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Several Years Before My Birth

SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE MY BIRTH, my father flees the U.S. because of a visa problem. He adjusts; it is one of his talents. Ontario is colder than he had anticipated, but bearable. The snow is not new; he does not marvel at its ubiquitous, muffling coverage the way he had when he first encountered it, upon his arrival in the U.S. the previous winter, 1974.

Today, on what will be his last day in Ontario, he says a dutiful Lord's Prayer in the sunshine splayed by the YMCA's mammoth windows like any decent Anglophile Episcopalian. My father is thirty, recently wed, and handsome. I think he resembles Ricky Ricardo, classic square jaw, broad forehead, thick black coif gleaming with coconut oil. When he ploughs to the Consulate for the tenth time in nearly a month, he wears dress shoes; he will never buy sneakers and will only briefly own a pair of work boots. Whether flattened beneath a Chevy's oil change or conducting the register at 7-Eleven, for a lifetime he sports only dress shoes.

Perhaps it occurs to him—perhaps repeatedly since he took flight—I should not have come. America, maybe, is not everything.

But of course it is or else he would not be here idling patiently near the border of its hospitable northern neighbor. The days are at once overcast and oddly bright, giving him the impression of being in the clouds. It is not the import of the day that propels him to rush. It is his nature to hustle. The cosmic joke of the universe, he knows, is the skimpiness of time. Decades later, disputing a heart attack in the touch-up paint aisle at the Trak Auto, he will rush to purchase a tube of pewter high-gloss before the clamp in his chest fully disables him.

In the U.S., my mother's brother awaits his return, though they are nearly strangers.

"You are feeling well?" my uncle had asked when he first arrived at Dulles International. He had arranged for my father's "visit" to the U.S.

"Yes, yes. What is there?" my father replied, using his—casually

translated—version of the nonchalant “what’s the big deal?” At the time, he had been staring out the window of my uncle’s Chrysler, startled by how gray and off-white America was, how covered in asphalt and concrete.

No one had wanted to remain in Ceylon where riots had besieged beaches and waterfalls. My grandfather had survived fistfights. His brother had been knifed. But it wasn’t the sirens or violent chatter that drove them out—that after all was politics—it was money. A blade or a bomb could be guarded against, retaliated for: Whom do you pummel for a job?

Once in the States, he promptly applied for a working visa through the Indian Embassy. Leaving behind my mother and brother, he lived in the crowded one bedroom apartment of his in-laws. On walks with his baby niece—who both relieved and augmented the longing he felt for his son—he would smile. Otherwise, he was overcome by a general loneliness.

So this was America. Traffic consisted mostly of autos, not people, and the apartment complex in Langley Park where he lived with his in-laws was occupied not by whites as he had expected, but by blacks, Latinos, Vietnamese, and south Indians like himself. It should have encouraged him: those just like him, navigating labyrinths like the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Giant supermarket, but they only increased his desire to be home in Trincomalee, where at least everyone looked the same.

Yet on his last day in Ontario, feet already damp from his leaky walk to the Consulate, he must admit that Trincomalee, although home, is not happiness. He worries about being reunited with my mother, his still-new wife, a woman who, for whatever unknown reasons, is too miserable to take on the charging locomotive of a new family. She is, simply put, odd.

But there is no time for this messiness in an arranged marriage. When they met briefly before the engagement, shyness and propriety had prevented him from saying much. They had the customary, concise exchange.

“You are well?” he asked.

“Yes, yes.” When she did not meet his eyes, he was pleased by her modest manners. A fortuity. A good sign.

“For your mother, I am sorry,” he offered. Some usual ailment had taken her mother early. He’d had a moment of fleeting destiny: two motherless orphans could be a strong match. “It is a sad thing.”

“What is there?” she had replied.

She was hateful as soon as they wed. She was disappointed in him, she detested him, she knew what furtive thoughts crept in his head about her cooking and her plain round face.

“I hope you enjoyed your day, wandering the streets and lounging around the city, Wandering-Raj,” my mother would say in Tamil, addressing him with his first name, an announcement of disrespect.

Having bused around the city all day pleading for a job, my father was certain of one thing: this was not how a wife was supposed to behave. He went over the lecture again. Work was impossible to find. Why else did she think her brother had risked everything to go to America? It would be nearly a lifetime, however, before he conceded defeat on their happiness. At first, he volleyed silence when reason predictably failed.

“Where is the money?”

He looked away.

“Why do I go like a beggar in these cotton saris, while your cousins in Tuticorin all wear silk? That must be where your money goes.”

She rocked on a veranda swing that faced the beach.

She refused to cook, clean or wash any clothes. It was her revolt. Instead she devoured gossip magazines, refused to bathe, hid his spectacles, and beat their son because of her temper. She was a lemon of a housewife.

“Is there nothing to eat?” my father asked.

“You hate my cooking no matter what I do,” she sulked.

I must hate the way you clean, too, he would think, although it was true she was a sorry cook.

“Here and there you eat like a pig, but my dosai and chutney you barely touch.” She dared him to respond. “My sister-in-law’s dahl is a great thing. Go eat at her house since you like it so much.”

My father had seen his own father occasionally slap his obedient mother, and although he knew men were obligated to thrash unruly wives, he was a mild man raised among many doting female cousins. They loved his movie-star face and Elvis hair. Never had an occasion been provided for him to exercise his manly right to meanness. He held his tongue at my mother’s mouth until some outrageous accusation or hidden wallet or missing diabetic medicine spun his grip out of control and towards her neck.

Sensibly then, scowling with a black eye, her unreasonable hatred for him legitimately grew. No uncooked meal or scowl could warrant a

smack; her womanly dignity whatever its source—instructed her of that. Unable to convince her, neither with fists nor logic, my father scooped the responsibility for frying and stewing and washing clothes outside in their well—a humiliation he hid from everyone.

It was my brother who worried him, a serene angel of a boy who incurred our mother's wrath nearly as often as our father did. She flung magazines and can openers at him, or sat outside on the porch where she could not hear him. My father relied on optimism: his wife was young—ten years his junior—perhaps she would warm when she became accustomed to being a wife and mother. He was confident that success would change her, as if her neurosis could be won over: he was certain that money would extinguish their fights, as if her suspicions were rooted in valid gripes. Until he could provide her the success he believed would shush her, he tried other things.

He came home armed with the magazines my mother read.

“Here,” he'd echo into the silence when he handed them over. He wished they would not fight. When they invariably did, he left her swollen and self-righteous with bruised cheeks, and then rammed his head against their cheerful pastel walls. On some days, his slightly morose sense of humor led him to chuckle at his family: a wife with a black eye, a husband with a ripped forehead, a son with a scarred ear—a family of wounds. He even left her once, marching home to complain to his father, who only chastised him.

“What is this?” My grandfather, a schoolteacher, eased eyeglasses down his nose. “Control her or she will crawl on your head.”

Even on that day, my father raced back on ferry and rickshaw in time to heat milk and uppama for my brother's breakfast. He tried not to hear the sad whispers my mother crooned into my brother's breezy bed, a wide cloth hung from the ceiling in a U-shape. It swayed with the hidden weight of the baby.

“If you do not love your Amma, Shyam,” she murmured, “who will?”

My father listened.

“If you do not love your mother, she will die,” she sighed. “Who will love you then?”

The tin plate roasted my father's hands. He blew coolness onto the small bites he handed Shyam, waiting for my brother to cry out if they burned his mouth.

BY THE TIME MY FATHER REACHES THE CONSULATE there are long lines—

or queues, as he calls them, British vocabulary trickling down as far south as the rural schools in Trincomalee. He has returned to the Consulate repeatedly and has been confused each visit. He flounders, submerged in a Swiss-cheese legal system with pitfalls and landmines—so much so that all advice, even from the most expert source, even from the administration itself, has proven to be unreliable to the point of being treacherous. A pronoun or misplaced prefix is all it would take to send him directly back to his wife and son as a failure.

The Consulate's waiting room was bursting, so my father leans against the wood paneling until it is his turn to speak with someone. In the office, he picks the chair that allows him to conceal his deaf ear.

"Since you came to the U.S. have you had any employment other than clerking for the Indian Embassy?" The skeptical man leans forward on his elbows over a metal desk. The lighting is unflatteringly fluorescent, the walls eggshell. Outside it begins to snow again.

"No, sir," my father lies. "No other job."

"Are you sure, Raj?" the man prods. "The Embassy isn't paying you much." He glances at the pile of thin papers in his grasp. "I'm not sure how you could survive on this."

Although he fears it will make him appear lazy, my father replies again, "No, sir, I am working only at the Embassy."

My father does not inform the man that he also shuffles fried foods at Gino's Chicken, mops at 7-Eleven, or that he borrows my uncle's Chrysler to deliver the *Washington Post* to three neighborhoods back in Langley Park. He only confirms clerking for the Embassy and taking a few classes at a school for car mechanics. There is no format to give the man any evidence of his diligence, his ambition. He is embarrassed by the lie.

"Do you have a social security number?" The man, who has not introduced himself nor made the point of the interview clear, keeps his gaze fixed.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

My father irritably thinks of the blue card he was coached to acquire back in D.C., the one with nine numbers typed across its face. He hopes they cannot trace it. He thinks of the Washington Redskins jacket he purchased for my brother, a varsity-style winter coat with the Skins' logo emblazoned on the right breast: the profile of a Native American Indian warrior. It is a good gift, perfect for the blustery winters of this hemisphere.

“Yes, I am sure. No card, sir,” my father answers. He tries to recall whether eye contact is polite.

“Do you know that an A-2 Permanent Visa is not a work permit?”

My father sits stunned, then recovers. He swivels his head to hide his astonishment. Yesterday a staff officer he spoke with had said that it *was*.

“Raj?”

“Yes, sir, I understand very much,” he answers, comforted at least by the familiarity of his uncertainty. Surely, he thinks, tomorrow someone will tell him something else, anything, as long as it contradicts what he was told today. Sensing that the meeting might soon be concluded, he succumbs to a grandiose vision: my mother smiling proudly on their cement stoop, waving the blue tissue-soft aerogramme announcing that he is settled in America and will send for her soon. He pictures my brother, no longer a baby, nearly four.

“I have a son, too,” my father says, nodding at the solitary photograph on the man’s desk. A blond toddler waves, pink from sun.

“We all have families,” the man answers, suddenly frosty. The framed memory must often be mistaken as an invitation to chat.

“Someone from the Embassy will be calling on your behalf after lunch,” the man says vaguely. He reorders the stack of papers and pushes them towards my father. “If he makes a good case for you, we should know soon.” Despite what he says, he does not sound optimistic.

“Thank you, sir,” my father says, trying to gauge whether the exchange is over, whether it went well or poorly.

The man nods and turns his back, my father’s signal that he should leave.

On his last day in Canada, on his cot at the YMCA—what he calls a hostel—my father readies himself to wait. He should nap. Despite the wet chill, he leans his head against the window where beyond there is whiteness and the infrequent dark streak of a tree trunk or branch. He urges his mind to go blank. He eyeballs a few swirling flakes, but it is useless. Accustomed to working nineteen hours a day, this is what is most difficult for him, what will always require the most effort: rest.