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## The Paying Guest

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JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
HONORABLE MENTION

THE PAYING GUEST

Shivani Manghnani

The first room you rented was on Marine Drive, in a flat that belonged to a new divorcée. She spent her days in a marble-floored bedroom, shouting at her ex-husband on the telephone. Her children looked at you like an intruder when you first occupied the front room, which was their old playroom. But you left your door open and asked their names. You let the boy sift through his old toys that were stored in boxes in your closet. The girl was heavy, with dark circles like half moons under her metal-colored eyes. The mother was always forcing her on a diet, scolding her when she reached for the extra *chapati* or spoonful of sugar in her cold coffee. One afternoon you came home in a tight dress and the mother was pinching the daughter's cheeks. —Don't you want to look like her? The mother had demanded hysterically, pointing at you, throwing the biscuit tin on the ground. —*Don't you? Don't you?*

The children cried when you left after only two months. They hugged your knees when you finished packing up suitcases that did not include your perfume, your most expensive, creamiest lipsticks, your laciest bras. An opal necklace given to you by your father when you turned 16. You didn't tell them their mother had stolen these things from you, that you had to leave quickly because you'd been in her bedroom while the cook was sleeping to steal everything back. You stole some things of hers too— French body lotion, rose scented bath cubes, a lavender camisole with pearl buttons, and wrapped everything together in a shoebox that you handed to the girl before you left.

—Keep this under your bed, you said, like you were giving her treasures, the answers to her questions. —Make sure no one ever takes anything from you.



The next room you rented was on Altamount Road, and the day you came to see it Mrs. Dutta studied you like a circus animal or a parcel from a mysterious sender. You made it a point to dress flamboyantly, in printed pants that skimmed your knees and a wide necked, tight fitting blouse. You wore long, shiny earrings and propped sunglasses on your head. You told her you were from Texas, the most American of all states, and that you were an English tutor. Your students were spread all over Bombay. —I will be gone a lot, you declared.

Mrs. Dutta said her son also lived in America, said “San Jose” like it was Paris. But he would be living here for a few months, through July. —I wish he would stay longer, Mrs. Dutta confessed. He worked in the room at the back of the house, where he was making a documentary, she said.

—On what? You were determined to seem friendly.

—Me.

You smiled. You said you loved her movies though you hadn’t seen any of them. You asked your aunt the night before about Mrs. Dutta, found out she was an industry favorite in the 60’s. She married a director who swindled away *crores* of her rupees and slept with countless leading ladies before dying. You rattled off a few movie titles your aunt had mentioned. —*Jewel in the Crown* was my absolute favorite, you said. She led you to the mantle, held up each little picture frame capturing her on the arms of politicians, actors you faintly recognized from your parents’ old videotapes. —Here’s Roshan, she said, my son, pointing to a light-skinned teenager in a hooded sweatshirt. It was the only photograph in color. —He’s much older now, she said, *almost forty*. She lowered her voice like it was a secret. In the photograph Roshan’s eyes darted sideways, deep set and half open. You liked his face, his overconfident smile.

After Mrs. Dutta went over the rent—200 dollars, and the rules—no boys, pay for your own laundry soap, tip the sweeper—she asked if you had relatives in the city. You didn’t want to tell

her about your trusty doctor aunt, your old uncles in the suburbs, your newly married cousins. Instead, you shook your head as the servant set down a tarnished silver tray with two teacups. Without asking, Mrs. Dutta dropped one sugar cube into your cup of milky tea. You couldn't tell her why you were spending so much to be alone.



You didn't come here to teach children to read, to vaccinate villages, help women leave their husbands or conduct archeological digs. You like train rides through the countryside, rivers the color of pea soup. Mostly you hope the men here will like you—you couldn't meet any in your Aunt's house, where you were expected to be home by 8 and in bed by 11. The divorced woman on Marine Drive wouldn't even give you your own key. She asked the watchmen what time you came and went, if any boys came to see you. You want to find someone to drive you through the parts of the city you're still afraid of, to make you eat things that normally, you wouldn't touch.



You move into Mrs. Dutta's house on Holi. You've watched the celebration before, played in college, at home, with your cousins on past trips when you were small and scared of India. Growing up in El Paso, your parents gave your nanny instructions on how to handle holidays when they were not present, which was often. For your first Holi, your nanny invited the neighborhood kids, freckled and loud, and brought her own daughter with her on a dusty bus from their *colonia* in Juárez to teach you and everyone else rich Hindu tradition. Your father had sent for color packets from India, and as you all threw handfuls of powder into the air, you heard someone say, *I had no idea Navajos were so much fun!*

This Holi, you decide, should feel like the first time. You step

into the living room where Roshan and his mother sit reading the paper. He lowers it, brings it back to his nose. The white hair swept behind his ears reminds you of waves. You ask why there's a tent set up outside the building, why boys are filling balloons with colored water. You do your best to look amazed, as if you are really learning, as Mrs. Dutta details the arrival of spring, the death of a demoness.

—You should wear white, Roshan instructs, with no emotion. You are glad to change into something transparent. Undressing, you think of Roshan's reddish lips, his wolfish, gray stubble.

Walking to the courtyard you stay a few steps ahead of Roshan so he can admire the soft slope of your hips. He warns you—the color will stay on your skin, stain your scalp for days, no matter how many showers. —Don't let it get in your eyes, he says, very serious. You bite your lip as a young boy thrusts packets of color in your hands.

The courtyard extends from the lobby all the way to the street, and under an orange tent women shuttle trays of food down a long table. Roshan keeps a safe distance from a group of boys attacking some girls in white *kurtas* with water balloons, watching bright pink explode across their bodies like juice from crushed pomegranates. You decide you don't need caring for and leave his side. A boy aims his water gun at you and you don't move away. Soaked, you wait under the tent with old men who sit on lawn chairs, their clothes clean and dry. The drums start and you expect Roshan to suddenly run to you, smear you with fistfuls of color. Instead he gently sprinkles your hair with orange. It trickles down your face like dust and stings your eyes. He dips into the purple and like a painter deciding his final stroke, brushes your cheeks. You can see around his mouth those deep lines your mother has, pulling her face down. You open your first packet and hold out a palm of royal blue. Roshan shakes you by the shoulders, and it spills on the grass, now so wet the powder forms a small, frothy pool at his feet.

—This stuff is pretty dangerous, Roshan says, this time more playful. He wiggles his toes in the grass. Turquoise seeps between

them. —There's mercury in it. He tugs at the bottom of your shirt. He can see your nipples, the dark dip of your belly button. Streams of water cascade from a young boy's hose. When Rohsan leads you up the stairs you think he's taking you back to the apartment, but you climb past the fifth floor until you're on the roof. You squint, bend under a drooping clothesline, shoo away mynahs. You gaze down onto other people's terraces. Some of them have swings, herb gardens. Roshan presses on your shoulders, signaling you to sit on a bench. The chunks of color embedded in the backs of your knees, your fingernails, the inside of your ears feel suddenly hot.

—I have someone else, he says flatly.

—A wife? You ask. He nods. You wonder why there are no signs that she exists.

—She's not here, he says. He wants you to know that he's left her in America, like a winter coat he has no use for.

—It's okay, you say, because no one has ever looked at you like this. Like they needed you.

Peeling off your heavy clothes, Roshan tells you how lost you looked that afternoon, holding bags of powdered color, afraid to throw it, as if you could hurt someone. You look over his shoulder, at the buildings streaked with black stains. Pots clang, a bicycle bell rings, someone must watch through the windows.

—I like how you felt when I smothered you, he says, lifting you by the hips so your skin doesn't touch the bench. You are shocked by your lightness.



The first days are the hardest. You wonder about his wife—you picture her as someone who works with clay, who wears ponytails and chunky turquoise. The type that likes boys from third world countries. You ask her name.

—Marian, Roshan whispers, like she's right around the corner. The way he says it makes her sound Persian, which you hope she is not. They are the most beautiful women on earth. In bed is

not the best time to imagine her. You pull the covers up to your nose so your voice muffles.

—Is she white?

He nods. —Do you have to say white? It sounds so bad when you say it like that. She's Irish.

You apologize, your body loosening. You would feel worse stealing an Indian woman's husband. Maybe you wouldn't even try, you tell yourself, you're better than that.

In the morning you make sure to leave the house with a wide shoulder bag and a serious, rushed look on your face. You have students to see, you lie, overdressing in crisp cottons that will melt and soil the moment you step outside. You hurry down the road until you can't see the building or the curious watchmen, and hail an air-conditioned cab. You hop from one expensive hotel to the next, drinking cappuccino and writing interesting observations in a leather diary.

You aren't beautiful, just different. Your hair is cut shorter than most girls on the street, your aunt says you walk with large steps and swinging arms; that you always look angry. You get whistles from cart owners and shopkeepers, occasionally a college boy who you tower over in platform sandals. Though it is difficult, you step daintily over corncobs and cow dung. You wander through districts you've read are historic and especially vibrant without pretending to have a purpose, buying chocolate bars to hide in your new drawers.

In other ways, the first days are the easiest. It is fun to dart Mrs. Dutta, to wait for her to take naps or leave the house to play bridge. Roshan bursts into your room where you appear to be reading or writing postcards but really, you're just waiting for him to invite you to his side. You've reapplied your gloss at least three times and are wearing a fresh blouse and floss-like panties. You have to come across as though you've been pretty all day.

He leads you into his room, which is twice the size of yours with slanted ceilings. It's in the back of his mother's so he puts his hands over your mouth. You make your body mummy-like, and the bed and floors squeak softly. Afterwards you are entwined,



curved like letters. He stares at you incredulously.

—What are you doing here? You're a college graduate, you explain, you have an excuse to be aimless.

—Marian wants a baby, Roshan says and covers his face with his hands, like he wants to hide. You don't even have pets.

In San José, Roshan makes wedding videos. He whips out a peach toned business card, this proof of his other life, and tucks it back into a drawer because he doesn't want you to see his phone number.

—That's funny you say, reassuring yourself that you are not the type to call ex-lovers. He looks hurt. —No, I mean, I just never met anyone who actually does that. You squeeze his arm. —I think it's wonderful.

Roshan wanted to be a filmmaker but his mom wouldn't let him. Still, he dreams of directing a love story between a maid and a high roller set in a Las Vegas hotel built like the Taj Mahal.

—That's a great idea, you say, though you hate Vegas. You kiss him sweetly and make sure he is breathing deeply before sneaking back down the hall. Under your carefully rumpled sheets, your hands linger between your thighs, your face burns from his cheeks.

Though you don't shower before breakfast, at the table you coo thanks yous and pleases to Mrs. Dutta and refuse the offer of a second fried egg. *One is really enough*, you lie. You don't ask for a second cup of tea and carry your dishes to the sink. You make your bed and offer to help with dusting when the maid comes. They both laugh, *Of course not! Silly!*

You want to appear independent, a hard worker. Every now and then, Mrs. Dutta checks on you. She brings coffee to your room in the afternoon when you pretend to plan lessons. Narayan, the servant, usually brings the coffee, but maybe Mrs. Dutta wants to show you that she is a hard worker too.



One night Roshan insists you sleep together in his king sized bed. —Are you sure? You ask, several times. —I mean, are you



*sure* sure? He rolls his eyes and tugs at your bra strap.

—Movie stars are used to this kind of thing. You assume he means adultery. You have never met a family like this. Yours has neatly arranged marriages, consults astrological charts before naming children.

You squirm when his mother blasts Pachelbel's Canon in D, just as he casually ties your arms to the bedposts with his undershirts. You wiggle your pelvis side to side, open your mouth to protest. Roshan keeps a finger to his lips.

When you run into Mrs. Dutta in the hall, you're wearing her son's t-shirt and white drawstring pajama pants. You avert your eyes while she gives you a quick once over. —Morning! She shouts, patting your back like you've just won a race. She starts humming, maybe a song from one of her movies where she played the heroine. She's still singing when you hurry to your room to shower. You keep your face under the hot, trickling water. Putting one hand on the wall, you wish there was a window to open, to breathe.

You and Roshan eat breakfast alone. The two of you wake up late, boldly lazy. When you hear Mrs. Dutta's keys jingling as she shuffles to the bathroom, the clatter of dishes being washed—you walk hand in hand to the dining room.

The house is quiet. The servants are tucked safely in the kitchen, frying eggs and boiling milk for their own morning meals. You remove clean plates from the cabinets and wipe down place mats. Roshan toasts slices of fresh bread. You're still a little nervous, reaching into the fridge for the orange marmalade. At any moment you expect someone to barge in and call you *kutti*! You can see the servants eyeing you like a thief. When you mention this to Roshan he calls you paranoid, a *nukrawalli*.

When the table is set you eat the leftover halves of the omelets Mrs. Dutta keeps covered with an upside downed plate. You poke at the soggy cantaloupes, the brown edged bananas she didn't finish. Mrs. Dutta likes you. —She thinks Indians are better, Roshan says. You had hoped it would be more complex. You hoped she would think of you as a daughter, that eventually, you

wouldn't have to pay for your laundry soap, or tip the boy who sweeps your room.

You drink lukewarm tea and feel sorry that Mrs. Dutta has to eat alone. Maybe you have a sad look on your face, thinking of his mother, because Roshan narrows his eyes. —You want to steal me, don't you? He says. You sip water loudly, swishing it back and forth in your mouth. You imagine him older, and you becoming the kind of woman he would want to massage and feed. You shake your head, roll your eyes.



You're sitting up in bed, watching two crows balance on the peeling paint of the outside sill.

—Aren't you curious? Roshan asks, sliding a palm under your hips

—About what?

—How different you are.

You face him, hair in your eyes. More than anything, you need to know what she looks like. You make yourself yawn.

—I mean, your bodies. Roshan smirks. He wants to upset you.

—How different they feel.

You could tell the first time on the roof, the way he kept kissing your knees and your ankles, that you were very new. Still, it is hard not to imagine Marian's red hair, clover eyes. You wonder how she wraps herself around him.

Roshan clears his throat, as if on the verge of divulging something very important. You throw an empty water bottle at the window and the crows flap away. The bottle bounces off the ledge and rolls noisily under the bed. That's the closest you'll ever come to throwing a tantrum. You don't want to seem worried about what Roshan might say, but you don't want to disappoint him either, so you try your best to look concerned, like a doctor listening to a patient rattle off symptoms.

—Her breasts are much bigger, he says. —I mean, I like yours. His eyes search your face for reaction. You pat his hand

encouragingly. —But I like hers a lot.

—I understand, I really do, you insist, because women with C and D cups look so very burdened to you. You grab your breasts with your hands, squeeze them together.

Roshan places an index finger under the left one. He draws a circle, slow and careful, like a child learning shapes. —Don't get me wrong. I like yours too. They're like little apples. If you were honest, you would tell him that two other men have told you this. But you want him to believe that he is the first to do everything right.

—What does she do anyway? You ask. Roshan won't tell you. He thinks you'll harass her. You laugh. —She must be rich if all you do is tape weddings, you say. —She must have a really important job if she couldn't come with you. Roshan pinches hard on your breast until you howl, slapping him lightly on the arm.

—Don't ever do that, he says, releasing his hold, pushing you down until you are flat on your back. Finally. You have hurt him.

—I've been stalked once, you lie, suddenly wanting him to think others have wanted you.

Roshan rolls away, gets up from bed. He touches his toes, bends back. His body is loose around the middle, he's covered with wiry, whitening hair. Porcupine shades. You get up to smoke, which his mother hates, especially if you leave the butt on the sill. He warns you about throwing things out the window, as if you might toss the pillows, the barbells he only lifts when you're watching. On the floor, you fold your legs under you, suck deeply on the cigarette. All of a sudden Roshan laughs, which is more like a snort, and quiets himself. This is your cue to ask what's so funny? But you don't. You're trying not to indulge him too much. You are sorry it has to be like this. You give in.

Roshan once dated a Muslim girl in college, but this was no scandal in the movie star family. Her name was Taslim. —She had a body like yours, he says, long and stretched out. Meaty. You flinch at this description, but only inside. —Tas-lim, Roshan

says her name slowly, drawing out the last syllable. She could really go for hours, in the stairwell, the elevator, in the sleeper of a deluxe coach they took to Goa. You try not to wonder if you have this kind of stamina.

Roshan raises his arms over his head, then leans to one side. You pick up his barbells, they're not heavy. Slowly, you do bicep curls. —Tell me something, he says. You don't have any stories about prowess or conquest.

—Once, I had an affair with a Russian who liked to pin me against his oriental rug. I was his reading tutor at the local community college. If you wanted to tell the truth you would have stopped there. —I loved him, you offer. —Even though he turned red in the summer. He said he couldn't live without me.

—Are you serious? Roshan asks.

When he gets in the shower, you wonder why he didn't ask you to join him. Standing in front of his mirror you pinch the skin around your waist, pull back the flesh of each thigh until you see a space between them. You go through his drawers, his closet, looking for photographs, a love letter, a journal. 39-year-olds don't write in journals, you remind yourself. You are frantic, pulling at his socks, his stack of white t-shirts, like someone throwing open the kitchen cupboards, digging into fridge drawers for food. You feel like you have been told not to eat.

When you hear the shower stop you perch on the edge of his bed, staring at the computer. You are afraid. It's hooked up to a video camera, a big metal drive. You settle, remind yourself of all your accomplishments—you were valedictorian. You've interned with *Vogue*. You can speak three languages.

Still, you rifle through the thin stack of papers on his desk—receipts, spreadsheets with phone numbers, scribbles: *interview mom at the Bombay Club before rainy season. Otherwise TOO HOT*. You can't picture Marian in this heat. Maybe she is more the temple and tomb type. She wants to see marble palaces built for dead lovers. She dreams of belly dancing for men with long, curled mustaches, pink palaces with pagodas and fountains.

You wonder what she loves about Roshan. It must have been

the way he said her name.



Roshan's bed is covered with magazine cutouts, tapes of uncut footage, digitally remastered classic collections where his mother is the star. He gives you the task of sifting through the sepia toned photographs, of finding the most flattering. You pinch the edges delicately with your fingernails, afraid to touch.

You don't think it's so impressive that Mrs. Dutta can cry on demand, which, Roshan informs you, is her specialty. Together you watch hours of scenes capturing this wonder—Mrs. Dutta sobbing at the foot of bellbottomed co-stars, tearing up dramatically during a careful waltz down a staircase in the clouds. When you come to a clip of Mrs. Dutta in a nurse's uniform, crying over the comatose body of the film's hero, you ask,

—Didn't your dad make this? Roshan clears his throat. He pours himself a whiskey. You stand behind him, put your palms gently on his shoulders. He swallows quickly, pours another.

—What was he like?

—Let's get out of here, he says, pushing the chair back.

Roshan knows you're afraid of the roads here and races down the hill, nearly crashing into a juice stand, a young girl selling *mogra*, a couple on a motorcycle.

—I'm hungry, you say, because he made you leave before dinner.

The car makes a quick left and you are in what looks like a maze of small huts, no lights. He jerks over bumps in the road, shifts gears to slow.

—Lock your doors, he says, a slight smile spreading. You think you may be buying drugs. Then you see the women—dark, small, standing in doorways, bellies drooping over their saris. There aren't red lights in the windows as you've heard. One steps to your side of the car, barely a teenager. She slaps the glass by your head, leaving a smudge. You bend down and cover your face.

—Look, he says, just LOOK. That's all I'm asking you to do.

Later you will forgive him. Roshan's father used to bring home other ladies. Sometimes he made his wife cook for them. You remember that from your Aunt's stories, just as you will always remember these women—their nose rings like fishhooks, the way the girl who came up to the car glowed, full of hope.

Afterwards Roshan is proud that you didn't cry. He takes you to the coffee shop at the Taj Hotel—the only place where you would eat and use the bathroom when you were little. —Order anything you want! He says, tossing the menu to you the way rich people throw down bills. You want to vomit but devour a club sandwich and slurp through a chocolate milkshake. He holds your pinky under the table and reminds you of the rules.

—Be nice to me, he says.



You sit next to Roshan on his green couch, watching cricket. You have no idea who's winning or playing—you just follow the running bodies in white uniforms back and forth across the huge field. Mrs. Dutta walks in front of the T.V. dressed in a yellow robe with mirrored embroidery around the collar, carrying a tray with two cups and a jug of limejuice. She asks why you aren't touching the plate of potato wafers. They lie on the plate like a pile of petals, glistening with oil. She's sprinkled red chili powder on them, but not much, she says, she knows you can't take too much spice.

The phone rings and the servant brings Roshan the cordless. —*Aap ki bibi*, he says, grinning at you. You know the word that means wife. Even before saying "hello" Roshan rises from the couch.

You do your best to keep your expression blank. Mrs. Dutta emerges from the kitchen with a papaya and a cutting knife. She lifts up her robe and sits next to you. You picture Roshan in his room, unbuttoning his jeans, putting his hands just below his navel. This is how he relaxes.

Mrs. Dutta places the papaya on a plate and draws her knife



quickly through the middle. When you hear Roshan laugh you shift like you have to use the bathroom. You could barge in on him, yank away the phone, shout *He's mine he's mine!* into the receiver. Mrs. Dutta would probably let you. She scrapes away at the orange insides, spilling a few black seeds. She holds out a spoon of sun colored fruit. —This will be good for you, she says.

You lean forward and think you hear him making kissing noises. Be strong, you think, swallowing, looking for the seeds on the ground, bending your head between your legs like someone about to faint.

When Roshan finally returns he pats his tummy like he's stuffed. You hate how happy you are to see him again. His mother shakes her head as he pulls you off the couch, your knees shaking. —I want to go for a drive, he says, voice calm. —Let's get you changed. He holds your hand and takes you to your room, where he sifts through the clothes in your closet. Greedily, he fingers a salmon colored, silk shift with straps even you think are too thin to wear here. He watches you put it on while rolling a joint of hash and tobacco. You shake your head because you don't want any, but he places it between your lips, coaxing you.

Outside Roshan hails a cab and tells the driver, —Gateway. You have always wanted to go there. Pulling up to the brick archway on the border of the Arabian Sea, the cab scatters a flock of pigeons. Roshan straps his camera bag across his shoulders, then hugs it against his stomach like a shield as he pulls you up from the car. You are drowsy, watching lovers stroll under umbrellas and children tossing popcorn to the birds.

You move to the coastline where droves of men crowd along a wall, hanging on each other like clothes on a drying line. Some hold hands. —We call them the lookers, Roshan says, pulling you closer. —They come to watch foreign ladies in shorts. He laughs.

—Stand over there, he says, nudging you away. You pull up the straps of your dress. He gestures to a spot on the wall where you can sit. You hear men chuckle. In the heat, a thick line of



sweat collects above your lip. You hunch your shoulders as if to fold. —Go on, he says, pushing you towards the wall.

The men make clicking sounds with their lips when you sit. Roshan holds up the camera.

—Ok, but hurry, you say. The sun is in your face. A boy carrying postcards stops to watch as Roshan brings the camera to his eyes.

—Move to the left, just a little.

—Hurry, you say.

—Ok, stop right there.

—Hurry, you say again, and then he clicks. You are angry with Roshan for making you wear this dress. You jog over to him. You press his palm into your side.

—Let's go.

—One more thing, Roshan whispers. He pats your hair, runs his finger softly over your cheek. He looks at the row of men on the wall. They are clapping.

—Kiss me, he orders, parting his lips.



When you're together you look for people you think the other might like. It's a game. You sit at Hotel Sea Rock, on red plastic chairs, looking out over gray water. A large bottle of Kingfisher between you. Roshan picks the bones from his fish when a broad shouldered man walks past your table.

—That's your type, isn't it?

—You're wrong, you say, watching the man take out a slim cell phone. He speaks loudly, as all men with new electronic gadgets do. —You're wrong, you say again, because the man looks a little flushed, like Roshan, with bristly cheeks. A pointed nose that you call "regal" when he complains about its length.

You don't think any of the women here are Roshan's type. He dangles a prawn in front of you like bait. He bites off the tip and rolls his eyes.



—I wish you would talk more, he says. —You never say anything. Even Mom thinks so.

You wonder if Mrs. Dutta complains about you. Lately, you've been trying hard to appear rustic when you are at home. It's July, and you don't even need the air conditioner to sleep. You wake up sticky and dress in Roshan's pajama pants and worn undershirts. Like the servants, you walk without house *chappals* until your feet blacken.

You find Mrs. Dutta in her room, dyeing her hair, and suggest the two of you throw a surprise birthday party for Roshan. She beams. You nod enthusiastically to her menu choices of *boti kabob* and *gol guppa* and volunteer to pluck chickens. She laughs.

—I'm so happy you're here, she says. You already know that the chickens come cleaned. Even if you go down to the coop to pick them out, someone else, a poor person, a man, does the plucking.

Mrs. Dutta has made a guest list and you have selected the invitations—they are white with red balloons, with *Fantastic Forty!* written in black cursive across the middle. You wonder if Roshan is nervous about his age. He seems obsessed with yours. Every time you refuse to bring him water, or argue about where to eat dinner and what movie to see, he says, *that's because you're just twenty-two*. He says your age with annoyance and a bit of pride. You imagine him at home, examining his body, running his hands over the places where he is sagging, or spotting. Where the hairs turn silver. Against him you must be radiant.



When he picks up the phone and his voice turns babyish, you're already on the other side of the bed—but not before hearing her voice crackle through the line. Roshan's hand slides under the covers and you curl like a fist. If she hadn't called in the middle of the night, you may have slammed the door, stomped

down the hall. But you rise lightly from the bed, pad softly back to your room where your heart pounds like someone about to fight. Roshan comes minutes later, kisses your neck. He makes you stand facing the open window—your palms gripping the bars. You wonder what he said to her as you inhale the scent of mustard oil and petroleum. It's dark out. You can see right into a living room where a young woman sits with her feet in a bucket of water. She clutches her belly and her husband stands behind her. The husband presses into his wife's shoulders with both hands, his fingers kneed the sleeves of her blouse. You wonder if she's pregnant while Roshan takes his hand and slides it between your knees. He wraps an arm around your middle, clutching your thickening sides. You've become swollen since arriving at this house. He thrusts into you, harder than before, and you feel you could fall. He puts his mouth over your ear.

—I want them to see us. Under bright lights you would have cringed. You've done a good job of displaying confidence with Roshan, like the thirty-somethings you see at the gym, moving easily about the locker room in candy-colored thongs. Often you strut around his room in high heels, bending forward and back, avoiding the mirror.

In your bed, you don't put your hand over his chest. As the sun rises you think, *I can't remember the last time I woke in my own room.*

—The best birthday I ever had was my ninth, Roshan says, squinting at the ceiling. —I had a pool party. I spent the whole evening trying to lift my aunt's sari. He chuckles. Finally, Roshan tells you, his aunt took him to her bedroom. She pulled him so roughly by the arm the other children thought she was going to beat him. It was July, when the heat makes everything crooked. The aunt closed the door. Slowly, she unraveled the layers of blue silk. He still remembers lying down on the pile of soft, cool fabric she left on the bed. His aunt lifted up the petticoat, she pulled down her thick, white underpants. Roshan was glad she showed him.

—Now, he cups your chin with cold hands, tell me something

that happened to you when you were small.

You talk quickly, a little desperate. As if this is your last chance. You grew up in a desert. An old couple who lived down the block became your parents' first American friends when the neighborhood objected to your father's accent and the clothes your mother wore, the smell of cumin that always seemed to drift from your doors. The old man kept an eye on the house when the family took winter trips to India, to see grandparents you couldn't speak to or understand on your own. You saw them so rarely, your mom told you to call these new friends "grandpa" and "grandma." Grandpa held you in his lap and gave you silver dollars, and grandma brought over fruitcakes and taught your mom to make hot dogs and chicken potpie. As a vegetarian determined to raise you right, to make sure you never felt different, your mom bought a turkey and cried as she shoved it deep in the oven. Your new American grandparents came over to celebrate. It was a real Thanksgiving, and you were the real Indians. You wore your Halloween costume—a pilgrim's outfit your mother had sewn because you had just read about the Mayflower and were fascinated with the Puritans: their bonnets, their buggies. The grandfather called you *adorable*. He winked at you and told your parents that they better watch out—you were getting quite a figure. You were ten. While your father poured wine, while your mother showed grandma the new upstairs wing, the old man pulled down your skirt. *Ha ha!* he said, like it was a joke. You remember his glassy eyes, the quickness of his breath as he slapped your bare behind and said *good girl, good girl*, when you remained still.

This story doesn't make Roshan want to be with you. You sound so rehearsed, like you want the part too badly.



The night of the birthday party, you circle through the house like the help. The servants hiss when you enter the kitchen and shout at them to make more ice. They are not used to taking

orders from you. You made sure to dress simply—in a cotton *salwaar* and jeans. You only go the living room to offer drinks and refill trays of *pakoras*. You feel full, watching everyone eat and dance. No one asks what your name is or who you are. You make sangria and nachos and arrange the flowers guests hand you. In the center of the living room you created a surprise centerpiece using Mrs. Dutta's favorite picture. In it she and Roshan stand in front of a swimming pool lined with tiki torches. When Mrs. Dutta first saw it the tears were quick, just like in the movies.

Roshan winks at you throughout the evening, especially when he is talking to other women. Most are much older than you but wear sequined shirts and tight fitting pants. A dimpled one with hair like a triangle talks to him the longest. You smile back at Roshan and clear empty plates as he leans in closer to hear her. She keeps a polished hand on his shoulder. Tossing lipstick stained cups in the trash, you wish they were glass, so they could shatter.

After Mrs. Dutta leads everyone in singing and cutting the black forest cake you made but were disappointed with—the humidity made the frosting sweat and the middle droop—Roshan slinks away from the table and waves you into his room. He pushes you against the closed door.

—Close your eyes, he says. —Open your mouth. You feel him shove a piece of cake between your lips, taste the slightly burnt flour, the over-sugared cherry sauce. He smears your nose with frosting and you cringe.

—It's cold, you say.

—It's a sign of love, you know, it's what couples do to each other on their wedding night. He says the word "wedding" with a sneer.

You're a good sport. You wipe the stickiness away, make him lick your fingers. Roshan pecks your cheek when you hand him the card and the thin package. —You were great out there, he says. Like this is a play.

He opens the present first, which is a framed picture of you outside the Gateway. You are blurred, your hands pasted to your

sides. A half smile. —God I love that dress! He says. —Oh baby, I'm sorry. I can't bring this home. Even though I want to, to remember you. Your arms tighten around his waist as he opens the card. Silently he mouths the lines of the poem you've copied on the inside.

—Wow. He nods his head up and down. —This is good. You're really good. He sounds shocked.

—You like it? You don't tell him someone else wrote it.

—I can't believe you did all this. Why did you do this for me? He asks, suddenly desperate, crushing you. When you pull back it's as if he's seeing you for the first time. He smells like whiskey.

—I could stay here forever. Couldn't you?

It's impossible to believe him. You've been working so hard, with no food or water all night.



You take a taxi to your Aunt's house, in a dusty corner of Bombay cramped with fishermen and Christians. The servant is in the driveway to carry your luggage to the room next to your Aunt's, which never belonged to anyone. She's kept a small shrine there for your grandfather, who disowned her once she started her abortion clinic. He looks so much like your mother, who still sleeps on her side of the bed, refusing to believe that your father has left.

It's a good thing you left that house. Your Aunt has put new sheets on the bed and there are curtains over the windows. Still, it smells dank. The rain has started, at night it falls in needle like sheets over the city. When your Aunt comes back from her clinic, which is attached to the flat, she looks drawn, thinner. Even her eyebrows have whitened. When she embraces you, you smell bleach. —You've put on! She exclaims, patting your stomach. —Enjoyed? She asks, like you've been to Goa or the Maldives.

When you pulled away from the building on Altamount Road, no one was standing in the driveway. Mrs. Dutta shook your hand in the foyer, her cold fingers slipping away quickly. On the

roof, Roshan stood in his pajamas and smoked.

—I loved all the colors, you say. Your Aunt frowns, puzzled. Holi was so long ago. —I feel like the colors are still everywhere, on me. You scrape under your fingernails, tug at your hair. You pull back the collar of your shirt, searching for something that isn't there.