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Lilly: Want Ad

WANT AD

Paul R. Lilly Jr.

Ari's thinking of Angie again, the way she weaves her hair. Twin spirals black as a raven's wing. Those braids are bouncing against her spinal column right now. And she's not far away, either. Queens or Manhattan.

Ari's also thinking of how he got here, scanning an empty Hempstead street through windows that need a double shot of Windex. The answer keeps coming up like a slot machine: rugs in all three spaces. In Ari's mind the rugs unroll themselves, as if alive. Sarabend Sarouks with rows of pears in lavender and ivory, thick Kashans dotted with eight-point medallions in blue and crimson. Nains from Iran, 600 knots to the square inch. Finally that Kashmiri rug in silk. The one Ari thought would turn the tide, make Angie look at him in a new way. Her father, too.

Him especially. Arjun Singh. Scrolling his blue screen and calculating the worth of his only heir, Angie.

Will a rug man do? Because a rug man Ari is.

Sometimes it's just threads, the way they are knotted into the warp, that alert Ari for a pattern, like following a vase design in a certain Turkish prayer rug his father once owned. Which you do line by line, until your eyes halt before the four pillars inscribed in Turkish, "Allah is perfect, praise be Allah."

But now Ari is looking at a different pattern. India is in it, because Angie is from there. Ari's father is in the pattern, for sure. Terikian Carpets was his store.

A rug's a map, Ari's father once told him right in this same showroom, but with different dead flies on the window sill. What he didn't say is that if you get good at it, the temptation is to think rug-reading can rub off into other areas. Like love, which some picture as a cord. Marriage a tying of the knot. Others, perhaps, see a relationship as frayed. Thread-worn. But few think of real threads the way Ari does.

About the time of his father's rug-talk, Ari's mother became sick, her blood cells forming still another pattern for someone

to read. Doctors were looking at charts, x-rays, passing on their findings to Ari's father. Ari started showing a feeling for rugs his father had never seen in his son before. Ari began to visit museums, scribbling notes about antique Persian rugs, Afghanistan tribals, giant Moghul court carpets from India. In the store his father looked to Ari for solace, but Ari would work the conversation back to Sarouks and Kashans and the quality of wool in the Hamadan area. The best rugs have their own claim to death anyway, Ari reasoned. The sheep that made the wool are always dead; the thin brown fingers that wove the patterns and tied the knots are likely dead as well. Better off dead, if you ask Angie. But this was before Angie.

With his wife in Mercy Hospital, Ari's father started to spend more time in his Ford Galaxy, repairing rugs in the suburbs. Ari had to cover the store. Ari brushed dead flies into an ash tray, using a Pakistani whisk made from camel hair. He worked through a stack of Hamadans, flipping four by sixes into the air, aiming for a landing at the customer's feet. Few of these feet showed up, so Ari had time to perfect his toss. Ari guessed that hawking rugs on the road gave his father a small space in which his wife's tumor did not exist. So it became an unspoken agreement between father and son that rug talk would express their common fear for a woman whose own pattern was already fading beneath a uniquely fierce sun.

Ari's mother died. Not long after, so did his father. Then Angie entered the picture. A work of art herself, Ari thinks, but woven with stranger threads. She's completing an MBA at NYU, which is where Ari met her. In a night class, sitting in front of him. He saw her braids first. Their tight weave dropped past her shoulder blades not a foot from his writing hand. After the lecture, her face: skin the patina of weak tea, shadowy eyes, facial bones delicate as a bird's, but masking, he would later see, an outsider's simmering lust for success.

Angie's father, a widower, left Mumbai to work in Queens about ten years before. He picked up work fast as a computer programmer, taking the subway in from Kew Gardens to a fourth

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floor office in Soho, once a dress factory built around the time of the invention of the telephone. Over his desk a rat's nest of computer wires dangles from an eight-foot ceiling. The clutter does not bother him. He owns one third of the company. At noon he walks to the East River and eats his lunch, which is packed in a round metal canister with separate compartments for rice, dahl. Angie prepares the canister for him each day. When he sees an occasional ship it reminds him of Mumbai harbor.

This Arjun Singh is a Hindu but has a few Muslim friends back in Mumbai. One even attended his wedding, Angie says, and his name is Abdul Fir. He deals mostly in rugs, currency exchanges, and other things Ari didn't ask about when Ari met him in Mumbai in September. The day after Ari returned from Mumbai he called Angie. This was a week ago.

"Hey. It's me. The Rug Man." Silence. Ari can picture her moving a braid over her shoulder.

"I've got your wedding present."

"Who is getting married?"

"A pretty one. A real pretty one. She likes her toes kissed. She likes rugs of a certain color."

"Am I knowing this person?"

"You know her toes. Look, I've got a package for you. From India. From Kashmir, to be exact. I practically walked there. Invite me over."

"You said Mumbai. Just a week."

"I didn't like the selection. I got a lead on some Kashmiri silk rugs. From your father's friend. Abdul Fir."

"He is having a scar."

"On his mouth, yes. Don't know what from. He helped me. We took busses to Srinagar. He speaks Urdu."

"All that time I am thinking Mumbai you are visiting. Now Srinagar. So much unhappiness in Kashmir."

"Right. Hindus and Muslims. Between bombs going off they weave rugs of silk. Muslims, that is."

"Children, you mean."

"They're definitely young. There isn't anything else for

them.”

“You are condoning it.”

Ari accepts that it is an uphill effort to impress this person with the braided hair. Also, he has some blanks in his work record that don't sit well with Arjun Singh, who started work when he was two, if you can believe him. Arjun Singh thinks Americans are lazy.

“I need the rugs. And hope the dealers do the best for the weavers. Some are children, as you say. I'm not arguing. You're right. They're too young.”

“Many are not making it to fifteen.”

“Angie, I can't help that. Someone's going to buy the rugs. That's what I do, remember.”

“You have a choice. They do not.”

Bide your time, Ari tells himself. She'll come around. When she sees these rugs. But even now he wonders if he has too much riding on them. Maybe on rugs in general.

As Ari sees it, he is not lazy, just made some wrong career decisions. He tried the college scene part-time for a few years. Did some trucking with Alco Muffler in Oceanside. Sold auto parts, brake drums. He needed to earn *something* in order to keep his father from kicking him out. They lived in North Hempstead.

When his father, the real rug man, died, Ari got the house, although the neighborhood isn't what it was when his parents bought it in the seventies. Still, it's a place to stay, and not far from the store, which is one of the last holdouts on downtown Franklin Avenue. A growing concern, Ari likes to say, because it's now his base. Where he is going to grow. Get a hold on life. Arjun Singh would say it's about time. Ari is twenty-six, after all. But rugs are going to do it for Ari. He travels for them, sells them. Buys more.

It takes Ari two days to recover from the September Kashmir trip and the flight from Mumbai, but on the fourth day back he invites Angie to see the rugs. A private showing. She is in a better mood. No references to child weavers. She says she will

cut one class and come out from Queens by bus.

The Hempstead bus station is not a great place to be, especially at night, Ari knows, so she arrives in the afternoon and they walk directly to the store. The Terikian Carpets sign is the same as when his father was alive, but the street looks like an evacuation before a hurricane. Plywood on barred windows, graffiti all over the plywood. Nothing inside of value anyway, even the drunks assume that. Except for Terikian Carpets, of course. But no one but Ari knows what is in there.

After his father died, it took Ari nearly a month to lay the rugs out and size them up. He wrote notes for each one, the kind of thing his father hated to do, and even took photographs. It was a stash. Ari had two Shirvans over six feet, a Sine Kilim, a Kayseri Zaronim prayer rug with a hanging lamp woven in gold thread and the mihrab arches in blue. Museum stuff, really. There were a half dozen Teheran prayer mats two by two, one in a vase design that upset the brain following the lines.

He had big ones too. A Kirman Dozar, seven by four, with a royal-blue medallion floating like a lotus in a pool of cream. A Koum Zaronim with four Muslim princes on horses hacking away with curved swords at stylized antelopes and tigers like there's no tomorrow. He had three Ispahan Dozars in birds-in-nest, the birds opening their beaks to each other across branches of burnt sienna. Bokaras from Russia, Hamadans in all kinds of designs. Sine, Tafrish, Sharibaff. Ari is still sorting them out.

Ari leads Angie in by her hand because she is a bit spooked, no one in the store but them, and she's seen they're not in the best of neighborhoods. Then Ari opens the door to the storeroom, which he renamed the Inventory Room. The rugs cascade from high in the rear of the room, Ispahans overlapping Kashans, Saff prayer rugs riding the final surge until a Sarabend Sarouk comes to rest at the tips of her black boots. Angie is on a beach facing a tidal wave of rugs.

"Oodles of carpets I am seeing!" She claps her hands. Ari takes a bow.

"The Prince of Carpets, you are. What are their names?" She

points to the Saff prayer rug from Turkey. "You must be telling me their names."

"Names I can do," Ari says. And he does.

They sit down on the Sarabend Sarouk, this one from India, not Iran, and take their shoes off. Then their socks. Ari peels back the Sarouk, and lets her see what is underneath: a Kashmiri rug, straight from Srinagar, all silk except for the cotton backing, a tree-of-life design growing upward from an urn into the air, branches that split into smaller twigs holding fourteen birds in shades of pink, yellow, and the blue of a rooster's shin. Their beaks aim at the sky over their heads, which is divided into four mihrab arches. "Think of a tree growing inside a mosque," Ari says, watching Angie's naked feet.

Ari stretches Angie out on the rug and lies down beside her. He holds her hand and pushes her fingers back and forth across the nap, making shadows where the cut threads reverse themselves. He tells her what her rug is saying: Fourteen birds mean they will have fourteen sons. That starts her laughing. Still, Ari can see something hit home because there is enough of India in this American beauty from Queens by way of Mumbai to dream of sons over daughters no matter what.

"Then what does the urn mean, Mr. Rug Man?"

"The urn." Ari traces the outline with her finger. "It stands for the rich soil of our fourteen sons' roots. The mixture of my father's Armenian cunning, my mother's Irish faith in my eventual success, your father's Mumbai street smarts. Your own NYU panache in full-dress leather." Ari learned the word panache from his mother. When she told him he didn't have it.

"You forgot my mother." Ari is thinking of his own, who had little faith, in fact, in his success. Call her a realist, Ari concedes to himself.

Angie is watching the urn, but one braid falls past her eyes so Ari can't see her face. Before Ari's Mumbai trip Angie had shown him a photo of her mother. A woman wearing a green sari, gold earrings, a nose ring of gold. Her hair was as dark as

Angie's, her hands folded inside her sari.

"No. I didn't forget. The leaves of the branches. She's in there. Green's her color. The leaves protect the fourteen birds."

"In here there is need of daughters."

"Two, but we may have to cut back on sons."

"Which birds are the daughters?" The power of a rug, thinks Ari. He folds it into a square lump, ties it up with burlap sacking.

Ari's idea is to make Arjun Singh walk on his daughter's Kashmiri silk rug. Then he'll have to think of Ari.

Here's the problem. Arjun Singh wants an Indian husband for Angie. They have these newspapers, printed right in Queens, just like the Hindu Times Ari saw in Mumbai. Page after page of marriage ads. Sometimes Arjun Singh makes up his own ads, and sends them in. But Angie's supposed to earn the MBA first, and while she's doing this, Ari is making progress with her, he likes to think.

If Angie's rug from Kashmir doesn't get Arjun Singh to give Angie a little space, Ari has a bribe for him. A second rug, even bigger than Angie's, silk also, but seven by four. The rugs came stacked in a gray jeep, the only new thing Ari ever saw in Srinagar. The fabled valley of Kashmir. All the houseboats on Lake Dal were rotting on the shore. No tourists anywhere. Indian troops manning sandbagged checkpoints in the streets, and the frowning Kashmiris sizing up the two of them from behind half-closed doors. Abdul Fir did the translation for Ari. Two of the dealers unrolled the rugs on the jeep's hood. They took turns eyeing puffs of smoke erupting far up on the mountain ridges. Mortar shells. The Indian army again. Or Pakistani infiltrators. Or Kashmiri separatists. You could never find out. A kind of permanent backdrop for business in what's left of Srinagar. Reminded Ari of Hempstead.

Two days later Ari and Abdul Fir slept on the bus from Srinagar to Jumma. The bus climbed through mountain passes dotted with the burned-out hulks of buses that didn't quite make the curves. They drank water from plastic bottles, bought

bananas through the open window from children without shoes. From New Delhi they flew to Mumbai, and by the time Ari and his rugs were stashed on an Air Canada flight to Frankfurt he was near collapse. But he had the rugs.

Ari and Angie fool around on her rug for a while, a little heavy breathing but nothing serious. She wears a blouse that looks like the top of a scuba suit. She lets Ari pull the zipper down a few notches. Her hair smells good, and Ari asks her if she uses a Jufti or a Persian knot for this kind of weaving. Angie shows Ari how she braids it. She asks Ari about Abdul Fir, what he is like now. Ari tells her how he met him as planned in the Tea Room of the Taj Majal Hotel. The place was full of Arabs, swishing around in white robes and holding cell phones. The women wore black tents, with eyeholes. They were in purdah. There certainly was a woman under there somewhere, Ari says, but that's all you could tell.

"That is all you are permitted to know, silly. An infidel, you are. Worse, a Westerner."

"Perhaps there's a woman inside here?" Ari reaches again for the zipper of her diving suit. She gives Ari a fake horrified look and pushes him off her rug. Ari turns down the lights. Angie looks fine sitting there, the darkness of her hair and eyes against all the reds and blues of the rugs. This is the second time Ari kisses her toes, and Ari continues up the ankle and shin of her left leg, rides the top of her patella with his lips. But about here is when she says she is hungry, and does Ari have anything to eat in the store?

Ari locks up the place and they head for his car, parked out front. His father's Ford Galaxy. It looks like a junk heap but Ari had the engine and power train rebuilt. A Hempstead car. On the outside it says zilch value even for parts. So leave it there, my friend, and keep walking, is Ari's hope. It drives solid, his own magic carpet for taking Angie to the Red Lobster. She's not a vegetarian like Arjun Singh, and Ari likes to watch her eat. Ari keeps pushing more shrimp towards her.

"Eat up, you'll need strength for your fourteen sons."

"Twelve. Two daughters. This you have said."

"What will your father say?"

"About what?"

"My intentions. The rug, then. What will he make of it?"

"The rug will make you a serious candidate for my hand, you are thinking?"

"Tell him to ease up on the marriage ads. Look what he's got right under his eyes."

"Ah, and what does he?" Angie is looking down at her plate, pushing shrimp shells into a pile. Ari is watching the way her braids began in little tepees on her skull. What does he, indeed? Ari almost says.

She looks up at him. "He is not telling me what to do. If he arranges me to meet a possible husband I can say no to this man."

"Naturally. This is America, right? Just say no."

"If I say no forever, I will be on the shelf."

"No one will want you."

"No one nice."

"Nice like me?" Her smile tells Ari what he is up against.

"Look, I'll drive you home. Do the radiator good to suck on some Kew Gardens air. Unless you want to stay the night with me. I can show you the house, the inside." Ari has driven her by his house once.

"What will I tell my father?" Ari can't tell if she is actually considering it.

"Do you ever stay away for the night? What's he used to?" There are sides to Angie that Ari doesn't know. He does know of her ambition. She has some of the highest grades in the class. Ari has some of the lowest.

"He usually wants me home. But I have friends."

"Friends?"

"Girlfriends."

"It's good to spell things out."

"You are approving."

"So what would you do? Say you're with one of them for

the night?”

“He will be asking questions.”

“I’ve got a better idea. I’ll drive you home now. Let’s show him your rug.” We’re looking at a long-term investment here, Ari tells himself, a rug dealer to the marrow.

Ari drives her by his house again to let her think about where they might have ended up that night. Some branches from an oak tree on the front lawn scratch against his window, but Ari never cuts them back because he likes that sound, as if someone’s asking to come in. Not a burglar, which is what everyone in the neighborhood talks about. Angie asks which window is his bedroom. Ari points, but the oak tree hides it. Ari turns toward Northern State, coasting along in the slow lane. The cars passing them seem no older than last year.

“My father wants me to meet someone.”

“When’s this?” Ari tries to make it sound like there is no problem, fine, let’s have half of Kew Gardens line up, hand out photos. On Queens Boulevard Ari sees some rust buckets like his, but near her apartment every other car is spanking new and sporting a club lock. The thought occurs to Ari that his Galaxy is a club, guaranteed the last to be stolen.

“It is a ritual. We talk. Nothing will come of it, my father knows that.”

“Testing the market.”

“You are being silly.”

“Where do you meet?”

“In a restaurant. Probably Tandori.”

“Where we ate last month? How about sitting in the same booth?”

“Is it so I can see how this person is falling short?”

They are parked in front of her apartment, but Ari doesn’t want to go up.

Ari is picturing Tandori with its bronze Ganesh set up in the window, about two feet high, old elephant-head waving his six fat arms about, handing out pineapples and stuff. Ari liked it in there, with the red booths, looking at Ganesh’s shoulders from

the back. Now he doesn't as much.

"Maybe you shouldn't sit in the same booth."

"Now you are being upset. Trust me. I did not have to tell you."

"Why did you?"

"Not to be making you jealous. Perhaps to let you know something. What it is like to be me. I do not have a mother to advise me."

"When is this meeting? I'll book the other booth. You can join me for dessert." Angie smiles, but Ari feels something is off, hanging in the air, with the cars prowling by looking for a space, and the traffic light over the street turning green, yellow. Red. Then green again.

"Well, let's deliver a rug. A special customer." Ari gets out and carries the rug through the lobby. At the desk is an Indian who gives Ari's ponytail the once-over but Angie flashes him one of her smiles and they are in the elevator.

Arjun Singh opens the door, sees it is a rug Ari has in his arms. He steps aside, and Ari starts to get his spirits back. Arjun Singh knows rugs. They can agree on that if not on the destiny of Angie. Ari opens the burlap. The urn launches its branches towards the kitchen. Arjun Singh crouches over the rug, fingering the border. No expression. But Ari can tell he is hooked.

"From Kashmir. Very nice."

"Guess how many birds, Papa?"

Arjun Singh's fingers trace the dogtooth border, move upward into the mihrab.

"Your friend helped me. Abdul Fir."

"Ah." His first smile since Ari walked in. "And is he in health?"

"Knows his rugs. He translated for me. I think. He may have been giving his own spin. Hard to tell."

"Urdu he is speaking there."

"Urdu. Could have fooled me." Arjun Singh glances up at Ari from the rug.

"He is speaking five languages. Since a boy."

“He also knows the Indian police.” Three of the Border Security Force searched the bus at the Srinagar station. One was a Sikh. He twirled his lathi stick slowly. The other two had machine guns. They made Ari untie the rugs. Abdul Fir talked to them, pointing to Ari. Ari couldn’t follow it, but he took out his money purse. The price of the rugs was still going up, and Ari was a long way from New Delhi.

“You are taking tea with us?” Angie steps past the rug into the kitchen and starts boiling water. The obedient daughter. Ari puts his hands together, aims them at Arjun Singh. “Namaste. Tea it is. Chai, right?”

“You are learning. Tell us of Mumbai. Not clean, I am thinking. That will be your impression, is it not? There is much energy there.”

“Energy all over. I had tea at the Taj, saw the ships out the window.”

“The Taj. The Britishers are fine builders. If you stay at the Taj you are not seeing Mumbai.” Angie serves the tea.

Ari sips half a cup then hints he has rugs to deliver in the morning, customers waiting, a line in front of his store backing up to Sal’s Fuel Oil. People waving greenbacks. Arjun Singh bows, gives Ari a namaste, and turns to his blue screen. Ari knows that Arjun Singh has eyes in the back of his dark head, something like Shiva’s third eye. Which opens when the world is about to be destroyed again. At least, Ari muses, Shiva gives you a warning. Angie walks Ari to the door. He is feeling more confident. So he asks her what night her meeting is.

“How much of my life are you wishing to know?”

“How about ninety percent?”

“You should not learn so fast. You will be growing bored, perhaps.”

She smiles as she closes the door. This door, with its tiny eye of a peephole, its number 15 scored in burnished bronze, seems to Ari a blank page awaiting messages that will tell him what he should do next.

Ari drives home spinning out scenarios: Tandori is closed

on Monday. She has a night class on Tuesday and Thursday. The weekends are too crowded. It has to be Wednesday. Ari can show up early, nurse some tea and dahl and rice, wait for them to come in. Ari wants a look at him. The one who answered the ad. Maybe he will be fat. Ari doesn't like the thought of this man sitting near her. Touching her braids. But of course that would never happen. It will be formal, restrained. He will sit across from her. She will talk about her courses at NYU. Arjun Singh will mention her grades. The fat man will describe his business success. He owns an apartment building in Queens. He invented the car club. It will be something impressive. Arjun Singh will take notes.

Ari passes the old Creedmoor mental hospital, now less populated. They're out in the streets, picking through the dumpsters. But some lights are on all the way to the twentieth floor, sad cases up there looking down through wire mesh. Then Ari thinks of Angie walking into Tandori and sitting in their booth. For a second he wonders who has the better deal, the face in the window up there or the one in a fifteen-year old Ford trying to move oriental rugs.

Ari knows he has the better deal. But he can see he will need a lot of rugs to fill out the span of time left between passing this exit to the Throgs Neck Bridge and his removal from the earth some point in the future, the whole thing observed from on high by Abdul Fir's Allah or maybe Lord Ganesh still passing out pineapples with his fat hands. Or Jesus himself, whom Ari learned about first. But who fades somewhat after breathing in all that Kashmiri fervor in a crowded place Jesus never knew about.

The Ford rolls into Ari's driveway and stops. He stares at the gray door, then thumbs the garage opener. The door rumbles, a giant metal eye opening. Ari coasts in. When the door clanks down behind him the light goes out. He wonders what it would be like if Angie had agreed to spend the night with him. The two of them listening to the twigs from the old oak skimming the glass, her hair unbraided and fanned out on his pillow. And

Arjun Singh and his newspaper ads far away.

Ari locks up the house, double checks the dead bolts fore and aft, and goes to bed. There is no wind so the twigs don't tap at the glass. Ari can sift through the patterns undisturbed. In the dark he sees threads for a while, then Angie's hair, her fingers braiding it, unbraiding. But not on the pillow beside him. Ari recalls her note-taking during lectures, her lilting banter with professors after class, her frown at scoring second out of sixty-five, the tightness of her smile as she sizes up her NYU competitors. She wants to go higher than Arjun Singh. She's smarter. And she knows it.

On Wednesday afternoon Ari ties up the Kashmiri rug he has in reserve for Arjun Singh. The big one, the one the Sikh officer pointed to with his lathi stick. Ari puts it into the back seat of the Galaxy and takes aim for Kew Gardens. As he carries the rug into Tandori, Ari gives a bow to Ganesh in the window. It is early, only two customers there, both Indians. Mr. Shastri comes toward Ari, eyes on the rug. He raises his eyebrows. Ari tells him he doesn't want to leave it in the car. Too valuable.

"You can't be too careful," Mr. Shastri says, but he is uneasy with the size. Ari asks for a booth in the rear. Then Ari decides to show the rug to him.

Ari unties the string, lets it roll to the floor. It lights up the room. Mr. Shastri squats, runs his fingers through the nap. He rocks on his hams. The two Indians in the first booth come over, wagging their heads, which looks like a no, but Ari knows means yes. Yes. And yes again. Mrs. Shastri comes out of the kitchen, wiping her hands.

"From Kashmir," her husband says to her. Then it is quiet. Their eyes follow the scroll work within the borders, pick out florettes, follow tendrils to their source. They look up at Ari.

"A gift for someone," he says. They nod, back away.

Ari rolls it up, leans it against the wall in his booth. He takes a seat behind it. The rug hides him from the front door view. Ari orders dahl, gobi aloo, basmati rice, things Angie showed him, then something that turns out to be carrots and almonds

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in lemon sauce. Ari can't stop eating. More customers come in, heads are bobbing above the booths. Ari orders palak paneer and gets creamed spinach with cheese. He orders chai. Only two booths are empty. Voices rise, blending with the clatter of dishes. He orders a dessert made of balls of almond paste floating in liquid sugar.

Ari looks up behind his shield of rug and sees Arjun Singh, holding the door for Angie. Behind her comes the reader of advertisements. He is young. Twenty-three, maybe less. And not fat. Behind him is his father, the man looking for the match worthy of his first-born son. Possibly only.

Ari ducks his head behind the rug. They sit down three booths away, too far to hear anything. Arjun Singh and Angie have their backs to him. The son barely looks at Angie. He lets his father do the talking.

Ari drinks his chai, orders another. The rug chafes against his ear. He gets out of his booth, hefts the rug over his shoulder and strolls two booths down. A waiter eases past Ari with a tray of glasses of water. Pani, the waiter whispers. Pani. Ari unfolds the rug, letting it roll out, a rectangle of blooming flowers, curled leaves, a soundless explosion of birds raising their beaks to an unseen sky. The four stare at Ari. It is clear to Ari that he has their complete attention. Ari sinks his right knee into the center of the rug and gives Arjun Singh a namaste, his fingertips forming a pulsing tent below his nose.

A spike of amusement races through the son. He raises an eyebrow. Some spectacle here about to unfold, a play perhaps. He leans forward so as not to miss a single line.

His father glances at Ari, then his eyes scan the rug's mille-fleur pattern, take in the pink rosettes sprouting from a restaurant floor. Angie is getting smaller, shrinking, her eyes numbering the tines of her fork.

"Arjun Singh. I would like to marry your daughter. The one to your left. Angie."

"You are a man without restraint. Is it that you are a drinker of spirits?"

The son is openly grinning. "This is like a film I saw."

"I give you this rug as a sign of my devotion to your daughter. Still on your left."

The waiter weaves around the border of the rug to a table in the front, bowls of rice on his tray. Mr. Shastri watches from behind his cash register. Apparently as long as Ari stays on one knee no one will call the police.

"What is the name of that film?" The son presses his fist against his forehead, miming memory loss. He is into it, sees a role for himself here somewhere.

"Arjun Singh," Ari says, "May I ask the wish of your daughter?"

Angie flinches. Her eyes, Ari would have to say, are smoldering. "I do not wish to speak of this now." Then she looks down, begins studying her plate.

"My daughter is not wishing to speak."

The son's love of spectacle is a rising flame. His smile tells Ari that he is not eager to be following his father from one interview to the next, sizing up potential wives over Formica tables with stainless steel trim screwed into the edges. Maybe he has lived in Queens too long, his native roots withering away. Or this son wants to check the ladies out himself. Ari starts thinking he has won something here, and then pushes it too far. Because if it isn't this one, this candidate to Ari's right grinning from ear to ear, it will be another tracker of ads. Angie keeps shrinking.

Voices in the restaurant are quieting, but Mr. Shastri, arms crossed, is a man who deals with the public, knows how to wait out an event. Ari is making up lines in his head. His knee hurts. He stands up.

"What is this rug to me?" Arjun Singh asks Ari.

"I carried this rug. Through the Khyber Pass." For a second, Ari is Errol Flynn in an old black-and-white, muskets going off, men in turbans running around, bagpipe music. Brits in kilts defending the color line.

"The Khyber Pass is in Afghanistan," Angie chimes in.

"Well, whatever pass. I carried it through a tunnel, I know

that.”

Ari is losing track.

“I thought you were on a bus,” Angie says. “With Abdul Fir.”

“It broke down. We all walked out of the tunnel together. We ate diesel fumes. All to bring you this.”

She looks up, composed. “This is not wise, your coming here.”

The son is getting carried away. “The Khyber Pass? This is better than the film!” He looks to his father, who ignores him, keeps scanning the rug.

Ari nods to Arjun Singh, offers his final namaste, and walks out. The waiter steps around the rug again, impassive. The water glasses on his tray are empty.

The son comes out after Ari, trotting. Also chewing. A rice grain perches on his lower lip. His teeth are white, his merriment unbounded. Ari can see he isn't interested in Angie as a wife, so he hates him.

“My father would like to make an offer.” The rice grain on his lip looks like a termite egg. He smiles. “For the Kashmiri carpet.”

“Ah, but now it is Arjun Singh's. A down payment.”

The son shakes his head, brushes off the rice grain and walks back to Tandori. He turns to Ari, raises his arm in salute. “The Khyber Pass! I love it!”

Ari drives to Hempstead, occasionally rubbing his ear where the rug had pressed against it, thinking of Angie taking in his own unravelling right next to Ganesh's fatty shoulders of bronze. Ari senses that Angie needs no Brahmin sadhu to read his horoscope. Inauspiciousness is written all over the face that looks back at him in the rear view mirror.

When Ari sees the Hempstead exit he turns toward Terikian Carpets. No one is on the sidewalk on either side of the street. As Ari pushes the key into the front door lock he notes fresh graffiti on the wall of Sal's Fuel Oil. More than ever Ari needs to move rugs. But he has them in spades. A real stash. They are waiting

for Ari in the dark, inside. He just has to turn the key.