

Brown Paper

by Maggie Sokolik

The manager complains that the closet shelves are lined with newspaper. She has instructed the front desk clerk to affix proper paper to each of the empty shelves.

Bharadwaj stands with his back to me, scraping off the yellowed pages of the *Ganashakti*. He then begins measuring, cutting, and gluing brown paper from a long roll. He sings in Bengali. The manager enters to inspect his work. After a short discussion, he says, "Yes, Madam," removes the paper from the bottom shelf, remeasures, recuts, and reglues.

The telephone is a mere prop on the desk. It is not connected to a wire, the wall, or the outside world. The small hard cots are covered in graying sheets, naked of blankets. A trail of ants creeps along the grout in the shower, going from nowhere to nowhere. The little red fridge humming in the corner is empty except for one Kingfisher beer, supplied by Bharadwaj.

"Americans like beer, right?" he asks. "It's not acceptable for a woman to buy beer." He proffers it in a brown paper bag.

The window stands open in hopes of a breeze, but diesel fumes and dust drift in instead. I think I hear a monkey, but Bharadwaj says it's just an ordinary bird. I want to hear monkeys.

The shelves are completed. I run my hands over the clean dry surface of the fresh paper. "Beautiful," I whisper.

I have nothing to put there.

