals, and kept her saris. She left behind the sense of belonging that comes with living in a joint family, the sense of purpose that comes with participating in rituals within a large community, the sense of pride that comes with identifying yourself as a Nagar. Cooking a full Gujarati dinner for her husband in Queens was the same in principle as cooking a full Gujarati dinner in

Baroda would have been—it is all cooking Indian food. But cooking alone is very different from cooking with a mother and sister-in-law looking over your shoulder, commenting, criticizing, and helping, just like cooking on an electric stove was so vastly different from the gas stove that she used for so many years in India.

\* \* \* \*

“The hardest thing for me to go through in the first years here was not being able to be part of a joint family. It was just me and my husband—I used to live in such a selfish world. I missed the family support, I missed the daily music programs I used to listen to, I missed the magazines, books, and newspapers. I used to miss open doors; curious yet caring neighbors. Then slowly I realized that if I could go out and make myself available to the community, they would get to know me and I would get a chance to meet new people and they became apart of my global family. The more I shared my culture with other people, the more I got a chance to learn about their culture and I realized it’s not the culture that makes human beings, but rather that how one acts defines culture, and in that sense, human beings are alike no matter what culture they come from.”

--Rita Avashia

\* \* \* \*

This is my mother. She rolls with the punches. She admits that coming here was difficult, and admits that in the beginning she was really lonely, but then she finds something positive to focus on and moves on. In this way, we are very similar. My mother will tell me that her older brother used to hit her with a cricket bat and drop cockroaches in her mouth when she was asleep, that her mom used to hit her a lot, that

her father was never around, but she says those things almost objectively—as though they didn't hurt her. It's the same way that I talk about the fact that my parents left me alone for weeks at a time when I was a child, that my one of my best friends at college lost her memory and doesn't speak to me anymore, that my cousin lay dying in a hospital in Wisconsin. We speak very matter-of-factly, and attempt to present a face to the world that says that these things don't affect us, but internally, we dwell on these hurts for a very long time.

My mother has downplayed the impact of many changes in her lifestyle over the years. When she first came to New York, she still wore saris every day, cooked two full Gujarati meals every day, spoke predominantly in Gujarati, wrote letters to her family every week, had the majority of her interactions with the other Indians who lived in her apartment building. After ten years of living in West Virginia, she had taken to wearing saris only on special occasions, cooked Gujarati food for dinner only on weeknights, was writing to her family (and getting letters back) on a monthly basis, instead of weekly, and had made friends with people from many different ethnic backgrounds, instead of just Indians.

My parents' decisions to assimilate were made in order to make life go more smoothly themselves, and for their children. My mom stopped wearing saris on a daily basis because she was made to feel uncomfortable when she did so. My father took up gardening, and saying things like "ain't", because somehow he thought that doing so would take attention away from the fact that he looked so different from all of his co-workers at the blue collar chemical plant where he was the physician. My sister and I were given lunches to take to school that contained peanut butter and jelly sandwiches

instead of the more traditional *rotli* and *shak* because our parents didn't want us to be made fun of. In fact, they even tried to convince us to eat meat, thinking that this would make it easier to find food that we could eat when we weren't at home. However, in this area, at least, they were unsuccessful.

Slowly, English became the medium of communication within our household—my mother was the only one who persisted in speaking to us in Gujarati. My father talked to us in English, and when we talked with our mom, she spoke in Gujarati, and we responded in English.

Thinking back on the process of assimilation that my parents went through, I often find myself feeling very guilty about the role that I played. My mother stopped speaking to us in Gujarati in public because I yelled at her for doing so. She let go of one of the most cherished aspects of any culture—language—largely as a result of the way that my sister and I reacted when she used it. I know that this situation is not unique, and that it has happened to many, many immigrants, but that doesn't make me feel any less guilty for the part that I had in impacting what my mother kept, and what she left behind.

\* \* \* \*

My own feet tell a very different story from that of my mother's. In shape, I have my father's feet, and also the Avashia trademark second toes that are bigger than my 'big' toes. But my feet differ from my mother's in many other ways. The skin on my feet is smooth, the soles are so soft that I am sometimes ashamed of them—ashamed that I did not play on the street enough, or work hard enough to make them tougher. I suppose I associate tough feet with a strong character, and fear that having tender feet implies the same about my nature. The skin on the tops of my feet is marred only by a crisscross

pattern of darker and lighter skin tones, caused by the bad habit of sitting in front of the space heater for too long.

My feet tell a story of growing up in southern West Virginia, where I rejected much of the culture that was offered to me, rejected the “big things” that are a part of Indian culture. And now I am left trying to re-discover those subtleties that my mother left behind. I have no big things left, and so I go in search of the small, the essence behind the big rituals, as opposed to the rituals themselves.

I am a walking contradiction. Every day, I walk across my campus and think about what a hypocrite I am. I call myself Indian, yet nothing about my external appearance, save skin color, would tell you that. I don’t wear Indian clothes except on extremely important occasions. I don’t speak Gujarati unless I’m on the phone with my family. I don’t eat Indian food unless my mom sends it to me, I suddenly am inspired to cook, or I manage to drag a friend down to the all-you-can-eat buffet at India Garden on Sundays. By all visible qualifications, I fail the “Are you a true Indian?” test.

But look deeper, and you will find that I’m a *karmayogini*—that I believe that the way to achieve spirituality is through action, as opposed to through ritualistic devotion (*bhaktiyogini*) or religious study (*dharmayogini*). You’ll find that I value the concept of *ahimsa*—non-violence. You’ll discover a person who is fiercely devoted to her family, even though she has trouble expressing that devotion sometimes. I have begun to discover the subtleties. I have begun to define myself as an Indian.

\* \* \* \*

The big question is whether it’s a matter of dilution or purification. Either it’s that with each generation, we lose more and more of the aspects important to Indian culture—

water things down, mix and match, try to make them fit into our lives, but don't change our lives to fit them. On the other hand, it could be that with each generation, we are boiling things down, sifting out the inconsequential, the superficial, the negative, and getting down to the essentials of Indian culture—to the things that are most important, most integral to being Indian.

If being Indian is about language, food, community, clothing, then perhaps we have left too much behind. And yet, if we manage to leave behind things like caste distinction and religious hatred, is that really a bad thing?

\* \* \* \*

What will my children keep? What will my children leave behind? I wonder about this now, even though I'm many years away from marriage, and even more years away from having children. What do I have left to pass on to my children? How do you pass on the essence of culture?

There is a theory among people who study immigrants that the first generation to come over holds on tightly to their culture, the second generation tries to assimilate, and the third generation returns to a lifestyle similar to that of the first generation. Will my children be more Indian than I am? I hope so.

I want my children to do the things that I didn't do. I want them to learn to read and write Gujarati, even if it means that they have to go to India every summer, or spend their weekends in a Gujarati language school. I want them to participate in rituals, to be a part of the Indian community, instead of being an outlier. I want them to have both the subtleties and the blatant aspects of culture—a combination, instead of just having to make do with one or the other.

I can't go back to being the way my mother was when she first came to this country. I don't have the saris, don't know the language well enough, don't fit into the community in the right way. But I can give my children the things that I have kept, and help them find ways to regain the things that I have left behind, and hope that in the midst of this, they will find their own ways of being Indian. I can cook Gujarati food for them, tell them stories from Hindu mythology, fly kites with them on *Utraan*, throw colored water with them at *Holi*, teach them about Gandhi, take them to India and let them get to know their family, and hope that these things will be enough. That the things that they keep will outnumber the things that they leave behind.

\* \* \* \*

My mother and I have very different feet, but our hands are the same. I hadn't noticed it until an aunt pointed it out to me. And then I looked at my hands, and looked over at my mother's hands, and realized that they really were the same small, long-fingered, thin-wristed body parts. The only difference then was that my mother's hands were covered with burn scars, and mine were not. As a child, I remember my mother getting a new burn on her hands or arms at least once a week. She has burned the tips of her fingers so many times that she longer has feeling in them. The burns come as a result of work that she has done for her husband and children—they come from the ironing, cooking, and cleaning that she has done faithfully for so long in order to make her house and her family comfortable. They seem to come with the territory of being an Indian wife and mother.

I got my first burn scar a few weeks ago when I was cooking and reached into the oven without gloves on. In the moment after the burn began to hurt, I thought of my

mother, who once tried to see how hot the stove was by sticking her hand on the element.

We may not have the same feet, my mother and I. We may not have had the same experiences growing up. But I have a feeling that our hands are going to grow more and more alike as I get older.

*"...Last night I did not go out after dinner. To try to understand these things, I reread the last lesson that Plato put in his teacher's mouth. I read that the soul can flee when the flesh dies.*

*And now I am not sure whether the truth lies in the ominous later interpretation or in the innocent farewell.*

*To say good-bye is to deny separation; it is to say Today we play at going our own ways, but we'll see each other tomorrow. Men invented farewells because they somehow knew themselves to be immortal, even while seeing themselves as contingent and ephemeral..."*

*--Jorge Luis Borges, "Delia Elena San Marco"*

### **Keeper of Souls**

I am an old soul trapped in a young body. This is what my relatives tell me. They say that my soul is inextricably linked to those of my great-grandmother, my great-uncles, my grandfather. That when those people died, their souls found their way to me, meshed with mine, changed my soul to be more like theirs.

It begins early. It begins the month before I was born, to be exact. March 11, 1979. My great-uncle, Kishor Avashia, has a heart attack and dies at age 45. I am born 30 days later, on April 10. Damini *kaki*, Kishor *kaka's* wife, is convinced that I have been born with his soul, and continually finds proof of this as I grow up. She says that it is in the way I love to sit on the *patiyo* (platform swing) for hours, in the way I will be silent for extended amounts of time, lost in my own thoughts, in the way I get quietly angry instead of shouting like my other Avashia relatives. She says that it is in our similar stubbornness, in our shared love of books, in our intensity. She doesn't assert this frequently, or vehemently, only says it when she sees Kishor *kaka* in me and can't keep from remarking on the similarity.

I do not question her belief. I have been brought up on stories of monkey deities that can cross oceans in a leap, blue gods who kill serpents by dancing on their heads,

mere mortals defeating huge man-eating ogres, and ten-headed demons. Compared to these things, the idea of the transmigration of a soul from one family member to another seems very easy to accept.

Damini *kaki* is not the only one who feels that my soul is comprised of the souls of my ancestors, and Kishor *kaka*'s soul is not the only one that I seem to hold within me. There are others. My great-aunt Aai sees her husband Kirti *kaka* reflected in my inexplicable connection to the town of Gondal, in my love of *khadi* (homespun cotton), in the way I will mix my *rotli*, *daal*, and *bhath* (rice) together, as if to say, "Ek kam patyu" ("Let's just get it all done and over with at once"), just the way he used to. My mother sees *Motiben*, my great-grandmother, in my no-nonsense attitude, my passion for my family, my way of almost demanding that people be straightforward with me, my efforts to hold our family together. My aunts see my grandfather in the way I pace with my hands behind my back, the way I lose myself in books and writing, the way I don't mince words, the way I choose, and don't choose, to communicate.

According to Damini *kaki*, Aai, my mom, my aunts, I hold these souls inside me. I suppose they *are* me, in many ways...or that I am them, depending on how you choose to look at it.

I have struggled to balance this mysticism against American rationalism, and have managed to reconcile them by appreciating the stories as a way of achieving spirituality, and by recognizing that while rationalism is a perfectly valid way of viewing the world, some of us need to be able to appreciate mystery.

This is not a case of misunderstanding genetics. It isn't about traits that are passed down from one generation to another via blood, shared experience, or wisdom that is imparted. This, some would say, is reincarnation.

Within my soul you will find the souls of Kirti kaka, Kishor kaka, Motiben, Dadaji. They are here, and with my every action, I reincarnate them. When I look at myself in this light, I am no longer frightened about losing what is essential in my culture, or about being disconnected from my family, or about not being the 'right' kind of Indian, for I know that my culture, my family, my heritage can be found within the souls I hold, and that I need only look inward to find what I am seeking.

## **Acknowledgements**

The essays within this thesis would not have been brought to fruition without the help of many, many people. Special thanks to Jane McCafferty, my thesis advisor, for the weekly meetings that were both a form of psychotherapy and writer's workshop, the patience and care with which she read every draft of every story, and the support and guidance that she gave me throughout the research, writing, and revision stages of this project. In addition, I am indebted to my best friend, and best reader, Julie Bogart, and to Jim Davidson, Jane Bernstein, and Sarah Cypher, who were also careful readers and critics of some of my work. Lastly, I am grateful to my family for supporting my compulsion to write, for answering my thousands of questions about family, culture, religion, and experience as I wrote these essays, and for finally succeeding in teaching me to think with my heart.