

For the Sake of the Boy

by Ramola D

Suraiya's husband would *kill* her if he knew, thought Sadhana. After two years of marriage, when she should have been thinking about a baby, here she was, thinking about an *affair* instead, that too with the most eye-catching man in the office. Worse, a divorcé, and an American. (What could be more unreliable?) Sadhana pursed her lips and glared at Suraiya, who had just told her, in a burbly excited voice (quite different from her usual sober and properly restrained young-married-woman tones), that Eric Redding had come right out that morning, after a week's worth of "impossibly adult flirtation" and asked her out!

For a minute Sadhana maintained her long-married-woman's dignity and did not respond. She just kept walking, one canvas-clad foot in front of the other, looking sideways at the sunlit ripple of water, gleaming Lincoln memorial in front, straggle of Canada geese strewn on the grass, and then down at Suraiya's feet, clad sensibly today in only half-inch heels, in special consideration of their lunch-time walk on the Mall.

It was a mercy, she thought (the half-inch). Perhaps the girl still had half a brain left. For lately it seemed Suraiya had become as unpredictable as some of the women in Marketing or Publications, teetering about on heels sometimes as high as the fuzzy-haired summer temp's who worked the reception desk and helped with the IT filing. Almost as if she weren't (like herself) a programmer with a Master's in Computer Science from IIT Madras (Indian Institute of Technology, ultimate science and tech school for anyone with half a brain) and three years of working as a software engineer (meaning C++ and Visual Basic and Java coder, which wasn't bad, that's how anyone started) at a Big Six firm (or was it five these days?--all those mergers, break-ups, what not, that you'd know more about if you only had time to read the paper, but which programmer had time for that?)--anyway, it was not as if she hadn't worked at one of those Name consulting firms in the power and utilities industry in South

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Carolina (anything government being solid, as a start), and had gone to one of those fancy New England schools instead and studied something vague and artsy and hopelessly unrealistic, like transpersonal psychology or liberal arts.

A little breeze blew. Sadhana captured a straying tendril of hair, observing once more Suraiya's form-fitting sheath, yet another reason for ire. It was like she did not *know* Suraiya anymore. The girl had started to wear completely different clothes, which had truly startled Sadhana. When Suraiya joined their (not quite Big Six, but nearly there) software consulting firm (reputable and well-known at any rate in federal government work of every kind) two months ago, she'd come in wearing skirts almost to her ankles, loose white blouses, and sensible jackets that fell nicely below her bottom and looked *smart*.

Nice corporate attire, Sadhana had thought, approvingly, at the interview she'd been asked to attend as project lead for this new Web project Suraiya was being hired for. Just like the clothes she herself chose for work, with nice, sensible suntan hose underneath, the kind you got at the grocery store, nothing sheer, and flat-heeled pumps, no-nonsense leather handbag for the shoulder, solid HMT watch for the wrist, respectable gold jewelry in the ear. A thali, she noticed—nice, simple gold chain with a pendant round the neck, nothing fancy or ostentatious, simple sign of marriage. And is your husband here with you in the States, she had asked, genially, when it was her turn, smiling. The other interviewers, all American, swung their heads at her in slight surprise, or twitched in their places—wasn't that a little personal?—but Suraiya did not flinch, and fingered her thali instead and smiled at Sadhana, an Indian-woman-to-Indian-woman smile as if she understood perfectly (that was when Sadhana knew they were going to be friends, her husband, like hers, was also a programmer), and said, Oh yes, I got my green card through him only. He is also a programmer!

Everyone smiled and looked generally relieved, Stan Smith, the Head of IT, Nancy Clamp, the VP of HR, Alita Round, the DC Branch Manager, and Barbara Dedyer, the Web Project Manager. A married

woman, the smiles said, was stable. A married Indian woman probably doubly stable. And an Indian programmer married to an Indian programmer positively charming. Maybe they sat down and wrote code together in the evenings, inventing small, harmless applications, screen-savers, code-checkers, bug-biters and such. No doubt they coached each other every now and then in the more subtle intricacies of embedding objects and data modeling. What's more, the smiles said, she had her green card. No need, that meant, for employer sponsorship (extra paperwork and legal fees) for *this* programming talent. Sadhana beamed and sat back in her chair, pleased to have established all this. She too had got her green card through her programmer husband, eight years ago when she'd come to the States after her marriage. Sadhana felt a warm sense of kinship with Suraiya in that moment.

And now, here she was, the mathematical genius from IIT, wearing a sticky sheath in pale lavender satin, bare arms showing, shiny black waist-length hair completely loose on her shoulders, eyelids shimmery with blue and silver eyeshadow, dressing like a vamp to the office.

Sadhana rolled her eyes to the distant geese. What on earth, she wanted to know, was an "impossibly adult flirtation"? What could be adult about it? Flirtation was adolescent. It was for sixteen-year-olds at an all-girls school (like hers, long time ago, in Secunderabad, St. Ann's) with a crush on a cricket player (like Imran Khan, it was almost natural to have a crush on him). Or a movie star (Gregory Peck? Robert Redford? It was hard to remember, even, who the stars had been, during her adolescence in the '70s, it had been that long ago.) Not for adults. (Who were *married*, for God's sake.)

She tried not to explode.

Instead she said, What do you mean, he asked you out? Even trying to sound careless and nonchalant (which she was), even to her, when it came out, her voice sounded affronted.

He asked me to have dinner with him, said Suraiya, pronouncing the word "dinner" as if it were "sex," lowering her voice and pushing the word out through her pearly teeth with a furry edge to it.

At least, it sounded that way to Sadhana, who was ready to believe the worst by now, given all the make-up. The coral lipstick especially. Sadhana could not bear the way that bright frosty coral looked against Suraiya's soft mid-brown skin. They had the same complexion, she and Suraiya. And she would never in a million years wear that color. It was an American color. Too pale, too bright. We just don't have the milk-pale skin, Sadhana thought, to carry that off. On our skin it looks peculiar. Garish.

Dinner? she queried now. She stopped herself from repeating herself, once more, on a higher note, which felt natural. What does he mean by dinner, she wanted to say. Doesn't he care you're *married*?

Instead she took a secret breath and said, as if this kind of thing was normal, and she merely fact-checking, Did he say when?

Ye-es, breathed Suraiya, through plump lips of breathless coral. Tonight!

Sadhana began to feel agitated. She was first of all hot from the walk. It was late September in Washington DC, it felt like fall in the evenings, but daytimes it was still hot. All around them on the Mall, people were dressed for summer. The office-going lunch-walkers in sleeveless tops and pedal-pushers. The GW students in camisole tanks and sandals with big cork heels. The tourists in neater shorts, looking prim and Midwestern in denim blues and whites, short white socks, laced-up shoes. And Suraiya in her lavender satin dinner dress. The men in cotton slacks and open-necked shirts smiling openly at her.

Sadhana took her jacket off, a (smart) navy blue blazer with gold buttons she felt lucky to have found long-ago at Hecht's, in the Sports section for Ladies. Ah, that felt better. The breeze from the water cool now, on her half-sleeved cotton blouse. She looked hard at the opposite edge of the Mall pond they were circling, where the geese were pursuing a school of tourists.

I cannot believe he actually asked you out, she said, the words erupting without her actually planning to release them, realizing in that moment she was mostly incapable of censoring herself.

Suraiya giggled. Don't you remember, she said, that day in the coffee-room when he thought I didn't know what going out meant?

Oh yes, Sadhana remembered. It was not long after Suraiya had joined the office. Eric had already started to trail after her like a beagle on a rabbit's scent, his shiny blond head bobbing and gleaming as he made his way from Marketing to the IT section on the completely-cubed seventh floor of Compliant EverService Consulting, holding his silver coffee mug in his hands and leaning against the divider to Suraiya's cube when he got there, his rich voice resonating across the floor, her girlish giggles irritating Sadhana until she had to get up and close her door, very carefully. As project lead she was one of the few in IT who got to have a real room for an office and a real door for a door. It was handy, on such occasions.

So she knew already when she entered the kitchen at eleven that morning and found the coffee-pot empty and no-one making fresh coffee but just standing around, talking--no-one meaning Eric Redding and the quite married Suraiya Krishnan, that is--there was more idle conversation brewing in the air.

She opened the drawer beneath the sink and pulled out a coffee filter and a packet of 100% Colombian. She heard Eric say to Suraiya, So, do you do that kind of thing?

Eric was still "getting to know" Suraiya then. Even with the back of her head, Sadhana could hear the note of avid curiosity in his voice, mixed in with gentlemanly hesitation (for Eric was gentlemanly), and genteel, drawn-out pronouncing of his words, as if he were questioning an unimaginably exotic creature from an unexplored continent where English could not possibly be a language for communication, which, perhaps in his head, he was.

Eric, who was Senior Division Manager for Marketing, was in his early forties, she knew, a tall, well-made man from the state of Maine, chatty and charming to the ladies, well-spoken and good-natured with the men, golden boy of the office. He was the kind of person who spoke favorably for the company purely by standing still. His figure lithe and taut from all the tennis and golf he played, the

everyday 3 pm run down the Mall from 18th Street to the Capitol and back, his jaw taut and handsome (no hint of the double chins plaguing Sadhana's husband now, at forty-one), his eyes a bright swimming-pool blue and his hair a Pantene ad, thick and wavyly blond. He looked the picture of health. Each time she saw him, which was pretty much every day of the week, Sadhana thought of him (silently, as she scurried by, barely raising her head, it was important not to look into those hypnotic eyes) as All-American, like Robert Redford or baseball. The kind of man no woman in her right mind would risk falling for. Because he was handsome. And handsome is as handsome does, as we all know. The too-beautiful people always the ones to break hearts and ride roughshod over feelings. Insecure, unstable. Look at the movie stars, always breaking up with each other and sleeping with someone else. Bollywood or Hollywood. Boy or girl. It's all the same. Beauty is a multi-edged knife, these people used it.

But it was hard to think of Suraiya as beautiful, she wasn't. She was nothing like an Indian movie star or model, who are the ones, everyone knows, who are beautiful. She wasn't even *fair*. It was hard to tell why Eric was looking upon her as even faintly exotic. It wasn't exactly as if she was dressing glamorously either. (That came later, and surely that came on the *heels* of his attention.) Oh, she was pretty enough. She had a small heart-shaped face, long, clustery-thick eyelashes, and a dimple on the right side of her mouth when she smiled. But she wore her long hair in a plait, she had no bangs (after eight years of living in the States, Sadhana knew to ask her Vietnamese hair-cutter for bangs, everyone knows they just soften your face, make you look younger), she just didn't look contemporary. (This was before Suraiya went to the parlor and got her hair styled and layered and (finally) banged, and began to look contemporary in a flash.) When she joined the office, she just didn't look extraordinary. Just a nice Indian girl, nice and traditional, who fasted on festival days for her husband, just like herself, and made fresh full-course South Indian saapaad dinner for him every night.

What on earth were they talking about? Embroidery, sewing, quilting, painting, art, Indian dance?

What kind of thing? Suraiya sounded careful.

Oh, you know, said Eric, concerts, plays, theatre, dinner!

Suraiya was laughing, in burbly spasms. Of course, she said, why not?

There was a slight silence. Eric seemed confused. Then he said, even more hesitantly, No, I mean, do you do that kind of thing *with someone else*?

Sadhana found the scissors under the pile of coffee packets stuffed in the drawer and drew them out. Snip! She sliced across the tin foil of the packet. Now she knew what they were talking about. Sticky, she thought. A sticky subject. (Better to keep on monitoring with the back of the head.)

Do you mean with—uh—friends, asked Suraiya, either still careful or confused herself, now. Yes of course, it's always more fun to go with someone else, isn't it!

No no, what I meant was, Eric the Senior Manager of Marketing was floundering, Would you do that with a *man*?

Aha! He'd actually come out and said it. All that probing and care about the foreign customs, the restrictions of the culture, all of it coming to naught, just as she'd thought. (It was clear to *her* from the start where he was going with that one.) Sadhana pulled out the old coffee cone and dunked it in the trash. She seated the new filter, poured the aromatic Colombian flakes into the plastic bowl. She slid the bowl back into the coffee-maker, hit the On switch. Time to break up this nonsense. She turned around, leaned back against the counter, and faced them.

Eric's face was red, from the effort of trying to say what he meant. Suraiya looked flustered. Neither of them looked across at Sadhana. It was as if she didn't exist, right then, there in the room with them.

Suraiya said, slowly, Yes, of course, I would—'

That's good! said Eric, looking relieved, as if he'd just passed an exam.

But, said Suraiya, and stopped and frowned.

But what?

But these days I could only mostly do that with my husband I think.

Oh! Eric was clearly not prepared for this. A husband. I didn't know you were married!

Oh yes, said Suraiya, touching her thali. This is just like your Christian ring you know. It means I am married.

Oh? Eric seemed stumped.

Oh yes, said Suraiya again. Three years now. Arranged marriage. He was already working in the States. He already had his green card. That's why I married him! She laughed like a child.

Behind her, Sadhana felt the vibrating of the coffee-maker. Smell of fresh coffee in the air. Sometimes, Sadhana thought, that air of mathematic precision you picked up in engineering college sounded a little off, in conversation. Eric seemed incapable of processing such boatloads of new information all at once. There was a moment of breathless silence while they stared at each other (and Sadhana stared at both of them).

So, he said finally (ploughing on), heroic but strained, do you go to movies and dinner and such with your husband?

Sometimes, said Suraiya, staring directly into those blue eyes as if she were indeed hypnotized. Rarely, she continued, in a confiding way. Not very much anymore, she finished, helplessly.

More silence. The coffeemaker belched like a dragon.

Eric said, also looking deep into Suraiya's (quite normally brown) eyes, also ignoring Sadhana completely, Would you go out with another man if he asked?

This was the point where a nice Indian girl would simper, demur, mumble, and dissemble. Sadhana expected it. But of course it didn't happen.

Would he ask, queried Suraiya, as if she knew who this man might be.

In a heartbeat, said Eric.

They were both smiling. Not regular, cordial, office-people, good-morning smiles. But dizzy crazy Jennifer Aniston, Tom Cruise in-a-movie kind of smiles. Sadhana felt like reaching over and snapping her fingers right in the middle of both of them. Snap out of it, she wanted to say. You're being ridiculous!

The coffee stopped making noises. She turned round, picked up the full pot, poured fresh coffee into her mug.

Okay, said Eric behind her, letting out a breath.

Okay, said Suraiya, letting out one of her own.

As if they'd been discussing some risky business venture they were now fully in agreement with.

Sadhana tinkered with the sugar and plastic spoon and the stirring then turned around, full coffee mug in hand. They had both left the room. Without filling their cups with coffee. Sadhana shook her head. God only knows, she thought, what goes on in the mind of a woman like Suraiya.

Maybe, she thought, as they walked on, it was because the woman didn't have a child yet. Having a child settles you after all. Look at her. Her son Ashish was born a year after their marriage, he was seven now. If not for him, she wouldn't feel like she had a reason to wake up in the morning. Before, she'd felt nervous, insecure, unsure of herself. He was the sun, moon, and stars now. The world revolved around him. Her whole life had settled, she thought, after she had Ashish. Settled meaning into caring for him, through thick and thin.

Like now, when it seemed he was becoming increasingly fussy and peevish, as if he were an old woman undergoing menopause. He'd taken to complaining about everything. He didn't want to go to school. Or go home and be with the baby-sitter after school. He wanted to go home in the middle of the day *from* school. He often complained of a phantom and shifting body-ache the doctor could never locate. Really, she didn't know what on earth was wrong with him.

She knew, on the other hand, what was wrong with her husband. He just wanted his own way all the time, in everything. He wanted to drink as much as he liked, smoke as much as he liked, have sex with her as much as he liked, then flirt with all the women in his office, and even sleep with them if he liked. He wanted to slap her around as much as he liked, especially when he was drunk, and he wanted her to shut up and not say a word or lift a finger against him. He was spoiled too much. His mother had brought him up like this. His father had let him do anything he wanted. He was spoiled, that was his problem.

Why does he beat you, Suraiya had asked one day, looking at the dark, mottled bruise on the side of her head one morning. Why don't you leave him?

How can I possibly, Sadhana said, surprised that one Indian woman (whom she'd thought once was so much like her) would say a thing like that to another. There is no question. My boy is only seven. For the sake of the boy, I have to stay with him.

That bruise swelled up four weeks ago after he hit her at a party thrown by their new neighbours in their sprawling Herndon subdivision (in Oak Trails, the *Living Community for Those Who Care About Their Children*). The houses here were all spacious and identical. A curve of lawn with a driveway, two-car garage, lirioppe and begonia planted on the sidewalks in summer, decorative purple cabbages and winter pansies from greenhouses in fall. The trees cut down to make space for the squat, vinyl-sided, inflated colonials that the developers planted overnight, slicing and dicing away any protuberant greenery as they built. There would be plenty of time later—and there was—to hire the proper landscapers, to select the right height of young silver maples and pin oaks (shipped in from West Virginia), to evenly space these along the grass-sown (turf-unrolled) sidewalks, to bring truckloads of fat wood chips to mulch the trees, to lay down the spotted yellow begonias and the crinkly cabbages. Now the streets were wide, cul-de sacs large, rows of

houses solid and imposing against the open sky. Anil, Sadhana's husband, had fallen in love when they first drove by. That is the kind of house I want, he said. All his Indian friends (and all his friends were Indian) at work had bought houses like these.

It was large, priced lower than the houses closer in to DC, and the Oak Trails Home Owner's Association hired the weekly landscapers to mow the lawn, prune the bushes (if they appeared), and plant the cabbages. It was all new. Shiny brass knockers and knobs, fresh beige wall-to-wall carpeting, new dishwasher, new sink, new everything. Never mind that the doors and shutters down the entire street were uniformly painted green-gray, the vinyl siding tan, and if you weren't used to the place you could drive around a while confused between the unflinching sameness of Cherry Tree Court, Maple Tree Court, and Sycamore Tree Court. The names of course decorative. In 2001, when they finished building, this development was so new they weren't even memories of stands of trees in these parts, they had come out of the developer's head as he blueprinted the cul-de-sacs and by-lanes. So never mind that there were no cherry trees and maples. Or sycamores. Nor ever had been. Never mind that Sadhana had a bit of a commute, downtown to Compliant EverService, a 20-minute drive to a bus stop, most usually a 10-minute wait, a 20-minute bus-ride to the Vienna metro station, a 20-minute train ride in rush-hour to Farragut West on the Orange Line, a 7-minute walk to 18th Street, where her office was. Never mind that she had to get up extra early, to make breakfast and lunch for them before she dashed out of the house at seven. It was convenient for Ashish, because his school, Kenmore Elementary, which was right next to the apartments they'd first lived in as renters after their marriage, off Herndon Parkway, was close-by, 10 minutes' drive. Most of all it was convenient for Anil, a 5-minute drive to his work-spot, the software consultancy run entirely by M Techs from India, where he was technical manager.

It was a house for programmers, managers, and engineers, Anil said. And on their street, it was mostly these who had bought the houses.

Their new neighbors no exception. The husband was a telecom manager at Nextel, the wife a marketing manager with a firm in Reston that did work for Defense. They had just taken these jobs, moved down from Kansas City. Sadhana thought they looked and acted like Midwesterners rather than programmers, they were blonde and friendly. They had bought one of the houses with a swimming-pool—in each block there were six of these (although the clubhouse had a pool too), and they threw a pool party to meet their neighbors.

Anil and Sadhana had gone because Anil had been waylaid by Natalie, the wife, and another young woman that Saturday afternoon as he stood outside, smoking. Sadhana had watched from the kitchen window where she stood scrubbing the pans from last night's dinner. Natalie was short, plump, pretty. The young woman with her, thin blonde hair sweeping her face, was tall and seemed young. Anil had looked up when she called from the sidewalk in front of their house, smiled, sauntered over. Sadhana couldn't hear what they said. Anil kept smiling and looking from one to the other, although only Natalie was doing the talking. The blonde girl kept shifting her weight from one foot to the other, looking at her feet instead of at Anil.

But that evening Sadhana had a chance to meet her. She was Trish, Natalie's sister, she was told, who had just finished high school and was “researching options for college.” Sadhana had stared, because it sounded peculiar. It seemed strange that you wouldn't just go to college right after high school. Wasn't all the research of colleges, and applications supposed to happen a whole year ago anyway? Anil didn't seem to care, although his family too would have been shocked at this marked lapse in application alacrity. After school, he'd gone to Guindy Engineering College. Mechanical Engineering, which he quickly found got you nowhere. So he applied and came to the States, did an MS in Computer Science at George Mason, then got a job from a college friend's uncle in Herndon, his green card from the INS, and his same-caste horoscope-matched programmer wife from Secunderabad. Now he

smiled widely at Trish and asked her if she wanted to go out and smoke a cigarette with him. Trish looked morose and uninterested. There appeared to be a perpetual blank look to her face, and she was still in the torn jeans and white teeshirt she'd worn that afternoon, but she nodded her head. They stepped outside, and Sadhana was left standing in the living-room with Natalie and a glass of white wine in her hand.

She's really depressed, whispered Natalie to her. She just didn't make the grades—she fell in with a bad crowd in her high school, that's what it was.

Ah. Sadhana nodded, like she understood. But she was thinking of Anil. The party had barely got underway. They had barely been introduced. Now there he was, already by himself, flirting with a woman he'd just met.

Natalie led Sadhana and Paula and Ray Blanden who lived at the corner of Sycamore Tree Court and the main Oak Trails street through her house. It was dark, for Natalie had switched off all the lights and lit candles in votive glass holders. At the back of the house the swimming-pool was lit with candles along the edge and colored lights strung over the wooden fence. There were children, teenagers, some adults, splashing about in the swimming pool. Music was playing, some kind of rock music Sadhana didn't recognize.

Sadhana spent the evening mostly with Natalie, helping her put plates out, cut the pizza, open an extra bottle of wine, put ice in glasses. They sat together by the pool and ate. Afterward she wandered through the candlelit rooms of the house looking for Anil. She fingered the CDs by the stereo. Names she did not recognize. Creed, Default, The Wallflowers, Hootie and the Blowfish. She sat by an open window and looked at the lit pool. By nine-twenty she was feeling dizzy from the wine, which she'd been drinking all night. Thoughtlessly, for she didn't usually drink. When Anil opened a bottle—he drank almost every night—she could not bear to drink with him, besides she didn't want to set a bad example for her son. But sometimes she accepted a glass at parties. Tonight she'd kept

drinking because the chardonnay was so sweet and she felt she needed a glass to hold in her hands, with all these people she didn't really know in close proximity, and her husband nowhere beside her. Well, it was time to go home now and relieve the babysitter. She hoped Ashish was sleeping already. It was late.

She went up the stairs, holding on to the bannister for direction. It felt like her body was floating. She came to the landing and heard voices. There were three doors in front of her on the landing. She pushed open the first and saw Anil and Trish. They were lying sideways on a bed, their arms and legs all over each other. Their mouths appeared welded. Sadhana said, Oh my God!

They unwound themselves. Anil lifted his head and seemed relieved when he saw through the flickering candlelight who it was. Go away, he hissed, not smiling.

Trish sat up slowly, languidly pulling down the teeshirt which had ridden up to her breasts.

It's time to go Anil, Sadhana said, keeping her voice as flat and plain as she could make it. The babysitter has to go home. Let's go.

Anil got up and came toward her. She saw then his shirt buttons were undone and his belt was unbuckled, the two flaps swung loosely in the air.

You go home, he said to her, you take care of it.

Sadhana stood for a moment, indecisive. As a matter of principle she'd stopped standing up to her husband. She didn't like being shouted at, she liked less being pummelled for no reason. Anil swung out at her if he was drunk or if he felt she was challenging him. The former occurred frequently and the only way to protect herself from that was to keep out of his way in the evenings if he stayed at home. The latter she carefully avoided. In their house it was always his voice, his ego, his opinion between them. She kept her voice down, her ego folded under, her opinions to herself.

But this was not their house. This was the neighbor's house, and that was the neighbor's younger sister. Furthermore, Sadhana was flying high with chardonnay. She said, Do you have no shame? Do you have any idea what you think you are doing?

He slapped her. So hard she almost fell, she teetered and clutched at the door. First on her cheek, then the side of her head. Get out of here--get out now! He said this as if he expected her to turn and walk out on her own while simultaneously pushing her. She had no time to tell what Trish's reaction was to this. He slammed the door shut behind her.

It was dark and cool on the landing. She sat on the top step. Music jangled up to her. Other noises from the party filtering up. Her head throbbed. She sat for a few minutes, then looked at her watch. Nine-forty. The babysitter was supposed to leave at nine-thirty. She went gingerly down the steps, into the music. She found her bag in the front closet, opened the front door and hurried into the clear cool night. Out here, far from the highway, with all the trees cut down, you didn't have to look up to see the sky stretch around you like a bowl, like you were in the country, and the sky sprinkled continuously with stars.

What'll you tell Ravi, she asked Suraiya now, turning to the practical as they walked past more Mall tourists. Don't you have to go make dinner? She could not imagine not being home everyday to make dinner for the three of them.

Oh I'll think of something! Suraiya smiled a breezy smile at a pair of lanky young boys who looked like high schoolers on their Washington DC field trip who were grinning at Suraiya as if they thought she was their age.

Like what?

Oh, an office party, a team meeting, whatever—that's it! I can say the team was working late on this build, then we went out for drinks, no, dinner! Don't you think that's believable?

Sadhana had to concede it was. At Compliant they were encouraged to work overtime on a regular basis, and the most absorbed programmers, the most money-hungry among them (mostly the single men with no family attachments) frequently did,

on a regular basis. Sadhana always thought this was unfair because the women couldn't stay as late as these men did. But the whole team often worked late, and each time a release was slated, the project manager ordered pizza and required that everyone stay till the code was compiled, built, executed, the bugs ironed out, the database pristine, and the application up and running. They were working on software now for a bank, and under the supervision of Barbara Dedyer (whose talent for compliance quite exceeded her client-management skills), the haphazard requirements the clients conjured bounced in everyday, and Compliant's version releases, just as haphazardly, bounced out, fast and furious.

I won't stay out too late, went on Suraiya, confidently. We're going straight from work. I should have plenty of time!

Sadhana didn't *really* want to sound neutral and distant, but she was conscious she was in America now, and living in the DC area for eight years had schooled her in the art of remote conversation. You could never say what you really thought, it might be considered intrusive. Not even to an Indian woman, especially one who had lived in the States, like you, for years. You never knew what complex you might step on, what sensitive membrane might snap beneath that seemingly Indian façade (which by definition was helplessly open to probing). They all had this grandiose sense of themselves now, like they were so special. The culture of the individual, thought Sadhana, that decidedly American concoction, it infected everyone who came from India. Very quickly sometimes. It took a year, two years, that was all. It wasn't just driving a car, living in a house with carpeting, or using a dishwasher that did it. Before you knew it, that smooth American face, cordial and seemingly open, but quite firmly closed to probing set in like cement. There was nothing to do then but bounce little yellow balls of mild commentary, back and forth, like you did with the Americans. Of course it was different with some Indian women, the ones who didn't change, that is. You could count on them to give way to your probing, to accept your most acerbic advice, to smile at your most scathing opinions of their lives. But it was becoming increasingly doubtful whether Suraiya belonged in

this category after all. She was acting friendly enough now, chattering away like they were in college, but there she was, on the verge of harakiri with an American. How could you rely on a woman like that? To be on the safe side, it was better to be tentative.

Oh, she murmured, determined to be neutral. They walked on, looking at the water. But, after a moment, her curious side asserted itself. Time for what?

Suraiya looked up at her in a friendly, complicitous way and laughed. Oh you know, she said, to talk!

Ah. Talking. That long-forgotten occupation. Which she'd mostly forgotten about, with Anil. Which she thought in fact Suraiya got a lot of, from Ravi. The two occasions she'd met him, both at office functions, he'd seemed like a personable, talkative guy. Honestly it was inexplicable why Suraiya could not appreciate him.

Where are you going, she asked, striving to sound casual, as if she did not care that her new Indian friend was rapidly losing her Indianness now, with each passing minute.

I have no idea! Suraiya, the Gold Medal in the state for Mathematics sounded pleased at this lack of knowledge. He said it would be a surprise!

They had crossed over from the Mall and were walking past the closed-off 17th Street entrance to the White House. Sadhana wanted to say something to Suraiya, something wise and elder-sisterly, something moral and cautionary, but she viewed instead the uniformed guards looking appreciatively at Suraiya's sheer-hosed-in-black legs and found the words sticking in her throat.

What about you Sadhana, do you pick up your child this evening? Sometimes Suraiya came out of the fog of her self-absorption and threw Sadhana a crumb.

Often, like now, an inaccurate crumb. No, she mumbled, blinking her eyes as she felt a sudden wave of sleepiness approach, not unusual at lunchtime. The school bus drops him off. The babysitter meets him and takes him home. We both get home late you know. It's six-thirty by the time I get home and Anil works late a lot at his

office, till eight or nine sometimes. She yawned, she was often half-asleep at work.

Oh I see. Suraiya was looking at her watch and hastening her step.

But I go home as early as I can so I make sure Ash does his homework and I can make dinner for him. You know I leave everyday by five.

Oh. Yes. Suraiya seemed to have lost interest. They were back at the office building. Sadhana thought now was the moment, just before they stepped through the revolving glass doors in the lobby, that she should say what was on her mind to Suraiya. But Suraiya skipped up the steps to the circular push-door and propelled herself to the other side before Sadhana could collect her thoughts and express herself, the moment was lost.

The usual babysitter had quit that night because she'd had to cancel her date with her boyfriend, given the late hour at which Sadhana had traipsed home. Yet another example of an Indian woman being unpredictable, that too not what you'd expect from a graduate student, whom you might think would be mature enough to be flexible. Of course, Sonya was a graduate student in Creative Writing, which might have explained it. When she took the job six months ago, she hadn't said it was for the extra money, or to pay for her books, no, she said "it was for the experience," like she was Shabana Azmi researching a role for a film, like she believed it. Sadhana kept her face impassive and realized she didn't care what Sonya told herself, she just needed a nice Indian woman she could rely on to take care of her son. Now Sonya said, I've had enough, and quit, just like that, because she had an American boyfriend who was unhappy she was always "being taken for granted."

And so they were in the painful position of having to search once more for a reliable, after-school babysitter. Or rather, she was, for Anil didn't take part in it. Now of course Sadhana didn't want him to, after the incident with Trish. She put a flyer up in the clubhouse

lounge, where people frequently advertised yard sales and furniture and bicycles and kids' toys they wanted to dispose of. She put a two-line ad in the Herndon Gazette. (Wanted. Female babysitter for 7-year-old boy. After school. Regular hours. Must drive car, have license.) She carefully scheduled the interviews for early evening and then began to invent excuses at work to run home early: doctor's appointment (no, nothing special, regular check-up), dentist's appointment, plumber arriving, pick up car from shop, DMV, child school play, and then in desperation, a rush of house-fixing—water heater fixing, windows being replaced, gutters cleaned, window AC unit installed. By the end of two weeks Barbara Dedyer was giving her peculiar looks, but she didn't care. When you had a child you were a she-lion. All your energies had to swivel around him. She could see in Barbara's eyes the unspoken thought: surely you don't make that much money to be doing all of this, all at once, and it was true, she didn't, certainly not as much as Barbara herself, but really, could she be discussing any of this with her supervisor? Plus, she was picky. She needed to be. To sift through the applicants for chickweed—Anil's private name for “sexy college chicks”—not in jest but dead seriousness. To eliminate the obvious dangers, court the safety clasps. Not the busty blonde Spanish aunt of a neighbour with the button that just kept popping, not the junior at GW from Brazil who moved sinuously like Sade, or the pretty African-American Tyra Banks-look-alike from three streets over on Silver Maple Court, not the shapely ultra made-up American housewife with two kids herself who simpered when she looked at a photo of Anil on top of the TV cabinet, certainly not the bubbly red-headed twenty-five-year-old who informed Sadhana she was Irish, an artist who eked out a living teaching art in community workshops, and “open to anything.” Not Trish, whom Natalie suggested, of course, when she saw the ad. Sadhana had gotten out of that one by pulling her culture out of a box. Oh no no no, not our neighbors, she said, oh no never that is not right. Trish must enjoy her holidays, not work for us!

It would be great for her, Natalie tried to say, more than once, It would keep her occupied, but Sadhana cut her off each time.

That is something we would just never do, make our neighbors work for us, she said, That is not our culture!

Natalie gave her a puzzled look and stopped pushing. It was clear she did not understand Sadhana but she looked like she was going to resign herself to accepting this as Sadhana's "difference." That was the proper thing to do, however strange you thought some people were, to recognize that their culture made them "different." However inexplicable it was. However peculiar they were. Sadhana checked the troubled sequence of looks on Natalie's face to ensure this train of thought (Natalie of course was not to know Sadhana was not aiming to be understood and was in fact counting on this reaction), felt safe, smiled, and made a hasty exit.

She was most certainly not going to allow Trish inside their house.

But returning to the search was a nightmare. The several Mexican ladies who called couldn't speak English and were probably illegal, a circumstance Sadhana felt fear about. The old American lady at the corner of Hawthorne and Persimmon looked like she should be in a nursing-home and be baby-sat herself. Not a single Indian woman applied. Sadhana was ready to tear her hair out when she met (the non-Indian but yet ideal) Lindy Falls and knew with certainty then her search was ended.

Melinda was thin, with scrappy brown hair, flat-chested. Her voice high, like a child's, like it came from the back of her throat and she'd forgotten to aspirate, or lift it. She wasn't chatty, didn't simper or giggle, wore no make-up. She said she'd helped her mother with her four younger siblings, and the best way to deal with children was to have regular schedules for activities. She didn't say she was open to anything. She lived close-by, was in the final year of her AA degree in Graphic Design at NOVA, and she had time in the afternoons. She was a staunch church-goer, she didn't care for dating. Her career was more important. One day Godwilling she might find a man

(through church maybe) and settle down. But right now she wasn't worrying about a boyfriend.

The deciding test she passed with flying colors. Anil barely appeared to register her presence when he came in that evening. He shook hands when introduced and disappeared into the house. She was too nondescript for notice, it seemed. She, herself, did not appear to notice he was tall, well-built, almost good-looking. She looked throughout at Sadhana, or at Ashish, her pale blue eyes earnest and questioning. She teased Ashish, pulled crayons out of her bag, and a chocolate bear-shaped notepad with pink hearts on it for him. Of course, he was ecstatic. It was clear he took to her at once. This was a major asset. Ashish was picky. In the past, he had taken a long time to get used to new babysitters.

Sadhana heaved a big sigh of relief and told Melinda she could start the next day if she liked, she was officially hired.

That evening Sadhana was just setting the food on the table, the parathas and savory brinjal and potato fry, the dhal with pumpkin, the broccoli cooked Indian-style like cauliflower, with turmeric, onions, and ginger, which Ashish acutely disliked but which she knew was good for him, when the phone rang.

You sit! She waved Anil and Ashish to their seats, went into the living-room. It was Suraiya, calling from what sounded like a bar, through a confusion of music and voices.

Listen! Suraiya was shouting.

What, what is it?

If Ravi calls, can you tell him I'm leaving soon?

Sadhana wiped her face with the red oven pad shaped like a rooster's claw she'd been holding in her hand (which she'd bought at the Priceless dollar store near the Homely Eyes where she went to renew her spectacle lenses every year). Why would Ravi call?

He thinks— Her voice was drowned in sound and Sadhana said, I didn't hear a word you said.

Suraiya said something else, also lost. Sadhana raised her voice a fraction and shouted, Can't hear you!

Suraiya waited a second, presumably for the noise which did not subside to subside. But this time she was able to get a whole sentence out. He thinks I'm with you at your house!

Sadhana felt an oil whoosh of annoyance spill vertically and fountain-like around her. Why did you tell him that?

Spur of the moment, shouted Suraiya. I wasn't thinking!

Not a favorite pastime of hers anymore, apparently. The girl seemed to have ceased cogitation entirely at advent of Eric Redding. Are you at a bar? shouted Sadhana, putting all her irritation into her voice. Is that where he took you for dinner?

No of course not! We're at Haggerty's on M street. Eric's teaching me to play pool! We had dinner in Tagliano's!

Where?

Tagliano's! It's right here, in Georgetown!

Whatever. She'd never heard of it, but then again she and Anil weren't so used to hiking across the river after work to dine in Georgetown. Okay! Besides, you could only shout for so long. I'll see you tomorrow then.

Wait! Sadhana! Suraiya sounded panicky.

What?

You'll tell him then?

Sure, said Sadhana, If he calls, I'll tell him. What was she supposed to do?

Thank you thank you, trilled Suraiya at high pitch, I'll have to take you out to lunch soon!

The polite thing, of course, would be to say, oh no, no, please, it's no trouble. But Sadhana wasn't feeling polite. Sounds good to me, she said instead, remembering to expand her voice like air into a balloon and blow it out with gusto. Goodnight!

Bye!

Crash. There, the phone was in its cradle. Sadhana picked up her oven claw and returned to the dining-table.

Shouting like that, said Anil, Who was that?

My friend, said Sadhana, whose general stratagem in affairs of the private girlfriendship she wished to keep private from Anil was not to divulge appellates at first. Not unless pestered and then she resorted easily to invention. False names meant safe people, in her book. Real names opened up all your friends to potential advances. It would start innocuously. Why don't you invite your good friend so-and-so to Old Town this weekend. Or shopping. Or apple-picking. Or pumpkin-patching. Or the beach. Then progress to secret flirtations on the tour bus, the ferry, or the mall. Or the apple orchard. Or the pumpkin patch. Or the beach. Unwanted advances. Lewd come-ons. Inappropriate remarks. Too many of Sadhana's friends had said things privately to Sadhana about Anil. Too many friendships had dissolved, for truth-telling to be tenable.

What friend?

None of your business, Sadhana wanted to say. Oh my friend from work, she said.

Ah, your *colleague*, said Anil, crumpling a plum over his rice and spelling out the word as if she were an ESL student and he the instructor. What's her name?

Reena, said Sadhana quickly, saying the first name that came to her head, serving herself rice and broccoli and dhal and avoiding looking at him.

Indian is it?

Sadhana mentally kicked herself. Indian women of course were of greater interest. There was just so much to find out about an Indian woman living in the US.

Yes. Here Ashish, you must eat broccoli, pa. She put a spoonful of broccoli on his plate and he groaned.

Please ma, I don't like it!

Never mind, just eat a little, kutty, it'll grow on you, you'll see!

Ash squirmed in his chair, pushed the broccoli around on his plate with his fingertips. He was a small boy, thin for his age, in Sadhana's view. His too-serious eyes blinked behind their glasses in his tiny face. His arms lost in the bagginess of the red t-shirt he was wearing.

From here or from India? That was an important distinction. Indian women “from here” didn't need to be held to the same standards. They were lost anyway, subsumed, already American.

From India. Madras IIT. She got married and came here.

Anil frowned. Why, from IIT she could have easily got a job herself and come.

Well so could I, said Sadhana. But did I? Could I? My parents got me married first!

Don't say your parents, say *you* could have never come here by yourself without getting married. Anil liked to take credit often for being the Groom with the Green Card. She must have been the same. You women all end up running after a green card for a husband!

Sadhana was beginning to feel annoyed. Don't be silly, she said, Haven't you seen the ads where the Groom is always looking for a Bride with a Green Card?

My head is paining, interjected Ashish, not without cause.

She turned to his plate. Just eat a little, sweetie, just a little vegetable. She made a little ball with her hands on Ash's plate of potato, brinjal, and yellow broccoli and tried to push it into his mouth, see how good that is!

Yuk! Ashish spat his food out as if he'd swallowed a projectile and bits of broccoli and potato and brinjal flew across the table, spraying his water glass, the salt and pepper shakers, the glass water jug, and Anil.

Chee! Don't you have brains! Anil got up and shook himself out. What are you doing, you stupid boy!

The boy cowered. His father looked angry enough to hit him. Sadhana pulled out the black and gold cloth napkins from the Kashmiri holder in the center of the table and started to wipe everything down frantically. Luckily the width of the table was between them, father and son.

Here, said Anil, showing her a spot by his water glass. Sadhana rubbed back and forth with her napkin. Here! He showed her

another on his arm. She wiped the piece of broccoli away from the hairs on his arm, taking care not to abrade his skin.

You eat your food and get on with your studies, said Anil to Ashish.

Ash sat hunched in his chair looking unhappily at his food. My head hurts, he said in a low voice.

Sadhana put her napkin down and felt his forehead. It felt normal. She smoothed his hair. Drink some water, she said. There! She lifted the water glass to his lips and he drank.

Ma can I go to sleep?

No Ash, eat first, then finish your homework!

Ash kept his head down and his hand on his plate still. Sadhana tried to eat but found she didn't feel hungry anymore. Anil returned to his ruminations on Reena.

So, your friend--what does her husband do?

Sadhana sighed and drank some water. What do you think he does?

Programmer?

Then what? That meant, did you really think he might be doing something else? When you, I, everyone we know from India is a programmer?

Put some more dhal on my plate, ordered Anil at this moment, probably to squash her miniscule show of spirit. Meekly, Sadhana complied. It was better to pretend to be a good wife than try to speak her mind. Better to let him think he was smarter than provoke a quarrel in front of Ashish.

Ashish seemed to be drooping. Ma! He was whispering. I feel cold.

She put a hand to his neck, checking for fever again. It was warm to her touch. Not too hot, not too cool. Normal.

Eat your food then go lie down, she said.

Ashish brightened. He ate a little, avoiding the broccoli. She took the plate from him when he finished the rice, scraped the broccoli onto her plate. When he left the table, she turned to Anil. Have you noticed, Ash is feeling sick so often lately?

Anil laughed. He's trying to bunk school, he said. He's not sick!
Sadhana frowned. Why do you think he wants to bunk school?
School is school, said Anil, Plus, he's a boy. He's just trying to
push things, see how far he can go.

Sadhana went into the living-room and sat beside Ash on the sofa.
Do you want anything, Ash?

No. His voice was muffled. He was lying on his stomach, holding
his head in his hands. She put a hand under his neck once more to
check. No. He seemed fine. Of course, headaches didn't show. She
sat still for a moment. Without the TV on, it was so quiet out here, in
the nights. She could hear a cricket outside, near the window that
opened into the front yard. Are you coming home early tomorrow,
asked Ash suddenly, turning onto his side.

I don't know, said Sadhana. I'll try. Why?

It's nice when you're home early.

That's nice sweetie. She bent down and kissed him on the
forehead. But don't you like your babysitter?

Ash shrugged.

You do don't you? I thought she's really nice, someone you can do
fun things with before Mummy and Papa come home.

She's nice. He closed his eyes.

Did you go out for a walk today?

He didn't answer. Sadhana waited but he didn't open his eyes. He
seemed asleep. She took the beige chenille throw from the back of
the sofa and drew it over him. She smoothed his sticky hair. She'd
wake him later and take him upstairs. For now, let him sleep.

Much later as she drifted off to sleep herself she realized Ravi had
not called. She must have been wrong about him from the start. It
was silly to imagine he might want to kill Suraiya. Because he was
so amazingly trusting of her--he would never suspect, never know.

The next day at lunch, Suraiya came by to Sadhana's office and
told her Eric was out of town for a week, starting this morning, at a
Marketing conference in Denver, and did she want to go for a walk

on the Mall right now? Therefore, it seemed she meant. An implication not lost on Sadhana, who was eating her lunch at her desk, parathas from the night before and fresh morning-fried okra and onions she'd made at six while the coffee was percolating and their neighborhood mockingbird made chickadee sounds outside the window. She peered hopefully at her watch. Don't know if I have time, she said, in the best tone of doubt she could muster, Lots of code to test.

Oh come on! Suraiya looked bright and restless, as if she hadn't slept all night. She also looked bright red, a circumstance effected by the raspberry-red suit she was wearing, one of those suits where you don't wear a blouse underneath, and red, heeled sandals. Sadhana felt nervous, looking at her. Eric's absence didn't seem to have made a dent in Suraiya's determined drive lately to dress like the fashion models in those deceptive *Dress for the Office* articles in Cosmopolitan. In Sadhana's book, that kind of adherence to glamour could get you in trouble.

Suraiya shook her shiny layered hair over her shoulder and smiled giddily. Don't you want to hear about last night?

Sadhana looked blankly at her for a moment. Before Suraiya had arrived to prop herself picturesquely in Sadhana's doorway, Sadhana had been seated, swivelled sideways in her chair, staring absently at the plate-glass windows across 18th Street into their reflection of blue sky and white clouds and sugar maples turning orange. She'd been thinking about Ashish, turning her worst fears over in her head, trying to resist the fine sheen of panic that was beginning, insidiously, to coat her thoughts now of him. Why could the doctor not find anything wrong? How could that just be evidence of boyhood, as Anil seemed to think. Did boys start off toward machismo that way, bunking school first, at the tender age of eight, pretending aches that did not exist? Or was Ashish in the throes of some virulent disease no-one could diagnose? The thought slid a cold metallic prong into Sadhana's chest.

She closed her blue and white Glad lunchbox and brought herself back to the memory of Suraiya shouting over the din of the bar last

night. How come you went after dinner to play pool so late? She felt unable to censor her thoughts, given that abrupt wrenching from her own secret pools of panic over Ashish.

Suraiya, however, did not appear to notice, or perhaps had come to expect such questioning from a fellow Indian woman, from India. Nosiness was indulged after all, in India, if not downright promoted. Let's go for a walk, she urged, I'll tell you outside!

Oh. Okay. Sadhana plucked her navy jacket off the back of her chair and shrugged it on. It may look odd, she thought fleetingly, against the orange and green printed skirt she was wearing, but it was convenient. The weather was chilly today, and it kept one warm.

A little wind was blowing as they stepped out, bright leaves swung about. On the Mall, as usual, Canada geese were stalking tourists, a group of young tie'd, white-shirted men were arcing a frisbee back and forth, people were lunching on benches, and the usual canvas-shoe-clad walkers walked briskly up and down the side of the lake.

It was just so great, Suraiya was saying, like one of those things you read about or see in a movie, it just felt so perfect, it was so natural—

What was? Sadhana tried to interject this as unobtrusively as possible, lowering her voice and striving to strip all ego from it.

The way he asked me if I played pool or billiards—and the next thing you know, he says, completely impulsively, just out of the blue, it was so spontaneous—I love that in a guy!--come on, let's go play pool, I'll teach you!

Suraiya was relaying this loudly, animatedly, and people turned to look at her as they went by. Some of them smiled, especially the young guys who walked by. Some of them stared, especially the old American men in suits from the Department of State and Commerce buildings nearby and the middle-aged American women in the pale hose marked "Flesh" in their packets at the store. Others stared too, including the larger, older African-American women in their staid office outfits who also looked like they worked in the government offices next-door, and the younger women with blonde or red or

streakily-blonde hair who dressed it seemed, just like Suraiya, in skirts with high slits and pants that clung at the thigh, and the foreign tourist women who looked South American or Italian, who stood out because their skin, although white, seemed carefully tanned, and their clothes were emblazoned with scarves and brooches, they dressed much better than the Americans. Sadhana was embarrassed for her, because she was drawing attention to herself. If she'd been a sister or a good friend, she would have said, Shush, keep your voice down, people are staring! Who knows why—because you were talking so loudly, because your accent stood out at once, because you were obviously Indian and talking so loudly, because of the crazy things you were saying, because it was naïve to say these things aloud in front of people? Americans talked loudly and nobody stared like that. It was polite not to stare. But you didn't have to live very long here, especially in Washington, to notice people swivelled their heads about and stared quite openly, if *you* talked loudly. Because you were an Indian, a foreigner, a person with an accent, a person who wasn't supposed to say things that stood out, to think these things even, you weren't supposed to stand out at all. Sadhana knew that. As an Indian you had to be doubly careful—even before 9/11, much before everything that happened, all the mayhem, the rules, the Ashcroft suspicions, even being female and less suspectable, and this had nothing to do with that, it just had to do with living here—to melt into the background, to not draw attention to yourself. You had to be adaptive. You had to blend in. No doubt you already stood out anyway, because you were brown. But really, because of it, you had to be careful. To keep *your* voice down, even if the Americans didn't. You would think Suraiya would know these things, having lived here three years already, that too not as a graduate student in a University but as a worker in the American workplace.

But Suraiya was oblivious. Have you ever played pool, Sadhana?

No. When would she have time to do something like that?

You should try it Sadhana—I can't begin to tell you, it's so romantic!

Romantic?

Yes! I'm telling you! It is just incredibly romantic, you cannot learn, you know, exactly how to hold the stick, and exactly how to shoot, unless you hold your fingers just a certain way over the stick, and position your body, just so that you can get the right kind of momentum when you shoot—and it's much easier if someone shows you!

Hmm, said Sadhana, skirting the slope where the Canada geese were pecking at popcorn a little red-cheeked Japanese boy and his family were throwing for them. The geese looked large at close quarters and more greedy than cordial, rushing forward to edge each other out each time a pile of popcorn fell on the grass.

That's what's romantic, said Suraiya, who didn't seem to need much of a response to keep on going. You know, the person has to bend forward, sort of over you, and enclose you in his arms and lean down, and touch your finger to the stick—you can just imagine—

To the extent to which this actually registered, Sadhana had an instant reaction of serious alarm and lurched sideways, without thinking, directly into the path of two geese flying forward to fight for popcorn being flung casually close to her. She flinched as the two brown and white bodies shuffled and collided with the side of her waist and legs, it was more shock at the actual collision than the force, itself, of it, that made her stumble and clutch for a moment, haphazardly, at cool blue September air, before collapsing in an ungainly heap by the side of the slope, one leg caught involuntarily beneath the other. The geese squeaked in outrage at having encountered human flesh rather than mandible corn and flew upwards, over their heads and across the lake, in a flurry of vocal protest. Other nearby geese, immediately excited and sympathetic, fluttered upward in a great rush of babbling and wings. People stopped and stared. The Japanese family hurried over. You ok, ok?

Yes, yes, I'm fine! Sadhana felt terribly embarrassed at the sudden spurt of interest in her well-being. She struggled to her feet, took the hand that Suraiya held out to her, lifting her up. Thank you, I'm fine!

Oh ok, said the boy's father, smiling and beaming. The boy's mother, petite and short-haired, brushed Sadhana's skirt and back, where bits of leaf clung. The boy sucked on his popcorn and stared poutily. She was the one who had made his geese fly off.

Sorry I'm ok, she mumbled, trying to hurry on.

Those are big birds, Suraiya said, as if in surprise, and a few passers-by laughed.

You didn't know how big, did you!

Up close and personal, they sure are, someone chuckled.

Who would have thought!

The little knot of people who had paused dispersed and they walked on.

Suraiya said, You sure you're ok?

Yes yes of course. Sadhana brushed her jacket down, where leaves and bits of grass had gotten stuck to it.

So, as I was saying, resumed Suraiya cheerfully, you should get your husband to play pool with you sometime, Sadhana, it's sexy!

The ludicrous picture this conjured up, Anil bending solicitously over his wife—his wife! when he could more excitedly be doing this with someone like Trish or some other woman he met—in a smoky bar over a sexy pool table made Sadhana laugh, unabashedly, no consciousness now, of people looking.

You have no idea, she said, how funny that is!

Suraiya smiled in a light-hearted way, pleased that Sadhana was laughing, not really taking her seriously. What's so funny?

Would you ever do that, Sadhana said, reasonably, with Ravi?

Suraiya pulled her mouth and eyebrows into an expressive contortion that spelled clearly enough her views on that possibility. Ravi has to plan everything, she said. He has to sit with maps of every state park we want to visit, he has to call six of his Indian friends at work to get the right directions, he has to read up all the history and geography on the place, do all his Internet research, then he has to schedule our visit down to our trips to the restroom in between hiking and lunch, and he has to reel out all his research to me in the car, at the park, even if a guide is talking, he has to act in

public like he knows everything and I know nothing, he's the male, I'm the female -- you call that romantic!

Suraiya stopped for a fraction of a second before she resumed. She was no longer animated. What I like about American men, she stopped. Okay, men like Eric, she amended, they don't treat women like they're delicate and incapable. Eric talks to me like I'm his equal, like my opinion about everything matters.

They were both silent for a few moments. They had started to walk back to the office.

And he's fun and spontaneous and romantic, said Suraiya, as if Sadhana had asked for a rundown of all Eric Redding's stellar qualities.

Privately, Sadhana was battling between the desire to speak and the politics of staying silent. But what about marriage, she wanted to screech, as loudly as the geese, what about being married? Doesn't it mean anything, that you're married to Ravi, and not Eric Redding?

That's just it, said Suraiya, heatedly, as if in response to just this unspoken question. He is nothing like Ravi—he is nothing like chauvinistic or mathematic or excluding. He's charming, he's friendly, he's open!

They stood at the corner of Constitution and 17th, waiting for the light to turn green. People shuffled around them. A bicyclist in bright yellow and black nylon zipped up the sidewalk and paused beside them. Sadhana said, quietly (so the bicyclist could not hear), But Suraiya, you have to think about it—how can you go out with any man when you're a married woman? A siren blared at this moment. The light turned green but the crowd on the sidewalk stayed frozen while a police car pulled a U-turn and screeched up Constitution Avenue toward the White House. The bicyclist pushed his bike back and looked down, interestedly, at the two Indian women. He was young, lean, dark hair hidden by his helmet, watercolor-blue eyes gleaming in amusement at Sadhana. It was clear he'd heard.

Sadhana refused to feel guilty although her face flushed with embarrassment. She had a right to say what she thought. Someone had to say this to Suraiya, and surely Suraiya was glad she had someone in the States to say what needed to be said. The girl was running wild, and she felt older and wiser than her. There was nothing wrong with saying such a thing. It was like giving advice to a niece or a younger cousin, it was perfectly natural and necessary.

Suraiya however did not appear to share this sentiment. She waited till they had crossed Constitution with the rest of the crowd, watching the bumblebee bicyclist surge ahead, weaving his way dexterously through pedestrians, disappearing down 17th, her face tight and closed. Then she said, just as abruptly, as Sadhana had, You know--why can't I be happy? Why can't I do what I want for once? Why should I have to sacrifice, all my life? Why should I go on pretending that just because I'm a married woman, I'm happy about living with my *boring* husband? Who says I can't go out with another man if I want, if that is what makes me happy?

Sadhana was grateful for the muted sound of Washington traffic around them, for the occasional honking of an irate horn, chatter of tourists on the sidewalk, cry of a seagull above. She was also grateful for the sun still shining on their shoulders, the sidewalk that stretched smoothly between their feet, the feet that kept plodding quite mechanically, her own admirable continuance of motion. She'd thought she was prepared to hear anything. She'd thought Suraiya might dissolve at this point, surrender to worldly advice. On the other hand, she realized, she'd not thought at all about how Suraiya might react. She'd said what she could not stop herself from saying. She would not have said it at all had she known what Suraiya might start talking about. *Happiness*. (What an absurdity.) She stole a sideways glance at Suraiya's agitated face and found no answer there. Where did such illusion of will spring from? She had nothing to say in return. There was nothing to say to that. It felt like instead of words a cool wind had blown between them. Cool day-wind, right off the top of the sudden ocean that surged now, between them. And

what do you say to wind? There was a sudden tightness in her. She could not look at Suraiya, she could not speak.

At that moment, in fact, Sadhana felt as stricken as on the day, a few weeks ago, when Suraiya had said, without stopping *herself*, looking critically at the second bruise she'd seen on Sadhana's face, that to continue staying with a man like Anil, *was just a little stupid, didn't she think?*

It had happened barely two weeks after Lindy had started. Lindy, without whom Sadhana would be lost, who offered, that day, at a moment's notice, to go pick up Ash when neither she nor Anil could. They were going into Production the next day and Sadhana was frantically trying to finish testing when Ash's school-nurse called. It was an hour before school generally closed. The boy is sick, the nurse said, he appears to have acute gastritis, he's asking for you to come pick him up, it's best you come take him home. It threw Sadhana into a panic because it would take her one and a half hours to get to the school. She tried to call Anil but he was neither at his office nor available on his cell phone, she kept being transferred to voice-mail. In desperation, she called Lindy on her cell. And Lindy answered. It's no problem, she said, when the situation was explained to her. It's just an hour early, and I'm home early from classes anyway. Don't worry, Sadhana. So Lindy picked up Ashish, and Sadhana worried only later that evening when it was past eight and Anil had still not showed up. No phone calls, no message on the answering machine, nothing.

When he stepped into the house at nine-thirty, she'd been sitting in the front room with the day's Washington Post, just staring at it. Ashish had fallen asleep again. He'd been asleep when she came home, and had stayed up only to eat his dinner. She let him skip his homework because he was holding his stomach like it hurt real bad and crying soundlessly while he ate. That was when she'd known first something was terribly wrong. At the office the next day, she called and set up an appointment with his doctor.

But just then, the first thing she said to Anil was, Where have you been?

He was drunk. He reeked of it. He stumbled into the room, put his briefcase down, dragged her up by her hair. Why are you waiting for me, he asked. Who asked you to wait?

I tried to call you, she said, twisting around and trying to push his hands out of her hair. I wanted you to pick up Ash.

He let her go abruptly and stood an inch from her, the smell of liquor rising knife-like from his breath.

She persisted, because she had to, for the sake of the boy, she had to say these things that had to be said. Anil was Ash's father, there were obligations he had. Don't you know you are no longer a bachelor, she said, to come and go as you please. You have a son, he is your responsibility. How can you come home so late when he is sick?

He slapped her then, so hard, the ring on his finger connected with her cheekbone, and slapped her again, because the first time, he too must have felt it. The skin broke on her face, she felt the lispings of blood from the ends.

How do I know he is sick, he wanted to know. Do I know that? Did anyone tell me that?

At this moment, Sadhana saw Ash standing at the dining-room door, eyes big, looking at them. He'd just woken, his hair was sleep-mussed and awry. Go, she tried to gesture at him, get back to bed! He didn't say anything, just turned on his heel and left. Anil hadn't seen him.

I tried to call you, Sadhana was whispering, horrified at the red coming off on her hands, smudging her blue cotton house-sari.

Don't give me that! Anil unloosened his tie and walked into the dining-room. He lifted the lids off vessels, looked in. You never called. I never got a message!

She checked later on Ash but he seemed fast asleep again in his bed. She put ice on her cheek. She wiped it with tissue, soaked in Dettol, the antiseptic her mother sent regularly from Secunderabad, then round Rite Aid cottonwool pads she kept for her nails, then a

soft white face-cloth. She stayed up long after Anil slept, holding ice to her cheek at the dining-table.

Nothing hid the purple laceration, the mottled bruise, the imprint of fingers the next morning. She poured liquid make-up into her palm and swabbed it into the shape of the bruise. It looked only slightly better, the beige of the make-up and the wheat-bread of her skin not exactly the same color. Not so well-camouflaged that no-one noticed. Everyone commented, and casually, at first, not realizing until later what it must be. I fell, she said a few times. Then, hit my head on the bookcase. A book, she said finally, a book fell on me.

She knew people were talking. She didn't hear them, but she knew. The looks of stupefaction and disbelief told her that. The secretary knew, from the look on her face. Barbara Dedyer knew, but wouldn't say a word, her Connecticut reserve stood her in good stead. Suraiya, unprotected by Connecticut or any other American state, a joint-family product like herself and void of reserve, gasped openly in horror and said it immediately, How dare he do that to you, Sadhana, how can you stand it!

Please, close the door! Sadhana half-rose from her chair.

Suraiya hastily shut the door. It's ridiculous, you can't let him get away with it!

It's nothing, said Sadhana, touching the tender bump tenderly, I'll be alright.

How can you say it's nothing? He just beats you all the time and—

Please! Sadhana half-rose from her seat again. Please, let's not talk about it! I'll be ok!

He has no right—

No he doesn't.

Then how can you let him do something like this?

I'm not letting him!

Of course you are! If you weren't, you would have left him by now! Staying with a guy like that is just plain stupid, don't you think!

A bright harsh silence fell abruptly between them. They stared at each other, mutually stricken.

I have no choice, Sadhana wanted to say. That is how it is, in our culture. We do not think of ourselves. We have to think of our children.

But she did not say it. She felt she'd said it before. Her face hurt. She wanted Suraiya to disappear.

I have to go to a meeting, muttered Suraiya, as if on cue. She pulled the door open and left.

That same feeling of chasm, of nothing-left-to-say, of awkward distancing, stalked them today, right after Suraiya's outburst on *being happy*, the rest of the way back to the office. Luckily it was a short walk. Luckily they ran into Brad Egges from the Web team and could make small talk about trips to the beach, new requirements from Marketing, and this time last year when the horror of Sep 11 happened and they had all rushed home, or, as in Sadhana's case, got stuck in a car for five hours with three other programmers who contracted in DC and lived in Reston, watching the smoke billow from the Pentagon at Key Bridge, unable to move because the panicked traffic around them was at a standstill. It was fortunate, because Sadhana had no conceivable response to Suraiya, and it didn't seem like Suraiya felt like she should have one either.

Eric brought his daughter to work one morning when he came back from his trip, because she got a special day off from school in preparation for the All-State Track meet the next day. Sadhana ran into them in the kitchen. Stefanie was tall and thin for her age, which Sadhana learned was twelve. She was in flared blue jeans and a white cotton shirt with ruffles and a motley assortment of bright bead jewelry on her chest and wrists. Eric was beaming as he spoke to Marisol Nunez from Admin of her prowess in Track, especially the

100-meter sprint, and in tennis, and volleyball and all things athletic. Stefanie sat at a table playing with pen and paper and said, Oh come on, Dad, you're embarrassing me! at regular intervals.

Now is the time to enjoy your life, said Marisol, beaming, don't you think, Sadhana!

Of course, said Sadhana mechanically, pouring her coffee, wondering in whose book sports equated with enjoyment. She used to hate sports. Catch her out there on that field, running! She hated those bloomers they made you wear at St. Ann's under your skirt. But young children needed encouragement at all times. That's wonderful, she murmured, as Eric told them the story of how she'd won the Junior League Track both in the county and the region.

Dad's so fixated, muttered Stefanie, although she didn't look unhappy about it. She smiled, and the metallic caps of her braces glinted in happy reflection.

Later, from her office at lunch-time, standing by the window and watching the random forays of people heading out to lunch below, Sadhana made out three familiar heads, heading in the direction of the Mall, toward Pennsylvania and Constitution. The shiny blonde head of Stefanie, and the shiny brown and newly-streaked blonde head of the newly hair-salonned Suraiya Krishnan. Eric and Suraiya were holding hands. Eric had his other arm resting loosely round the shoulders of his tall gangly daughter. Eric laughed, throwing back his head. Suraiya nestled closer. Sadhana felt an odd pang, watching them. Like she was watching a scene in a movie, not the mundane view of 18th street at lunchtime on a Thursday morning. Delivery trucks honked, double-parked, brought traffic behind to a standstill. Men and women in suits hurried by. The African-American woman selling purses from her cart held out a red Gucci look-alike to a young American woman in beige and pink striped pants and a black hat, who looked like New York, not Washington. Their three heads bobbed onward. Sadhana felt a funny feeling she could not identify at first. Then she knew. It was a sharp little lurch of sadness, because they looked like an American family out for a lunchtime stroll, because Suraiya did not look like a married woman, and Eric

did not look like a daring divorcé playboy from Hollywood, playing high stakes with an exotically foreign and exotically married woman, but rather as if he were staid, comfortable in himself, a loving father, and a loyal husband. They looked in fact as if they belonged together, and it made Sadhana feel a wave of loneliness, watching them. She did not want to be with them. She did not want to be Suraiya. She just felt sad, watching them, because they seemed happy, and she knew without having to say it out loud to anybody, or anyone saying it to her, that she had long ago closed all the doors to finding that feeling for herself.

One little change had occurred in her schedule ever since that day the nurse called and she'd been unable to go pick up Ashish. She had started to drive to work and park at the garage on Pennsylvania near 17th, even though it cost a lot and she'd never previously considered it because of the extra expense—the gas, the tolls, the parking. But she made it to the \$8 Early Bird parking because she kept her early-morning schedule, and she used her long-hoarded stash of quarters for the tolls on Toll Road, and it was faster, and she beat all the rush-hour traffic coming up on Route 7 and 50 anyway, so she quelled her conscience and kept driving.

She still felt mostly guilty about the gas—she had to fill the tank of her black Chevy Cavalier now every week—and both at the gas stations, and locked sometimes in a spurt of traffic on Memorial Bridge or Constitution Avenue, among the vastly gleaming metal columns of cars, jeeps, SUVs, Metro-buses, she felt the familiar pang of NRI guilt—the Non-Resident Indian's haunted remembrance of how much a single liter of petrol cost in India these days (almost a dollar, which meant almost \$4 for a gallon) and probably everywhere else, while it was dead cheap here—\$1.05 sometimes—and how this whole country was adding to global warming with all the carbon emissions, and now, with the Trade Center attacks, and the war for oil in Iraq that was suddenly being aired as an imminent possibility

by the Bush administration, it was all a sign the US was too casually reliant on gas, she felt terrible she was a part of it.

Purely from the science point of view, because she understood quite analytically how destructive emissions were, how depleting of fossil fuels the automobile industry was, how disruptive of who-knew-what tender ecological balance all that drilling must be wreaking beneath the earth's crust. The purest of science worked for the planet, she knew, not the politics of nations—as a science major all her life, it would be irresponsible of her not to know that. But she was beginning to feel less and less capable of being responsible enough to act on what she knew. The guilt was always there, it was everpresent, but these days it had become somewhat muffled guilt—everything came to her these days as muffled, not-quite-there, illusory, everything except her overpowering anxiety over Ashish. It seemed like work, the daily routine, living with Anil, writing code, testing, discussing database problems with the DBA, eating lunch, talking with Lindy or Suraiya or Barbara Dedyer, everything had become suddenly cottonwooled and meaningless, a sludge of routine she merely needed to get through. She focused on keeping an eye on Ashish, making sure he ate everything she put in front of him, taking him for walks by the creek in the evening, watching while he bicycled or threw hoops with his friends over on the Plum Tree Court cul-de-sac.

Anil didn't say anything when she started driving—maybe because dinner was never late these days, she was always home early—and she didn't say anything about traffic, accidents she passed, detours, fog in the mornings, she watched the reddish sun dazzle the pearly-dim waters of the Potomac and lighten the arches of the Roosevelt bridge, and kept all her thoughts about the day to herself. The only people to whom she talked about traffic these days were the Ethiopians who manned the garage-booth in the mornings, a father and twenty-year-old son, they smiled at her because she was a fellow foreigner, they understood on-edge Indian mothers who drove in early to work in order to take care of their families.

If she thought about her own part in fossil-fuel depletion or acceleration of oil wars at all, it was, like everything else, a sludge-stopped, muddy thought that circled and stopped—she was doing this for Ashish, for a reason, a cause, surely it was temporary, it would end sometime, she didn't know when, how could she think of everything all at once, the planet, the oil, she was doing this for Ashish, a reason, a cause.

The day the nurse called again and said Ashish was sick again, did she want to come pick him up, the first thing she felt was vindication. She could take lunch early, drive down 66, take him home, maybe even call Lindy and come back to work. If she drove fast, she could make it there and back in one and a half hours. It took her a minute of relief at this falling-into-place convenience having the car afforded, before the familiar sinking fear over Ash rose up. It was physical, an anxiety that transmuted into a pain in her chest. It made her hands shake as she put her purse together, took her lunch-box out and stuck it in the drawer, saved all her files, sent email to the team about being late from lunch (a family emergency), and logged out of the system.

She was just about ready to run out of the office when the door pushed open and Suraiya's face appeared. Sadhana I'm so glad you're still here!

Suraiya stepped into the room just as Sadhana was about to whirlwind out of it, which of course stopped both of them for a moment, Suraiya's eyes going round as she took in Sadhana's jacket, purse, car-keys, and look of frantic impatience, Sadhana's growing more impatient as she took in Suraiya's Kate-Moss-like thinness, her sheer gray tights, short gray skirt, sleeveless white blouse. Suraiya seemed like she'd been steadily losing weight since she'd started going out with Eric Redding. It was no secret in the office now, everyone knew, although everyone acted discreet, being mostly disapproving but unclear as to best reaction, and the Indian programmers on the team, that is, the men, just kept their faces

blank when Suraiya approached, kicking a cloud of Obsession or Splendor or L'eau Par Kenzo ahead of her (every day a different scent), wraith-like and model-thin in her form-fitting outfits, and frankly, who could blame them, how was one supposed to react with a woman like her.

I have to go pick up Ash, Sadhana said, he's sick.

I'm so sorry, said Suraiya. What's wrong with him?

Can I tell you later? I have to go, Suraiya!

I'm so sorry, said Suraiya again. But she seemed distracted and on edge. But I came to ask if you could give me a ride.

Now?

Yes, now—I'll grab my bag, meet you at the elevator.

Where to?

Don't worry, it's on your way home—trust me!

Sadhana let out a breath and closed the office door behind her and walked down the maze of cubes to the double-door into the hallway. From the other end, Suraiya flew to join her, flimsy silver crochet sweater in hand, dangly bead purse on her shoulder, just as the elevator rolled up.

They were half-walking, half-running down Pennsylvania, Suraiya's heels going clack-clack-clack, when Suraiya said, The Day's Inn in Arlington off 66 at Glebe, do you know it?

No!

Don't worry, I know the exit! It's right by 66, Sadhana, you don't have to go out of your way.

Sadhana wondered if she could open the passenger door by her exit and let Suraiya fly out, that would translate to not going out of her way.

They drove out of the parking garage into cloudy broken-egg sunlight, a gray and white day with rain building. As they drove over the Roosevelt bridge, Sadhana said, So how come you have to go to Day's Inn when you don't have your own car?

Oh. Suraiya sighed. It's one of those things that happened. I had already made the appointment. I thought I'd have my car, I completely forgot it had to go for a tune-up today. I'm so lucky you're

going that way--really, Sadhana, I would have had to take a cab otherwise.

It's no problem. Sadhana mouthed the words mechanically. It's not like she'd had a choice. You don't refuse a friend or colleague when she asks a favor. Especially an Indian friend. You never know when you might need one yourself. Wasn't that the cardinal rule of your culture? You help each other out when you have a problem. Although it didn't sound like Suraiya had a problem.

They didn't speak further until the signs for Ballston and Glebe Road came up, and Suraiya said, That's me! And, Here, north, when they drove up the exit ramp and stopped at the light.

The Day's Inn was right on Glebe, about a block down from the exit, she was right, it would not take long. Sadhana drove under the arches to the parking lot and stopped by the lobby.

Thanks so much Sadhana! Suraiya had already got out of the car.

Wait! Sadhana just realized something. When will you get back? But Suraiya was already smiling and waving and teetering away on her silvery heels out of earshot (unless you wanted to shout, and of course, in the vicinity of a hotel—however modest—Sadhana didn't want to shout).

The next minute she was too busy realizing the Day's Inn was more than a hotel, it was, to be precise, a motel, to worry about how on earth Suraiya was going to get back to the office, without arranging to pick her up on the way back. She was realizing this only because a dark red Chrysler convertible with its top up had pulled up, and a familiar blond head appeared in the driver's window, Eric Redding's face, wearing the same fatuous grin she'd seen on Suraiya Krishnan's. Sadhana found she couldn't quite put the car in reverse and pull away just yet. She stared as Eric Redding leapt out of the car like the fit Mall runner he was, in his checked brown tweed jacket and his velvet olive-green pants and creamy checked shirt, leather loafers, unable to help the realization that was crowding her well-clad-for-fall body from the top of her combed hair to her properly shod feet: They were *both* here. Eric Redding and Suraiya Krishnan. She said *nothing*. Then she said *appointment*. Not

conference. Or interview. Not: I am meeting my cousin from Kanpur who's stopping in town after her sojourn in Switzerland. *Him*. It was *him*. And this was the Day's Inn, an overnight hotel, no, wait, a *motel*—and Sadhana had driven her here--oh my *god!*

Eric bounded up the sidewalk, whistled as he headed toward the lobby. Suraiya was just stepping through the doors. She hadn't seen him, but it looked like he'd seen her. Of course he didn't stop to glance at the stricken Chevy Cavalier illegally parked in the Handicapped spot, engine running, or the stricken head frozen behind the steering-wheel. He bounded, oblivious, and Sadhana watched the doors swing open and close, watched Suraiya turn, exclaim in delight, watched Eric gather her up in his arms, as if they were lovers already, long-married, soul-met, eternally-known to each other, all in a state of trembling disbelief, yet oddly, simultaneously, not shocked at all—hadn't this, exactly, been what everything was leading up to, all that flirtation, open hand-holding, that devil-may-care air of insouciance Suraiya had acquired? A far cry from that moment, just a few weeks ago in the office kitchen, when Eric had revealed he knew so little of Indian women he had no idea they went out with men or that he did not know Suraiya was married or that he really didn't care if she was.

Sadhana reversed and pulled slowly out of the lot and back onto Glebe then 66, and stepped on the gas. She was remembering Ashish, and the feeling of dread came back as crab-apples turning pink and maples in citrus orange passed by.

But Ashish seemed fine when she walked into the nurse's room to pick him up. Like he was holding himself together fairly well, upright, and not even tearful, his blue backpack posted sturdily across his back, red nylon jacket all zipped up, his face patient and watchful, breaking into a big smile of relief when he saw her: Mummy!

Sweetie! She bent down, kissed him, inordinately relieved. She hadn't known what to expect. She'd tried not to imagine. But she'd

not been able to stop the tide of images that flickered before her on the tree-lit slopes, the shiny railtracks on 66, later the toll booths, the speeding cars on Toll Road, the plateglass windows of the dotcom buildings that lay empty now, after the dotcom crash, in Reston and Herndon. Ash, drawn foetally into a knot on the floor. Ash, held back by the nurse and the principal, screaming for his mother. Ash catatonic with mysterious pain, clutching his stomach and sobbing wordlessly.

No, there wasn't a tear. Can we go home, mummy?

He was held-in, she saw, almost calm. Of course, let me just talk to the nurse for a moment.

But the nurse, a young American woman who looked like a schoolgirl herself, was not very helpful. She was serious and spectacled. But not dressed like a nurse in a hospital. Or even a person in a school. She was in blue jeans and a white cotton sweater. Beats me, she said, I really cannot tell what is wrong with your boy, Mrs. Anil. He comes in here each time with a different problem. I'm a nurse, not a doctor!

Yes, but what is the problem today? Sadhana tried not to be angry that the nurse called her Mrs., let alone Mrs. Anil, which, although her legal married name now, grated on her ears each time she heard it. She liked being called by her first name, like everyone else, she thought, in America, who was—why did the nurse have to call her Mrs as if she were old and matronly, did she think Indians deserved greater respect? The thought briefly crossed her mind that she was on school grounds, where all sorts of pointless respect was bandied about, Mrs. was probably what most of the mothers were called. It was either that or the nurse, like so many other people she knew, even her neighbors, addressed her this way because she was being polite in the face of a foreignness she'd decided already she could not understand, it no doubt being incomprehensibly different, politeness was safer than lack thereof. Hence the Mrs. All of which combined awareness made Sadhana doubly annoyed. She didn't need extra respect!

First he came in with a tummy-ache, said the nurse, whose name-plate on her sweater read Carole, but who had never identified herself verbally to Sadhana as anything other than The School Nurse. Then he had a headache. Then he bent over and had spasms.

Spasms? What do you mean, spasms?

I mean, contractions of the lower abdomen, causing the subject to bend and clutch lower parts, spelled out the suddenly-cold nurse.

Oh my god.

Temperature and blood pressure both normal, said the nurse. I think it's a earache.

What?

Well, confided Carole, I've seen babies do this kind of thing, you never know what it is, and then you find out it's a ear infection!

Sadhana took a deep breath. This girl just *looked* intelligent, she thought, it was hard to tell if she'd had a medical education. Did anything else happen?

No.

Sadhana paused. She wondered if she should pursue the earache theory, just in case. Did you see him clutching his ears or anything? (She noticed the nurse looked anxious when she said clutching, as if afraid she could not pronounce it.)

Not that I recall, the nurse said. He did hold his head in his hands a lot.

They stared at each other for a moment. That's all, said the nurse, probably meaning Goodbye.

Thank you, said Sadhana, feeling at a loss, not sure what she was thanking the girl for.

You're very welcome, smiled Carole now, as if she'd given Sadhana something. You take care of the little boy now!

Sadhana gritted her teeth and walked out clutching Ash's hand. It was the girl, she told herself, *this* girl, this nurse, trying to be older than she was, more settled than she was, more matronly than she was. Calling Ash the little boy. Calling her Mrs. Providing no medical diagnosis whatsoever. She probably wasn't representative of

all young American school nurses. Just of herself, trying hard to *be* one.

Ash said, Can we go home now?

We're going home Ash! She settled him in his seat and looked at his quiet face. How are you feeling, sweetie?

Ash took a little breath and didn't answer immediately. We have to go home, he said, sternly.

Sadhana felt the sinking in her she'd felt all morning, since the nurse called, the uncertainty, and turned back to the wheel, and drove out of the school parking lot. She felt helpless, glancing every now and then at his quiet little self, tucked into his seat. He'd been very sick all morning, it sounded like. He was being so brave now. So quiet. She couldn't bear to think what might be going on inside him.

They pulled up at the house and she saw rightaway Anil's red Acura was in the driveway. Anil was home, and he'd not told her. She parked her car beside his in the driveway, thinking slowly she could have asked him to go pick up Ash if she'd known he was stopping at home at lunch. It was almost one. Ash seemed to have frozen in his seat. She got out and opened the car door. Come on, let's go inside.

You go!

What?

You go first.

She sighed and touched her hand to his neck and head, then pulled him out of the car seat. All that trouble to bring him home, now he sounded addled. He wasn't running a fever though.

She took the backpack and slung it over her shoulder, put her hand in his and led him up the walk. She paused by the short round yew three steps from the door, just beneath the open window. She paused because the blinds were up. Music was playing and it filtered out. Oddly familiar music, that she'd heard before, she realized, at Natalie's party by the pool. Some rock group singing *Wasting My Time*. Through the open window, she saw Anil on the couch, shirtless and tieless, bending over something. Or someone. One step more and she could see who it was. *Lindy*. Melinda, her reliable and

religious baby-sitter, of the mousy brown hair and conservative clothing, now of the flower-like lily limbs and void of clothing of any kind, writhing religiously on their beige living-room couch like an octopus, being devoured by her shirtless husband, their faces lifting and meeting, mouths plastering and coming apart, gasps and moans inaudible above the high-powered shouting of the rock stars on the stereo.

Sadhana made a sound like a mourning dove, deep in her throat, and put her hands out, backpack falling with a thud on the carefully-grown grass, as if she could stop them, reach them, call out to them. She felt her knees give way and fell, not caring that grass was on her suntan tights, her burgundy TJ Maxx skirt, she fell, and her child fell beside her, trying to hold her, lift her up, she was crying, not even aware she'd started to sob, tears slipping and surging and heaving their way out of her. She saw Ash was sobbing and sniffing too. Very slowly it came to her then, and she clutched Ash, there in the grass of their lawn, in bright one o' clock light, and looked into his tear-streaked face and understood. *This* was his sickness. *This* was his pain. All these days, Melinda had been his babysitter—and she was with him, early afternoons, for weeks—and Anil—when had it begun? She could not begin to imagine—he must have come home early, all those days, at lunchtimes, like now, or after Ash came home, using their house, not caring that Ash was there, could see.

Sadhana could not see ahead of her. She stumbled blindly to her feet, took Ash's hand, stumbled over the grass, back, back to her car. I hate him, I hate him, I HATE him, Ash was saying, stomping his foot on the car floor and crying.

Sadhana had never fully confided in her son, had never thought to co-opt him, spill her secret thoughts in front of him, but now she said, helpless, invaded, wide-open—How can we possibly leave him, he is your father. *Indian women did not leave*. Besides, she had no idea where she would go if she left him. She had no family in the States.

But she looked into Ash's crying face and thought, she had friends. Her own savings account. A credit card. A car. That was

what she thought, right after she said the opposite to Ashish. She remembered Suraiya's face, laughing and ecstatic and eager, in the Day's Inn parking lot. She remembered Ashish in the doorway, watching them. She remembered Suraiya saying, *Staying with a guy like that is just plain stupid, don't you think?*

She took a tissue then out of her purse and blew into it, put her seatbelt on and reversed slowly out of the driveway, her son beside her, seeing Lindy's car now, the gold Honda by the curb, parked there, comfortable and easy, as if for the first time, and kept on reversing, and reversing, and reversing, until she could finally drive away from the house, the street, the man who used to be her husband, her entire life in the United States as she had, so far, known it.

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