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The Vine of Desire

A Novel

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The Vine of Desire

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—*SF Weekly*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The Vine of Desire

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the bestselling author of the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Mistress of Spices*; the story collections *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* and *Arranged Marriage*, which received several awards, including the American Book Award; and four collections of prize-winning poetry. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ms.*, *Zoetrope*, *Good Housekeeping*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *The Best American Short Stories 1999*, and *The New York Times*. Born in India, Divakaruni lives near Houston.

For further information about Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, visit her Web site at www.chitradivakaruni.com.

The Unknown Errors of Our Lives

Sister of My Heart

Arranged Marriage

Leaving Yuba City

The Mistress of Spices

Black Candle

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The
Vine of
Desire



A Novel



ANCHOR BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

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once more for you:

my three men

Anand

Abhay

Murthy

Again the day, again the night

Dawn and dusk, winter, spring.

In the play of time, life ebbs away—

Only desire remains

Again birth, again death

Again the dark journey through the womb

In this world of changes, nothing holds fast

Except the coiled vine of desire

Bhaja Govindam, Sri Shankaracharya (A.D. 788–820)



And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself

beloved on the earth.

“Late Fragment,” Raymond Carver

Book One
Subterranean
Truths



Eros is strength abandoning itself to something elusive, something that stings.

—*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Robert Calasso

Prologue



In the beginning was pain.

Or perhaps it was the end that was suffused with pain, its distinctive indigo tint. Color of old bruises, color of broken pottery, of crumpled maps in evening light. But, no, not like them, ultimately. For although men have tried for thousands of years to find the right simile—and women, too—ultimately pain is only like itself.

This, too: it is hard to tell which is the beginning, and which the end. Particularly when it is one's own story, when its segments loop around, repeating themselves randomly, like a piece of computer code gone wrong.

The woman did not think any of this, lying strapped inside the ambulance as it jolted in a keening way to the hospital. She was focusing on the boy, the way he clung to the wet-silk walls of her womb. They rippled like the muscles of an angry snake, trying to shake him off. He curled himself inward, tight as a peach pit, hoping for invisibility. She hoped for him, too. But there is no fooling the flesh that formed you. The nurses were rushing them down white neon corridors to the double doors marked Emergency. They stretched her across the operating table. Hieroglyphs of blood on the paper-white sheets; she didn't know how to read them. The overhead lights were eyes, gigantic, insectile. Her womb heaved. The placental waters that had rocked the boy all these months had become a whirlpool. They spun him down toward the narrow passage that he knew to be death—yes, even the unborn know what death is. For a moment she felt his terror, became it. The crimson and black pulsing in her eyes. The taste in his mouth, sour, amniotic. Later she would think of it as the taste of failure. Hers. She heard someone scream. A metallic, spine-raking sound. Why, it was her. Inside her, she felt him scream back. Her echo, her shadow, her hope for eternity. Her golden child, in whom she had thought to bury all the errors of her past.

An immense force was tearing him from her now, past the lumped and bloody flesh in the doctor's hand, outward, upward. She followed, shaking off the ungainly body that he had shared, briefly, with her. They shot into space with such speed that it seemed she would explode. He was crying. *Keep me with you.* She was crying, too. *Don't you think I want to? More than anything else in the world? Don't you know I'd give up everything in my life, right now, if I could, for that? But* except the night clouds skimming across the moon's tattooed face, no one heard them. Except the small brown owls, birds of witness and reclamation. The clouds did not falter. Huddled into tree knots, the owls did not lift their heads to watch the bright specks hurtling upward, dual shooting stars, reversed. They had heard such wailing many times, seen many such lights disappear. Except for those to whom it is happening, death is hardly a unique occurrence.

Shimmering and gaseous, he spun into space, and she in his wake, so light that she wondered if perhaps she no longer existed. He was looking over her shoulder, a gaze of such sorrow that she, too, turned to look. She saw the scalloped walls of the old Victorians on the hills of the city, and knew its name. *San Francisco*, she whispered, the syllables at once

familiar and amazing in her mouth, and the lights in the tall triangular tower downtown flickered acknowledgment. Mist drifted, fragile as promises, over the cypresses that lined the ocean cliffs. Southward the bay gleamed like a woman's curved arm. Studded with rubytail taillights, the bridges were her bracelets. Up at Point Reyes, pewter waves etched the empty shore. A cormorant rose with a black cry, a lumbering flap of its wings. Out to the west, in the moonlight, leaping off the backs of porpoises, flashed an enigmatic code.

It filled her with rage. That he should be given a glimpse of such beauty only to have it snatched away!

But now her eyes were caught by the cities of the south bay. San Jose, Sunnyvale, Milpitas, their smoky, stubborn sprawl. In the low apartment houses by the freeways, pinpricks of yellow lights were going out one by one as people readied themselves for bed. One of those windows had belonged to her. To her and a man—but who was he? She couldn't quite recall. Only that he'd been significant. She felt a pull as she sensed this, downward, into the tangle of her unfinished life she'd left with him. Her imperfect life, her caught-in-the-body life, with its ferocious, zigzag pulse.

And with that thought she finds herself falling. Fast, faster. She tries to stop herself, to reach into the vast hushed swirling of light that hangs above her head. Where has her self gone? *Where?* No use. She plummets through space, solid as a spent bullet, rapid as ragged galaxies blur past her. Black holes. She sinks into emptiness, that hollow metal cube in the center of her being. Clouds now, the calm, unwrinkled peaks of mountains, the lacy glimmers of snow where ocean licks at earth. The brown glow of the city, its brave smells—gasoline and tire smoke and sweat—settling around her like arms. She wants to push them away. All of them.

I will take no pleasure in any of this. Never again.

The lights of the hospital are stark and unseeing like the whites of rolled-up eyes. They singe her as she falls through the different stories, the different wards. Surgery, Radiology, Crisis Intervention. How many ways there are to die! She is breathless by the time she reaches the room where a woman lies splayed on an operating table. A frenzy of activity around her, men and women in masks swarming like white bees. Staccato orders being barked out. A limp brown hand, a thin wrist with the pale plastic tag that offers up to strangers the woman's secrets. *Majumdar, Anju, 635-81-9900*. Why, it's her, again! There are IV tubes. Needles. Dark and pale liquids pumped by blinking machines. The stench of spilled membranes, hopes tattered as newspapers abandoned in alleyways. The machines whir so loudly, she cannot hear what the white-coats are saying. When she looks closer, the pores on the skin of the woman's face are enormous, black as burned-out craters. They widen like intractable mouths. She winces upward, but there is only a bumpy, spackled ceiling above her head, impenetrable. She feels herself turn thin and liquid, feels herself being sucked in.

She wakes in another room, inside the claustrophobic clutch of her flesh. A faint smell hangs around her, like rotten eggs. Pain slams into her once more, flattening her against the bed. Dazed and breathless, she is already forgetting where she has been, what she has been capable of. But the sense of emptiness. She can't forget that. When she can move again, she pulls the hospital pillow over her head with a choking sound.

There's a ringing in her ears, someone chanting a toneless word. It takes her a moment to understand it. *Prem Prem Prem*. The name that was to have been the boy's.

The man—yes, there's a man at her bedside, suddenly, with imploring fingers, *him*—tugs the pillow, but the woman is surprisingly strong. The tendons inside her elbows stand out like wires as she thrashes from side to side. The man is forced to call for a nurse. Two women come. One holds her down while the other shoots a chemical into her vein. They tell the man to go home. Get some rest. There's nothing you can do for her right now, one adds. Her voice is detached but not unkind. Before she leaves, she turns down the light so the room is dim and green, the color of seawater.

Alone in the sea-green light, the woman feels her muscles begin to loosen in spite of herself. She is coming apart, the way a braid does when one has been swimming a long time. Soon her eyes will flicker with furious dreams under her closed lids. Her unruly eyebrow will angle into questions to which there are only uncertain answers. *Why? Why? Where?* With the last of her strength, she pushes her body to the edge of the mattress, cups it into a shape against which a child might rest. There, that's good. With the last of her strength, she holds on to something she heard a long time ago, in another country, when she was not much more than a child herself: the dead are not irrevocably dead as long as one refuses to let them go.



The day Sudha stepped off the plane from India into Anju's arms, leaving a ruined marriage behind, their lives changed forever. And not just Sudha's and Anju's. Sunil's life changed, too. And baby Dayita's. Like invisible sound waves that ripple out and out, the changes reached a long way to India, to Ashok waiting on his balcony for the wind to turn. To their mothers. To the neat squareness of their flat, upsetting the balance of their household, causing the mango pickles to turn too sour and the guava tree in the backyard to grow extra-large pink guava. The changes multiplied the way vines might in a magical tale, their tendrils reaching for people whose names Sudha and Anju did not even know yet.

Were the changes good or bad?

Can we use such simple, childish terms in asking this question? Neither of the cousins were simple women, though there was much that was childlike about them when they were together alone, or with Dayita. When Sunil was away.

Sunil. Anju's husband. Sudha's cousin-in-law. A young executive with a bright future in a prestigious computer company. But no. None of this tells us who he really is. Because he wasn't a simple man either.

It is not clear when Anju first sensed this. At their double wedding, when she stood beside Sunil, their bridal garments knotted, and watched him watch Sudha's forehead being marked with the red powder of wifedom? Months back, when he told Anju that it was a bad idea to bring her cousin to America? The night before Sudha's arrival, by which time it was too late? When did she first sense that though she loved him, she didn't always trust him?

But lately Anju doesn't trust the runaway roller coaster of her own emotions either. The wild mood swings after the miscarriage that would leave her weeping or laughing hysterically. The long bouts of depression, later, that immobilized her in bed, incapable of even answering the phone.

Guilt ate at her, a slow, pernicious rust. No matter how often Sunil assured her that the miscarriage could have been caused by any number of things, she didn't believe him. When the blackness came upon her, her mind turned heavy and stubborn, like one of those cement mixing trucks you pass sometimes on the road. A sentence would catch in it and begin to rotate, *If only I'd listened to the doctor and not overworked myself*, until it broke down into a phrase, *If only I hadn't, If only I hadn't*. It ended, always, in the same anguished chant. *Prem Prem Prem*.

She would rock her body from side to side, her neglected will-o'-the-wisp hair spreading in static on the sofa, fingers digging rigidly into her arms until they left bruises shaped like tiny petals.

"I don't know how to help you when you're like this," Sunil would say.

Afterward, when the depression lifted, she would sometimes say, "You don't need to do anything."

Inside her head she added, Except love me.

Inside her head he replied, I do love you.

Inside her head she said, But not enough.

☪

The night before Sudha arrives, Anju cannot sit still. Some of it is excitement, but mostly she is nervous. Why? Isn't this her dear, dear cousin, sister of her heart? They've protected, advised, cajoled, bullied, and stood up for each other all their lives. Each has been madly jealous of the other at some point. Each has enraged the other, or made her weep. Each has been willing to give up her happiness for her cousin. In short: they've loved each other the way they've never loved anyone else. Why then does Sudha's coming fill Anju with this unexpected dread?

If there are answers, she will not allow herself to think of them.

At dinner she is unable to eat. "But what if Sudha doesn't like it here?" she keeps saying.

It is the year of dangerous movements. Two weeks back, a major earthquake hit Los Angeles, causing seven billion dollars' damage and leaving more than ten thousand people homeless. Will Anju and Sunil read this as an omen? Or will they discount it in the belief that every year has its own disasters?

Anju, who is a terrible cook, has spent the day making lasagna because, she says, Sudha has never tasted any in India. The sink and their few dish towels are all dyed the same stunning orange, a color which looks fearfully permanent.

Sunil doesn't comment on this. He focuses instead on the gluey orange mass on his plate, which he jabs half-heartedly from time to time. He is a meticulous man, a man who detests chaos. Who takes satisfaction each evening in shining his shoes with a clean rag and a tin of Esquire Boot Polish before putting them away on the closet shelf. But he makes an effort today and says nothing—both about the lasagna and about Anju's question, which is not so much a question as a lament for something she fears has happened already. He is thinking of what she said a few weeks back, unthinkingly. *The happiest memories of my life are of growing up with Sudha.* He is thinking of what he didn't say to her.

What about me, then? What about you and me?

☪

"Let me tell you," Anju was fond of saying in the last months of her pregnancy, "who I used to be before the accident of America happened to me."

She would be lounging in bed with a cup of hot milk and honey and a novel, one of those rare days when she didn't have to go to class. She would knock on the curve of her stomach. "You, sir," she would say. "I hope you're paying attention."

She loved speaking to Prem. In an illogical way, it was more satisfying than speaking to Sunil, even though Sunil was a careful listener and made the right comments at the right times. But Prem—the way he grew still at the sound of her voice, the way he butted her ribs with his head if she paused too long in the middle of a story ...

She told Prem about the old house, that white elephant of a mansion that had been in the

Chatterjee family for generations: its crumbling marble façade, its peeling walls, the dark knots of its corridors, the brick terrace where she and Sudha went secretly at night to watch for falling stars to wish on.

“It’s gone now. Demolished to make space for a high-rise apartment building. And I’m the one who kept at your grandmothers—do you know you have three grandmothers: my mom, Sudha’s mom, and Pishi, who’s my dad’s sister?—to sell it. I used to hate that house, how ancient it was, how it stood for everything ancient. I hated being cooped up in it and not allowed to go anywhere except school. But now I miss it! I think of my room with its cool high ceilings, and my bedsheets, which always smelled clean, like neem leaves—and which I never had to wash myself!—and the hundred-year-old peepal trees that grew outside my windows. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t been in such a hurry to come to America. Sudha used to sneak into my room at night sometimes. We’d sit on the wide windowsill, telling each other stories. I’d tell her about characters in books I’d read that I liked, such as Jo in *Little Women*—and she’d tell me the folk tales she’d heard from Pishi about women who would turn into demonesses at night and the monkey who was actually a bewitched prince. She was great at doing voices! You’ll see it for yourself when she gets here.”

Some days, after the doctor had scolded her for not getting enough exercise, Anju went to the park. She would make a desultory round of the play area, watching the children whispering to Prem that he’d be better than them all—more handsome, more active, and of course more intelligent. She would tell him how prettily the maples were changing color and then, choosing one to sit under, she would go back to her childhood.

“My favorite place of all was the family bookstore. For the longest time all I wanted was to be allowed to run it when I grew up. Every weekend I’d beg Mother to take me there. I loved its smell of new paper and printing ink, its rows and rows of books all the way to the ceiling, its little ladders that the clerks would scramble up when a customer wanted something that was stored on a high shelf. There was a special corner with an armchair, just for me, so I could sit and read all I wanted. It was funny, Gouri Ma—that’s my mom—was strict about a lot of things, but she never stopped me from reading anything I wanted.

“So in my teenage years, I read things like *Anna Karenina* and *Sons and Lovers* and *The Great Gatsby* and *A Room of One’s Own*. I’m glad I did, but maybe Aunt Nalini—that’s Sudha’s mom—was right. They were no good for me. They filled me with a dissatisfaction with my own life, and a longing for distant places. I believed that, if I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn’t so easy, is it?”

What about the other places of her growing-up years? The ones she never spoke of, the ones you’d have to eavesdrop among her dreams to find? Such as: the banquet hall where she saw her new husband stoop to pick up a woman’s handkerchief that was not hers? But the rest of that scene is brittle and brown and unreadable, like the edge of a paper held to a flame, another of those memories Anju keeps hostage in the darkest cells of her mind.

“The bookstore was where I met your father. He had come dressed in an old-fashioned kurta and gold-rimmed glasses—a kind of disguise so that I wouldn’t guess that he was the computer whiz from America with whom Gouri Ma was trying to arrange my marriage.

“He’d come to check me out! Can you imagine! People just didn’t do such things

Calcutta, at least not in traditional families like mine. When he confessed who he was, I was terribly impressed. But what made me fall in crazy love with him was that he bought a whole set of the novels of Virginia Woolf. She used to be my favorite author, you know. But he did it only to win me over.” She sighed. “Later I couldn’t get him to read even one of them.”

“Still—he’s going to be a wonderful father to you. I’m sure of that. He’ll love you more than anyone else does—except of course me and your Sudha-aunty!”

This evening, her dinner uneaten, Anju pushes back her chair and walks over to the old, discolored mirror that hangs in the small bathroom in the passage. She runs an uncertain hand through her hair and touches the dark circles under her eyes. She presses down on her jagged cheekbones—she’s lost a lot of weight since the miscarriage—as though she could push them in and hide them. “God, I look like such a witch!” she groans.

Last week she opened her India suitcase and took out a framed picture of herself and Sudha at their school graduation dinner. She examined it for a long moment before setting it on her dresser with a dissatisfied thunk. Even at that heedlessly happy time in her life, she hadn’t been pretty in the traditional way. She didn’t have her cousin’s rush of curly hair, or those wide, sooty eyes which always looked a little mysterious, a little tragic. But anyone could see (anyone except herself, that is) that she had spirit. In the photo, she stares out, a challenge in her eyes. She crooks her lean, stubborn mouth in a half-smile. There’s an irrepressible intelligence to her nose. Maybe that was what made Sunil choose her from among all the girls he could have had as an eminently eligible, foreign-returned, computer-whiz groom in Calcutta.

But somewhere along the way Anju’s eyes grew dull and muddy. Her mouth learned a little twitch. And the expression on Sunil’s face when he watches her nowadays—he does this often, sometimes, after she has fallen asleep—is complicated. At times it is pity. At times regret.

All through the fall of her pregnancy, while the leaves of the maple turned a crisp, brittle red until they were suddenly gone, Anju told Prem stories of Sudha. Beautiful Sudha, the dreamer, the best cook of them all, the magic-fingered girl who could embroider clothes fit for a queen. Luckless Sudha, who worked so hard at being the perfect wife to Ramesh even though she didn’t love him. Until the day she walked out of the marriage.

“It was because of her witch of a mother-in-law. For years she’d been harassing Sudha because she couldn’t get pregnant. You’d think she’d be delighted when she found out that Sudha was having a baby. But no. She had to have an ultrasound done, and when she discovered that her first grandchild was going to be a girl, she insisted that Sudha should have an abortion. So Sudha ran away—how else could she save her daughter—though she knew they’d make her life hell afterward.

“Oh, that old crocodile! How I wish I could have seen her when she woke up to find Sudha gone!”

For weeks afterward, Anju would describe that afternoon for Prem, over and over, in the

hushed tone one saves for legends.

The entire household has fallen into a stunned sleep, even the servants. The heavy front door, which is carved with fierce yakshas wielding swords, opens without a sound. Sudha slips out, carrying only a small handbag. She wears her cotton house sari and forces herself not to hurry so passersby will not be suspicious. The air inside her chest is viscous with fear. Her slippers slide on the gravelly road. Mango leaves hang dispiritedly in the heat, like small, tired hands. She walks carefully, she mustn't fall, she presses her hand against a belly that will start to show in a few weeks. At the crossroads she pulls the end of her sari over her head in a veil, a princess disguised as a servant maid, so no one on the street will recognize her.

"What about Ramesh?" Sunil asked when Anju told him Sudha had gone back to her mother.

"What about him?" Anju said, her voice dangerously tight.

"Didn't he try to bring her back?"

"Him! That spineless jellyfish! That mama's boy!" Anju's breath came in outraged puffs. "He did nothing—nothing he should have done, that is."

There was a doubtful look on Sunil's face. Was he wondering if there was more to Ramesh than Anju saw? If Ramesh wept for Sudha and the baby daughter he would never hold—carefully and quietly, in the shower, under cover of running water so no one would hear? At night, did his hand reach across the bed from old habit? And when he startled awake, was the taste in his mouth like iron? But Sunil knew better than to share such thoughts with Anju.

The following week, when he came back from work, she handed him an aerogram triumphant with outrage. "Look!" It was from Aunt Nalini, informing them that Sudha had been served with divorce papers. The papers had Ramesh's signature on them and accused Sudha of desertion.

What a dastardly trick! Aunt Nalini wrote. Now the poor girl won't get a single paisa from them. They've even refused to return the dowry I gave her at the wedding—a dowry for which I scrimped and saved and deprived myself of pleasure my entire life, as I'm sure you remember.

"Is it really as bad as she makes it out to be?" Sunil asked.

And Anju, who would usually sigh and roll her eyes after reading one of Aunt Nalini's missives ("Missiles," she sometimes called them), snapped, "Of course it is. What makes you think otherwise?"

"Well, didn't you yourself say that she was Drama Queen Number One?"

She ignored the comment. "If I could just get my hands on Ramesh! That jerk! You remember him at the wedding, his hair all glossed down with Brylcreem? He couldn't take his eyes off Sudha. I remember thinking, He's ugly, but at least he'll be good to her. And now just look!" She was pacing the room by now, panting a little.

"Please calm down," Sunil said, his reasonable voice giving away nothing of what he might be feeling. "It's not good for you to get so worked up at this time."

"Isn't that just like a man," Anju said, kicking furiously at the doorjamb. "To stand up for other men, no matter what they've done."

“When did I—”

“Never mind,” said Anju. She didn’t speak to him the rest of the evening. The next day she said, “I want to bring Sudha to America.”

The words crashed into him like waves. He thought they might pull him out to sea. “And where’s the money for that going to come from?” he said. Though money wasn’t what he was worried about. But what he was worried about couldn’t be spoken.

They had their first fight that day. Others followed in the weeks after. Thunderclouds of colliding words. Sobs. A stiff silence. A door kicked shut.

She started working secretly at the university library. She put her earnings in the bank and hid the savings book between layers of her saris. Each night her spine ached, the pain like an electric current moving up and down it, stopping wherever it wanted. “As soon as I have a thousand dollars, I’ll send Sudha a ticket,” she whispered to Prem as she made herself a bed on the lumpy couch. Her smile carved the dark like a thin, defiant moon. “Men! It’s best not to count on them for anything important.”

She rubbed her stomach gently, forcing herself to relax. “Present company excepted, of course,” she added.

She didn’t know that he, too, would fail her. In the worst way of all.



Anju abandons the mirror to pace the tiny apartment. In old yellow socks, her feet make a padding, caged-animal sound on the linoleum. She ends up in the kitchen, where she takes several eggs from the refrigerator. She breaks them into a bowl and begins rummaging around for a fork. She is not a good housekeeper. In spite of the efforts she has been making to tidy up for Sudha, the kitchen counters are a shamble of dishes that haven’t been put away and propped-open books and spices still in their torn plastic packets. Finally she gives up and takes a dirty fork out of the dishwasher, holds it for a perfunctory moment under the tap, and begins to beat the eggs.

“Anju! What on earth are you doing?” Irritation ripples along Sunil’s voice like a sleeve of fire.

“I thought I’d bake something for Sudha,” she answers uncertainly. “Maybe a devil’s food cake—it’ll be something new for her....”

Sunil moves with an athlete’s grace, stepping lightly on the balls of his feet. How fast he is. Already he has reached her. There’s something frightening in the way he holds his hands, stiff and suppressed, close to his body. But she isn’t afraid. There’s a feverish exhilaration in her eyes. *I dare you*. But he merely pushes past her to swing the refrigerator open.

“Look!” The cords in his neck are tight with his need to shout, but he speaks softly. “Haven’t you done enough?”

She looks. The refrigerator is stuffed with dishes: spaghetti and meatballs, potato salad, tuna casserole, banana bread, vanilla pudding, apple pie. All the recipes she looked up painstakingly in her *Good Housekeeping* cookbook. It is the most Indian of ways, what the women of her family had done to show love through the years of her childhood, that simple time which she longs for more and more as her adult plans seem to collapse around her.

There's too much food, far more than Sudha can ever eat. Food that will spoil over the next week and have to be stuffed down the garbage disposal covertly, while Sunil is at work.

For a moment husband and wife glare at each other across the cold white spillage of the refrigerator light, their faces too young, surely, to hold the tired rage stamped onto them. She grips the edge of the bowl as though she might fling it at him. Then, with a shaky laugh, she rubs her sticky knuckles across her eyes.

"I guess I did go a bit overboard," she says.

"It's only natural," he says, his voice quickly, carefully kind. "After all, it's the first time she's visiting us, and you want it to be special." There's relief in the sag of his shoulders. The last months have been hard on him, too, not knowing when she might burst into racking weeping, or retreat to bed to wrap herself in one of her relentless silences. He puts an arm around her. "Come sleep now." When she hesitates, he adds, "Don't you want to be bright and fresh tomorrow, when your cousin gets here?" And she, a faraway look on her face, allows him to take the milky-yellow mess of eggs from her and lead her to their bedroom.



Ashok. He's the one Anju never speaks of. Not to Sunil. Not even to Prem. The other man in Sudha's life, her forbidden childhood sweetheart. Is Anju secretly jealous of him? Is that why her thoughts stray to him more often than she likes? She imagines him as a teenager still, tall and gangly in a starched white shirt, his chest caving in a little. Meantly, she exaggerates his buckteeth as he waits shyly on a Calcutta pavement for Sudha to pass by. How foolishly crazy Sudha had been about him—in private, of course, such things weren't allowed in their family. Why, she'd almost eloped with him! Docile Sudha! But fortunately (that is the right word, isn't it?), at the last moment, she came to her senses.

Anju remembers with painful clarity the night on which Sudha told her that she had decided not to run away with Ashok. Anju had been sitting alone on the windowsill in her bedroom thinking of Sunil, whom she had just met. The sky was very dark—perhaps there had been a power cut in the city—and the stars seemed closer than usual. She made an arc with her hands and held it up to her eyes. She believed her life was going to be like what she saw: a safe and contained brilliance, a beauty that extended outward forever. When Sudha came up silently and put her hand on the back of her neck, she had jumped, startled. She had been that far away. Perhaps that was why she didn't question her cousin more closely, though it had surprised her when Sudha said she was afraid to take such a big risk. What if things didn't work out with Ashok? Sudha had said, looking away, her words falling from her all at once, like a bucket of water thrown out of a window. What would I do then? And Anju, intoxicated with her own thoughts, had said, quickly, You're right. It's better this way. Now, thinking of all that happened afterward, she wonders if she had said the wrong thing. She remembers Sudha's fingertips on the base of her neck, trailing feverish entreaties she'd been too much in love to hear.

Last month, Ashok asked Sudha once again to marry him. In spite of the divorce, in spite of the baby. It was something unheard-of in families like theirs.

"I'm delighted for Sudha," Anju said to Sunil when she got the news. Her face was pale and puffy, as though she'd been crying. "Truly, I am. I told her she should accept him. I told her

that I'm better now, that I can manage here without her.”

Sunil—wise man—said nothing.

Then Sudha wrote back to say that she had turned Ashok down. That she was coming to America.

“I feel terribly guilty,” Anju told Sunil.

“You look pretty cheerful.”

She gave him a wounded look. “One can be guilty and happy at the same time. I can't help thinking she gave him up because she feels she has to take care of me.”

“I don't know why she needs to feel that way. Aren't I here for you?”

“Silly!” she said, smiling. She gave him a hug—something she didn't do too often since the miscarriage. “Of course you are! But Sudha—well, things between her and me are different.”

At night, before she falls asleep, Anju makes a wish: that Ashok will be intelligent enough to wait for Sudha until she returns to India. At the same time she wishes that Sudha will stay on with her in America forever. Does she realize that her wishes, clashing as they attempt to rise from our sublunary plane to the ears of the gods, cancel each other out?

The beautiful Sudha. But what have we really learned about her? Only the externals, the snow that cloaks a mountain in an illusion of sleep while an entire world of actions continues below. Small creatures moving through invisible burrows, larger ones crouched, waiting, in caves. The leap, the sinking in of teeth, the outcomes that sometimes astonish but more often merely sadden. And at the center, the earth itself, rock and mud and pressed seep of glaciers. Who knows if it's readying itself for another shift, one that will end, this time, in avalanche. Or in a scarlet eruption that turns the land to ash?

The subterranean truths of Sudha's life are the ones we crave.



“Would you like me to comb your hair?” Sunil asks.

They are in their nightclothes, Anju sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the photograph. She seems not to have heard him, but she does not protest when he begins moving the comb through her hair with long, gentle strokes, nor when, after a little while, he lays it down to kiss her shoulders, then her throat, and finally, tentatively—for since the miscarriage nine months ago she hasn't been able to stand him touching her in that way—her lips.

But today she kisses him back—or at least she holds still while he kisses her, while his fingers unbutton her nightdress. Then she asks him to turn off the light.

“But why? It's only the night lamp—you've always liked it.”

She shudders in the lamp's deep blue shadow, pulling the bedsheet up to her neck. “I hate how my body looks. Everything slumps. The bones push out in all the wrong places—”

“Oh, Anju! You're exaggerating,” he protests, but he gets out of bed to turn off the light. She watches his lean back crisscrossed with shadows, the simple arrogance of his muscles bending. Her eyes find the photograph once again.

He kisses her eyes shut with determination. She opens her lips obediently under his. She

wants them to succeed as much as he does, to be back where they were before—but what was that? She's losing her thoughts in a rainbow fog, the start of a headache at the base of her skull. Still, when he says, "Remember that afternoon at the Rabindra Sarobar when I kissed you for the first time, how shy you were," she says yes. Although in truth she can't remember it. She tries hard to pull up a detail from the crumbly quicksand of her memory. Was it sunny? Was the sky filled with clouds like puffed rice? Were children floating paper boats on the lake? Was there a Lalmohan bird, crying from a branch above? He's waiting for her to add something. (What?) She says, "The palash flowers had dropped their crimson petals all across the water," then realizes guiltily that it couldn't have been so, she had been married in winter, he would have left for America long before the first buds opened.

So she presses her face against his, and holds herself beneath him the way he likes her to. But his weight on her is cold and enormous, a giant statue, made of concrete, except that it moves. His breath is like a furnace opening onto her face with its bitter coal smell. The ache at the base of her skull has grown into a voice, calling, even though calling is of no use. *Prem Prem Prem*, until she pushes him off and feels the failure, thick as slush, settle in his bones. She opens her mouth to tell him she's sorry, she knows how hard he tried. She tried hard too. But she just can't. And remembering how it had been once was no good, it would never be that way again, even if they were able to stitch up this chasm of a wound that runs jagged between the length of their bodies now. But she must have said something quite different because he pulls back and looks at her, asking in an angry voice, "What do you mean, you've got to make it up to Sudha for what she's sacrificing to come here to you?"

Anju doesn't answer. He knows what she means, she knows that. But always, where Sudha is concerned, he likes to act obtuse, likes to force her to explain, to drag out the emotion inside of her, unclothed, so they look sentimental, or superstitious, or plain foolish. Well, this time she isn't going to do it. She lies there mutinous, lips pressed together, thinking about Ashok. All those years he waited for Sudha when she was married to someone else. Was he out of love, or the fear of loving again? *I told him no*, Sudha had written. Anju twists a strand of hair around her finger distractedly until it snaps, wondering about that *no*. Could she have said it, in Sudha's place? If she weighed a man's devotion against a cousin's need, the security he offered against uncertainty, which is all she has to give Sudha, which way would the scale tip? She needs to think it through, and she cannot do it here, with Sunil's hand snaking from behind to cup her breast, his arm pulling her back against a chest that smells of Claiborne Sport, a tangy scent she once loved that now makes her feel slightly sick. But of course she can never tell him that. Does such consideration rise from caring, or merely habit? This, too, she needs to think about.

She can feel him now, grown hard against her. A nuclear heat radiates from his bones. *Escape, escape*. She gathers up her nightdress in alarmed handfuls. From the sudden stillness of his body, his hands falling away, she knows she has offended him. He won't try to stop her. He's too proud for that. She slips silently from the bed—what good are words now, even if she could come up with the right ones?—and gropes her way next door, where she lies down in the bed she has prepared for the cousin who's like a breathlessness inside her.

And her husband, does she love him? She turns the question, hard as a nugget of iron, around and around in her head. Ultimately she cannot imagine a life without him—and what

else is that but love? She keeps her eyes averted from the crib Sunil has set up for Dayita. And there's another problem, the child whom she doesn't want in her house. She's afraid she might start loving her, and that would be a betrayal of the dead. How is she to manage it, to pretend that the child does not exist? How is she to keep Dayita at arm's length without hurting Sudha? When she finally stumbles into sleep, her dreams are a chiaroscuro of uneasy strategies.

It is the year of accounting, the year of pardons, the year of uneasy alliances. Somewhere in America a man is sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of a black activist thirty years ago. Somewhere in India a bandit queen is released after eleven years in jail. Somewhere in Russia a cosmonaut is preparing to go into space, for the first time in the history of nations, on an American rocketship.

But here is Sunil, alone in his bedroom. Is he asleep, too? No. In the blue night-light he has turned back on, his eyes are chips of stone. They glitter with a strange resignation. Under the sheet, his hand moves as he stares at Anju's graduation photograph. A rapid blur of movement until his body stiffens and arcs, then slumps down into itself, and he whispers the name into the pillow his wife has left empty. A moth-wing of a name.

Sudha.

It was her picture he'd been looking at, all this time.

But he whispered the name rather than calling it out in passion. Can we salvage a broken bit of hope from that? Out of consideration for Anju, he had whispered the name of the woman he'd been trying all this time to keep away. The woman he'd been mad for ever since he saw her in a garden tented with jasmine—too late, for by then he was already betrothed to her cousin.

But was it consideration, or was it fear? No, not fear. Not that. For there is one thing about Sunil that even Anju knows: he is not afraid of anyone—except perhaps himself.



Sudha

We run barefoot on sand, impatient for water. Our hurry makes a small wind. It is the color of our saris, which stream behind us like the eager start of a fire. We are dressed in the same color—one of the many childhood habits Anju and I have fallen back into. Today we wear rebel red. It is a color that belongs to married women, one I have forfeited. I wear it with defiance.

I reach the ocean first. My first ocean. My sari is bunched up at my knees like a heedless schoolgirl's. The spray is soap and ice, and smells of sea horses. I imagine them somewhere deep and green, swaying. My toes curl in exhilaration. Anju has fallen behind, out of breath. Her panting sounds like the edge of a blade. She clutches at her side surreptitiously. She doesn't want me to see. Anju, who used to be so strong. My banyan tree. Since the miscarriage, she startles at moths, echoes, the greetings of strangers. I force myself to smile. No tears, no tears now. Once we had known everything about each other. My smile is a blank expanse of white, dead as the shells underfoot. But loss has made Anju incapable of detecting such things. She holds out her hand. I take it. Together we step into the sea.

He is carefully not watching us. He busies himself with amusing Dayita. Making funny faces. She gurgles at him and tries to grab his nose. He laughs and lets her, though her nails will leave sharp red moon-marks on his skin. When he looks at her, there is an odd gratitude on his face.



Each evening, coming home from the office, he goes straight to her crib to pick her up. Even before he takes off his shoes. He refuses to put her down the rest of the evening. Anju says Sunil, you're spoiling her. He acts as if he doesn't hear. Even while he eats dinner or works at the computer, he balances Dayita easily, on one knee. His arm loops lightly around her. She grabs his spoon just as he brings it to his mouth. She swats at the keyboard, deleting crucial data. He smiles. Anju tells me he's never been a patient man. He has surprised us all. Himself, too, I think. He only releases my daughter when I have to nurse her. He puts her down on the floor, so his hands won't touch mine as I pick her up.

Later he lies on the bed with Dayita on his chest. He tells her all kinds of things. All the things he doesn't talk to Anju about. The project he's working on. The accident he saw on the freeway. The places he plans to take her soon. He ruffles his fingers through her curls and gives her an edited version of the daily news. He tells her the plots of movies he saw growing up in India. He changes her diapers without consulting us, though we're waiting to help.

I am jealous for Anju, who watches from the doorway.

And Dayita, who drives us crazy all day, crawling into corners, getting stuck under the bed, throwing tantrums every two minutes: she basks on his chest, listening to what happened

the stock market. Her iridescent eyes shine, the color of chameleons.



“When he’s with Dayita,” Anju tells me later, “all the bitterness falls away from him. He used to be like that when I was pregnant. Boyish and excited and tender. He’d make a world of plans—all the things he wanted to do for—” she swallows—“Prem. He would put his mouth against my stomach to whisper them. If only I’d been more careful—”

“There’s no point in torturing yourself over what’s happened already,” I say, as I have many times.

Useless words, falling between us like lopsided snowflakes. Melting.

“Somehow I feel I’ll never get another chance to be a mother,” Anju says. Her voice toneless, it moves like a sleepwalker. “This child, he came to me too easily, and I was too casual about him. I’m going to have to pay for that....”

I’m frightened by that sleepwalker voice, its thin, icy glide. “What superstition!” I say, choosing harder words, clipping them close like nails. “You never used to be this way. Listen to you—you sound like my mother! Of course you’ll have more children. And isn’t Dayita your own, too? Even Sunil can see that—why can’t you?”

“Yes,” Anju says. It is a sound like a sigh. But what is she agreeing with?

There are things she doesn’t tell me about her marriage. I see their shadows on the wall, shivery-brown and thin, like diseased branches. I try vainly to untangle silhouettes.

We do not discuss him again.



It began on the very first night, the night Dayita and I came into their house. I know because I dreamed it.

So much talk and tears. So much catching up with pain. So much still left unsaid between Anju and me, that would perhaps never be spoken. We were afraid to touch each other in the pasts, the way one is with a cut that’s just stopped bleeding. We read, in each other’s eyes, the questions that couldn’t be asked, couldn’t be answered. *Why did you really bring me here? Why did you really say no to him?* We fell to sleep exhausted on the carpet in my new room. Lying between us, lulled by our voices, my daughter, too, slept awhile. Then she awoke.

In the living room he was sitting at his computer. Staring at the screen, which for once could not save him from his thoughts. A can of Coke, gone warm and flat, stood untouched beside him. He wanted whiskey, though he wasn’t a drinker. Whiskey to dull the points of those thoughts whizzing at his head like jugglers’ knives. But that would have been a victory for the women. (*The women*, that’s how he thought of us.) An admission that we’d gotten under his skin.

Sleepless in front of that opal flicker, he felt thankfulness. He could see that, with me coming, some of the sadness had fallen from Anju. But he was annoyed, too. We made him feel unnecessary. At dinner I had enquired about his work. Anju had asked if he wanted more lasagna, more pudding. Still, he knew he was an interruption to our reunion.

The last knife, the last thought. When it struck him, a tense joy spurted forth. To him I was

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