

# Once in a Lifetime

by Jhumpa Lahiri May 8, 2006

I had seen you before, too many times to count, but a farewell that my family threw for yours, at our house in Inman Square, is when I begin to recall your presence in my life. Your parents had decided to leave Cambridge, not for Atlanta or Arizona, as some other Bengalis had, but to move all the way back to India, abandoning the struggle that my parents and their friends had embarked upon. It was 1974. I was six years old. You were nine. What I remember most clearly are the hours before the party, which my mother spent preparing for everyone to arrive: the furniture was polished, the paper plates and napkins set out on the table, the rooms filled with the smell of lamb curry and *pullao* and the L'Air du Temps my mother used for special occasions, spraying it first on herself, then on me, a firm squirt that temporarily darkened whatever I was wearing. I was dressed that evening in an outfit that my grandmother had sent from Calcutta: white pajamas with tapered legs and a waist wide enough to gird two of me side by side, a turquoise kurta, and a black velvet vest embroidered with plastic pearls. The three pieces had been arrayed on my parents' bed while I was in the bath, and I had stood shivering, my fingertips puckered and white, as my mother threaded a length of thick drawstring through the giant waist of the pajamas with a safety pin, gathering up the stiff material bit by bit and then knotting the drawstring tightly at my stomach. The inseam of the pajamas was stamped with purple letters within a circle, the seal of the textile company. I remember fretting about this fact, wanting to wear something else, but my mother assured me that the seal would come out in the wash, adding that, because of the length of the kurta, no one would notice it, anyway.

My mother had more pressing concerns. In addition to the quality and quantity of the food, she was worried about the weather: snow was predicted for later that evening, and this was a time when my parents and their friends didn't own cars. Most of the guests, including you, lived less than a fifteen-minute walk away, either in the neighborhoods behind Harvard and M.I.T. or just across the Mass Avenue Bridge. But some were farther, coming by bus or the T from Malden or Medford or Waltham. "I suppose Dr. Choudhuri can drive people home," she said of your father as she untangled my hair. Your parents were slightly older—seasoned immigrants, as mine were not. They had left India in 1962, before the laws welcoming foreign students changed. While my father and the other men were still taking exams, your father already had a Ph.D., and he drove a car, a silver Saab with bucket seats, to his job at an engineering firm in Andover. I had been driven home in that car many nights, after parties had gone late and I had fallen asleep in some strange bed or other.

Our mothers had met when mine was pregnant. She didn't know it yet; she was feeling dizzy and had sat down on a bench in a small park. Your mother was perched on a swing, gently swaying back and forth as you soared above her, when she noticed a young Bengali woman in a sari, wearing vermilion in her hair. "Are you feeling all right?" your mother asked in the polite form. She told you to get off the swing, and then she and you escorted my mother home. It was during that walk that your mother suggested that perhaps mine was expecting. They became instant friends, spending their days together while our fathers were at work. They talked about the lives they had left behind in Calcutta: your mother's

beautiful home in Jodhpur Park, with hibiscus and rosebushes blooming on the rooftop, and my mother's modest flat in Maniktala, above a grimy Punjabi restaurant, where seven people existed in three small rooms. In Calcutta they would probably have had little occasion to meet. Your mother had gone to a convent school and was the daughter of one of Calcutta's most prominent lawyers, a pipe-smoking Anglophile and a member of the Saturday Club. My mother's father was a clerk in the General Post Office, and she had neither eaten at a table nor sat on a commode before coming to America. Those differences were irrelevant in Cambridge, where they were both equally alone. Here they shopped together for groceries, and complained about their husbands, and cooked at either our stove or yours, dividing up the dishes for our respective families when they were done. They knitted together, switching projects when one of them got bored. When I was born, your parents were the only friends to visit the hospital. I was fed in your old high chair, pushed along the streets in your old pram.

During the party it started snowing, as predicted, stragglers arriving with wet, white-caked coats that we had to hang from the shower-curtain rod. For years, my mother talked about how, when the party ended, your father made countless trips to drive people home, taking one couple as far as Braintree, claiming that it was no trouble, that this was his last opportunity to drive the car, anyway. In the days before you left, your parents came by again, to bring over pots and pans, small appliances, blankets and sheets, half-used bags of flour and sugar, bottles of shampoo. We continued to refer to these things as your mother's. "Get me Parul's frying pan," my mother would say. Or, "I think we need to turn the setting down on Parul's toaster." Your mother also brought over shopping bags filled with clothes that she thought I might be able to use, that had once belonged to you. My mother put the bags away and took them with us when we moved, a few years later, from Inman Square to a house in Sharon, incorporating the clothes into my wardrobe as I grew into them. Mainly they were winter items, things you would no longer need in India. There were thick T-shirts and turtlenecks in navy and brown. I found these clothes ugly and tried to avoid them, but my mother refused to replace them. And so I was forced to wear your sweaters, your rubber boots on rainy days. One winter I had to wear your coat, which I hated so much that it caused me to hate you as a result. It was blue-black with an orange lining and a scratchy grayish-brown trim around the hood. I never got used to having to hook the zipper on the right side, to looking so different from the other girls in my class with their puffy pink and purple jackets. When I asked my parents if I could have a new coat they said no. A coat was a coat, they said. I wanted desperately to get rid of it. I wanted it to be lost. I wished that one of the boys in my class, many of whom owned identical coats, would accidentally pick it up in the narrow alcove where we rushed to put on our things at the end of the day. But my mother had gone so far as to iron a label inside the coat with my name on it, an idea she'd got from her subscription to *Good Housekeeping*.

Once I left it on the school bus. It was a mild late-winter day, the windows on the bus open, everybody's outerwear shed on the seats. I was taking a different bus than usual, one that dropped me off in the neighborhood of my piano teacher, Mrs. Hennessey. When the bus neared my stop I stood up, and when I reached the front the driver reminded me to be careful crossing the street. She pulled back the lever that opened the door, letting fragrant air onto the bus. I was about to step off, coatless, but then someone cried out, "Hey, Hema, you forgot this!" I was startled that anyone on that bus knew my name; I had forgotten about the name tag.

By the following year I had outgrown the coat, and to my great relief it was donated to

charity. The other items your parents bequeathed to us, the toaster and the crockery and the Teflon pots and pans, were gradually replaced as well, until there was no longer any physical trace of you in the house. For years our families had no contact. The friendship did not merit the same energy my parents devoted to their relatives, buying stacks of aerograms at the post office and sending them off faithfully every week, asking me to write the same three sentences to each set of grandparents at the bottom. My parents spoke of you rarely, and I imagine they assumed that our paths were unlikely to cross again. You'd moved to Bombay, a city far from Calcutta, which my parents and I never visited. And so we did not see you, or hear from you, until the first day of 1981, when your father called us very early in the morning to wish us a happy New Year and say that your family was returning to Massachusetts, where he had a new job. He asked if, until he found a house, you could all stay with us. For days afterward my parents talked of nothing else. They wondered what had gone wrong: Had your father's position at Larsen & Toubro, too good to turn down at the time, fallen through? Was your mother no longer able to abide the mess and heat of India? Had they decided that the schools weren't good enough for you there? Back then international calls were kept short. Of course, your family was welcome, my parents said, and marked the date of your arrival on the calendar in our kitchen. Whatever the reason you were coming, I gathered from my parents' talk that it was regarded as a wavering, a weakness. "They should have known it's impossible to go back," they said to their friends, condemning your parents for having failed at both ends. We had stuck it out as immigrants while you had fled; had we been the ones to go back to India, my parents seemed to suggest, we would have stuck it out there as well. Until your return I'd thought of you as a boy of eight or nine, frozen in time, the size of the clothes I'd inherited. But you were twice that now, sixteen, and my parents thought it best that you occupy my room, and that I sleep on a folding cot set up in their bedroom. Your parents would stay in the guest room, down the hall. My parents often hosted friends who came from New Jersey or New Hampshire for the weekend, to eat elaborate dinners and talk late into the evening about Indian politics. But by Sunday afternoon those guests were always gone. I was accustomed to having children sleep on the floor by my bed, in sleeping bags. Being an only child, I enjoyed this occasional company. But I had never been asked to relinquish my room entirely. I asked my mother why they weren't giving you the folding cot instead of me.

"Where would we put it?" she asked. "We only have three bedrooms."

"Downstairs," I suggested. "In the living room."

"That wouldn't look right," my mother said. "Kaushik must practically be a man by now. He needs his privacy."

"What about the basement?" I said, thinking of the small study my father had built there, lined with metal bookcases.

"That's no way to treat guests, Hema. Especially not these. Dr. Choudhuri and Parul Di were such a blessing when we first had you. They drove us home from the hospital, they brought over food for weeks. Now it's our turn to be helpful."

"What sort of doctor is he?" I asked. Though I had always been in good health, I had an irrational fear of doctors then, and the thought of one living in the house made me nervous, as if his mere presence might make one of us sick.

"He's not a medical doctor. It refers to his Ph.D."

"Baba has his Ph.D. and no one calls him a doctor," I pointed out.

"When we met, Dr. Choudhuri was the only one. It was our way of paying respect."

I asked how long you would be staying with us—a week? Two? My mother couldn't say;

it all depended on how long it took your family to get settled and find a place. The prospect of having to give up my room infuriated me. My feelings were complicated by the fact that, until rather recently, to my great shame, I'd regularly slept with my parents on the cot in their room, and not in the room where I kept my clothes and things. My mother considered the idea of a child sleeping alone a cruel American practice, and therefore did not encourage it, even when we had the space. She told me that she had slept in the same bed as her parents until the day she was married and that this was perfectly normal. But I knew that it was not normal, not what my friends at school did, and that they would ridicule me if they knew. The summer before I started middle school I insisted on sleeping alone. In the beginning my mother kept checking on me during the night, as if I were still an infant who might suddenly stop breathing, asking if I was scared and reminding me that she was just on the other side of the wall. In fact, I was scared that first night; the perfect silence in my room terrified me. But I refused to admit this, for what I feared more was failing at something I should have learned to do at the age of three or four. In the end it was easy; I fell asleep out of sheer anxiety that I would not, and in the morning I woke up alone, squinting in the eastern light my parents' room did not receive. The house was prepared for your arrival. New throw pillows were purchased for the living-room sofa, bright orange against the brown tweed upholstery. The plants and the curios were rearranged, my school portrait framed and hung above the fireplace. The Christmas cards were taken down from around the front door, where my mother and I had taped them one by one as they'd come in the mail. My parents, remembering your father's habit of dressing well, bought robes for themselves to wear in the mornings, my mother's made of velour, my father's styled like a smoking jacket. One day I came home from school and found that the pink-and-white coverlet on my bed had been replaced by a tan blanket. There were new towels in the bathroom for you and your parents, plusher than the ones we used and of a prettier shade of blue. My closet had been weeded, bare hangers left on the rod. I was told to clear out a couple of drawers, and I removed enough things so that I would not have to enter the room while you were in it. I took my pajamas, some outfits to wear to school, and the sneakers I needed for gym. I took the library book I was reading, and the others stacked on my bedside table. I wanted you to see as few of my things as possible, so I cleared away my jewelry box full of cheap tangled chains and my bottles of Avon perfume. I removed the locked diary from my desk drawer, though I'd written only two entries since receiving it for Christmas. I removed the seventh-grade yearbook in which my photograph appeared, the endpapers filled with silly messages from my classmates. It was like deciding which of my possessions I wanted to take on a long trip to India, only this time I was going nowhere. Still, I put my things into a suitcase covered with peeling tags and stickers which had travelled various times back and forth across the world and dragged it into my parents' room.

I studied pictures of your parents; we had a few pasted into an album, taken the night of the farewell party. There was my father, his stiff jet-black hair already a surprise to me by then. He was dressed in a sweater vest, his shirt cuffs rolled back, pointing urgently at something beyond the frame. Your father was in the suit and tie he always wore, his handsome, bespectacled face leaning toward someone in conversation, his greenish eyes unlike anyone else's. The middle part in your mother's hair accentuated the narrow length of her face; the end of her raw-silk sari was wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl. My mother stood beside her, a head shorter and more dishevelled, stray hairs hanging by her ears. They both appeared flushed, the color high in their cheeks, as if from drinking wine, even though all they ever drank in those days was tap water or tea, the bond between

them clear. There was no evidence of you, the person I was most curious about. Who knows where you had lurked in that crowd? I imagine you sat at the desk in the corner of my parents' bedroom, reading a book you'd brought with you, waiting for the party to end. My father went one evening to the airport to greet you. It was a school night for me. The dining table had been set since the afternoon. This was my mother's way when she gave parties, though she had never prepared such an elaborate meal in the middle of the week. An hour before you were expected, she turned on the oven. She had heated up a pan full of oil and begun to fry thick slices of eggplant to serve with the dal, filling the room with a haze of smoke, when my father called to say that though your plane had landed, one of your suitcases had not arrived. I was hungry by then, but it felt wrong to ask my mother to open the oven door and pull out all the dishes for my sake. My mother turned off the oil and I sat with her on the sofa watching a movie on television, something about the Second World War, in which a group of tired men were walking across a dark field. Cinema of a certain period was the one thing my mother loved wholeheartedly about the West. She herself never wore a skirt—she considered it indecent—but she could recall, scene by scene, the outfits that Audrey Hepburn had worn in any given movie.

I fell asleep at her side, and the next thing I knew I was sprawled on the sofa alone, the television turned off, voices filling another part of the house. I stood up, my face hot, my limbs cramped and heavy. You were all in the dining room, eating. Pans of food lined the table, and in addition to the water pitcher there was a bottle of Johnnie Walker that only your parents were drinking, planted between their plates. There was your mother, her slippery dark hair cut to her shoulders, wearing slacks and a tunic, a silk scarf knotted at her neck, looking only vaguely like the woman I'd seen in the pictures. With her bright lipstick and frosted eyelids she looked less exhausted than my mother did. She had remained thin, her collarbones glamorously protruding, unburdened by the weight of middle age that now padded my mother's features. Your father looked more or less the same, still handsome, still wearing a jacket and tie, a different style of glasses his concession to the new decade. You were pale like your father, long bangs combed over to one side of your face, your eyes distracted yet missing nothing. I had not expected you to be handsome. I had not expected to find you appealing in the least.

"My goodness, Hema, already a lady. You don't remember us, do you?" your mother said. She spoke to me in English, in a pleasant, unhurried way, with a voice that sounded amused. "Come, poor thing, we've kept you waiting. Your mother told us you went hungry because of us."

I sat down, embarrassed that you had seen me asleep on the sofa. Though you had all just flown halfway across the world, it was I who felt weary, despite my nap. My mother served me a plate of food, but her attention was on you and the fact that you were refusing seconds.

"We had dinner before we landed," you replied, a faint accent present in your English, but not the strong accent our parents shared. Your voice had deepened, no longer a child's.

"It's remarkable, the amount of food you get in first class," your mother said.

"Champagne, chocolates, even caviar. But I saved room. I remembered your cooking, Shibani," she added.

"First class!" my mother exclaimed, with an intake of breath. "How did you end up there?"

"It was my fortieth-birthday gift," your mother explained. She looked over at your father, smiling. "Once in a lifetime, right?"

"Who knows?" he said, clearly proud of the extravagance. "It could become a terrible habit."

Our parents spoke of the old Cambridge crowd, mine telling yours about people's moves and accomplishments, the bachelors who had married, the children who had been born. They spoke about Reagan winning the election, all the ways that Carter had failed. Your parents spoke of Rome, where you'd had a two-day layover to tour the city. Your mother described the fountains, and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel you had stood three hours in line to see. "So many lovely churches," she said. "Each is like a museum. It made me want to be a Catholic, only to be able to pray in them."

"Do not die before seeing the Pantheon," your father said, and my parents nodded, not knowing what the Pantheon was. I knew—I was, in fact, in the middle of learning about ancient Rome in my Latin class, writing a long report about its art and architecture, all of it based on encyclopedia entries and other books in the school library. Your parents spoke of Bombay and the home you had left behind, a flat on the tenth floor, with a balcony overlooking palm trees and the Arabian Sea. "A pity you didn't visit us there," your mother said. Later, in the privacy of their bedroom, my mother pointed out to my father that we had never been invited.

After dinner I was told to show you the house and where you would sleep. Normally I loved to do this for guests, taking a proprietary pleasure in explaining that this was the broom closet, that the downstairs half-bath. But now I lingered over nothing, for I sensed your boredom. I was also nervous at being sent off with you, disturbed by the immediate schoolgirl attraction I felt. I was used to admiring boys by then, boys in my class who were and would remain unaware of my existence. But never someone as old as you, never someone belonging to the world of my parents. It was you who led me, climbing quickly up the stairs, opening doors, poking your head into rooms, unimpressed by it all.

"This is my room. Your room," I said, correcting myself.

After dreading it all this time, now I was secretly thrilled that you would be sleeping here. You would absorb my presence, I thought. Without my having to do a thing, you would come to know me and like me. You walked across the room to the window, opened it, and leaned out into the darkness, letting cold air into the room.

"Ever go out on the roof?" you asked. You did not wait for me to answer, and the next thing I knew you'd lifted the screen and were gone. I rushed over to the window, and when I leaned outside I couldn't see you. I imagined you slipping on the shingles, falling into the shrubbery, my being blamed for the accident, for standing by stupidly as you did such a brazen thing. "Are you O.K.?" I called out. The logical thing would have been to say your name, but I felt inhibited and did not. Eventually you came back around, seating yourself on the incline over the garage, gazing down at the lawn.

"What's behind the house?"

"Woods. But you can't go there."

"Who said?"

"Everyone. My parents and all the teachers in school."

"Why not?"

"A boy got lost in them last year. He's still missing." His name was Kevin McGrath, and he'd been two grades behind me. For a week we'd heard nothing but helicopters, dogs barking, searching for some sign of him.

You did not react to this information. Instead you asked, "Why do people have yellow ribbons tied to their mailboxes?"

"They're for the hostages in Iran."

"I bet most Americans had never even heard of Iran before this," you said, causing me to feel responsible both for my neighbors' patriotism and for their ignorance.

“What’s that thing to the right?”

“A swing set.”

The word must have amused you. You faced me and smiled, though not kindly, as if I’d invented the term.

“I missed the cold,” you said. “This cold.” The remark reminded me that none of this was new to you. “And the snow. When will it snow again?”

“I don’t know. There wasn’t snow for Christmas this year.”

You climbed back into the room, disappointed, I feared, by my lack of information. You glanced at yourself in my white-framed mirror, your head nearly cut off at the top.

“Where’s the bathroom?” you asked, already halfway out the door.

That night, lying on the cot in my parents’ room, wide awake though it was well past midnight, I heard my mother and father talking in the dark. I worried that perhaps you would hear them, too. The bed where you slept was just on the other side of the wall, and if I had been able to stick my hand through it I could have touched you. My parents were at once critical of and intimidated by yours, perplexed by the ways in which they had changed. Bombay had made them more American than Cambridge had, my mother said, something she hadn’t anticipated and didn’t understand. There were remarks concerning your mother’s short hair, her slacks, the Johnnie Walker she and your father had continued to drink after the meal was finished, taking it with them from the dining room to the living room. It was mainly my mother who talked, my father listening and murmuring now and then in tired consent. My parents, who had never set foot in a liquor store, wondered whether they should buy another bottle—at the rate your parents were going, that bottle would be drained by tomorrow, my mother said. She remarked that your mother had become stylish, a pejorative term in her vocabulary, implying a self-indulgence that she shunned. “Twelve people could have flown for the price of one first-class ticket,” she said. My mother’s birthdays came and went without acknowledgment by my father. I was the one who made a card and had him sign it with me on the first of every June. Suddenly my mother sat up, sniffing the air. “I smell smoke,” she said. My father asked if she had remembered to turn off the oven. My mother said she was certain she had, but she asked him to get up and check.

“It’s a cigarette you smell,” he said when he came back to bed. “Someone has been smoking in the bathroom.”

“I didn’t know Dr. Choudhuri smoked,” my mother said. “Should we have put out an ashtray?”

In the morning you all slept in, victims of jet lag, reminding us that despite your presence, your bags crowding the hallways, your toothbrushes cluttering the side of the sink, you belonged elsewhere. When I returned from school in the afternoon you were still sleeping, and at dinner, breakfast for you, you all declined the curry we were eating, craving toast and tea. It was like that for the first few days: you were awake when we slept, sleeping when we were awake; we were leading antipodal lives under the same roof. As a result, apart from the fact that I wasn’t sleeping in my own room, there was little change. I drank my orange juice and ate my bowl of cereal and went off to the bus stop as usual. I spoke to no one of your arrival; I almost never revealed details of my home life to my American friends. As a child, I had always dreaded my birthdays, when a dozen girls would appear in the house, glimpsing the way we lived. I don’t know how I would have referred to you. “A family friend,” I suppose.

Then one day I came home from school and found your parents awake, their ankles crossed on top of the coffee table, filling up the sofa where I normally sat to watch “The

Brady Bunch” and “Gilligan’s Island.” They were chatting with my mother, who was in the recliner with a bowl in her lap, peeling potatoes. Your mother was dressed in a nylon sari of my mother’s, purple with red dots in various sizes. Distressing news of your mother’s missing suitcase had come: it had been located in Rome but had been placed on a flight to Johannesburg. I remember thinking that the sari looked better on your mother than on mine; the intense purple shade was more flattering against her skin. I was told that you were outside in the yard. I did not go out to look for you. Instead I practiced the piano. It was nearly dark by the time you came in, accepting the tea that I was still too young to drink. Your parents drank tea as well, but by six o’clock the bottle of Johnnie Walker was on the coffee table, as it would be every night that you stayed with us. You had gone out in only a pullover, your father’s costly camera slung around your neck. Your face showed the effects of the cold, your eyes blazing, the borders of your ears crimson, your skin glowing from within.

“There’s a stream back there,” you said, “in those woods.”

My mother became nervous then, warning you not to go there, as she had so often warned me, as I had warned you the night you came, but your parents did not share her concern. What had you photographed, they asked instead.

“Nothing,” you replied, and I took it personally that nothing had inspired you. The suburbs were new to you and to your parents. Whatever memories you possessed of America were of Cambridge, a place that I could only dimly recall.

You took your tea and disappeared to my room as if it were yours, emerging only when summoned for dinner. You ate quickly, not speaking, then returned upstairs. It was your parents who paid me court, who asked me questions and complimented me on my manners, on my piano-playing, on all the things I did to help my mother around the house. “Look, Kaushik, how Hema makes her lunch,” your mother would say as I prepared a ham or turkey sandwich after dinner and put it in a paper bag to take to school the next day. I was still very much a child, while you, just three years older, had already eluded your parents’ grasp. You did not argue with them and yet you did not seem to talk to them very much, either. While you were outside I’d heard them tell my mother how unhappy you were to be back. “He was furious that we left, and now he’s furious that we’re here again,” your father said. “Even in Bombay we managed to raise a typical American teen-ager.” I did my homework at the dining table, unable to use the desk in my room. I worked on my ancient-Rome report, something that had interested me until your arrival. Now it seemed silly, given that you’d been there. I longed to work on it in privacy, but your father talked to me at length about the structural aspects of the Colosseum. His civil engineer’s explanations went over my head, were irrelevant to my needs, but to be polite I listened. I worried that he would want to see whether I had incorporated the things he said, but he never bothered me about that. He hunted through his bags and showed me postcards he’d purchased, and though it had nothing to do with my report, he gave me a two-lire coin. When the worst of your jet lag had subsided we went to the mall in my parents’ station wagon. Your mother needed bras, one item that she could not borrow from my voluptuous mother. At the mall our fathers sat together in a sunken area of benches and potted plants, waiting, and you were given some money and allowed to wander off while I accompanied our mothers to the lingerie department in Jordan Marsh. Your mother led us there, with the credit card your father had handed to her before they parted. Normally we went to Sears. On her way to the bras she bought black leather gloves and a pair of boots that zipped to the knee, never looking at the price before taking something off the shelf. In the lingerie department it was me the saleswoman approached. “We have lovely training models, just

in,” she said to your mother, believing that I was her daughter.

“Oh, no, she’s far too young,” my mother said.

“But look, how sweet,” your mother said, fingering the style the saleswoman presented on a hanger, lacy white with a rosebud at its center. I had yet to get my period and, unlike many of the girls at school, still wore flower-printed undershirts. I was ushered into the fitting room, your mother watching approvingly as I took off my coat and sweater and tried on the bra. She adjusted the straps and attached the hook at the back. She tried things on as well, topless beside me without shame, though it embarrassed me to see her large, plumcolored nipples, the surprising droop of her breasts, the dark patches of underarm hair that gave off a faintly acrid but not altogether unpleasant smell. “Perfect,” your mother said, running her finger below the elastic, along my skin, adding, “I hope you know that you’re going to be very beautiful one day.” Despite my mother’s protests, your mother bought me my first three bras, insisting that they were a gift. On the way out, at the makeup counter, she bought a lipstick, a bottle of perfume, and an assortment of expensive creams that promised to firm her throat and brighten her eyes; she was uninterested in the Avon products my mother used. The reward for her purchases at the makeup counter was a large red tote bag. This she gave to me, thinking that it would be useful for my books, and the next day I took it to school.

After a week your father began his new job, at an engineering firm forty miles away. At first my father got up early and dropped him off before returning to Northeastern to teach his economics classes. Then your father bought an Audi with a stick shift. You stayed home with our mothers—your parents wanted to wait until they’d bought their home to see which school you would go to. I was stunned, and envious—half a year without school! To my added chagrin, you were not expected to do anything around the house, never to return your plate or glass to the sink, never to make my bed, which I would see from time to time through the partly open door to my room in a state of total disarray, the blanket on the floor, your clothes heaped on my white desk. You ate enormous amounts of fruit, whole bunches of grapes, apples to their cores, a practice that fascinated me. I did not eat fresh fruit then; the textures and intensity of flavors made me gag. You complained about the taste, or lack of taste, but nevertheless decimated whatever my parents brought home from Star Market. I would find you, when I came home in the afternoons, always at the same end of the sofa, the toes of your thin bare feet hooked around the edge of the coffee table, reading books by Isaac Asimov that you’d picked off my father’s shelves in the basement. I hated “Doctor Who,” the one show you liked on television.

I did not know what to make of you. Because you’d lived in India, I associated you more with my parents than with me. And yet you were unlike my cousins in Calcutta, who seemed so innocent and obedient when I visited them, asking questions about my life in America as if it were the moon, astonished by every detail. You were not curious about me in the least. One day a friend at school invited me to see “The Empire Strikes Back” on a Saturday afternoon. My mother said that I could go, but only if you were invited as well. I protested, telling her that my friend did not know you. Despite my crush, I didn’t want to have to explain to my friend who you were and why you were living in our house.

“You know him,” my mother said.

“But he doesn’t even like me,” I complained.

“Of course he likes you,” my mother said, blind to the full implication of what I’d said.

“He’s adjusting, Hema. It’s something you’ve never had to go through.”

The conversation ended there. As it turned out, you were uninterested in the movie, not having seen “Star Wars” in the first place.

One day I found you sitting at my piano, randomly striking the keys with your index finger. You stood up when you saw me and retreated to the couch.

“Do you hate it here?” I asked.

“I liked living in India,” you said. I did not betray my opinion, that I found trips to India dull, that I didn’t like the geckos that clung to the walls in the evenings, poking in and out of the fluorescent light fixtures, or the giant cockroaches that sometimes watched me as I bathed. I didn’t like the comments my relatives made freely in my presence—that I had not inherited my mother’s graceful hands, that my skin had darkened since I was a child.

“Bombay is nothing like Calcutta,” you added, as if reading my mind.

“Is it close to the Taj Mahal?”

“No.” You looked at me carefully, as if fully registering my presence for the first time.

“Haven’t you ever looked at a map?”

On our trip to the mall you’d bought a record, something by the Rolling Stones. The jacket was white, with what seemed to be a cake on it. You had no interest in the few records I owned—Abba, Shaun Cassidy, a disco compilation I’d ordered from a TV commercial with my allowance money. Nor were you willing to play your album on the plastic record-player in my room. You opened up the cabinet where my father kept his turntable and receiver. My father was extremely particular about his stereo components. They were off limits to me, and even to my mother. The stereo had been the single extravagant purchase of his life. He cleaned everything himself, wiping the parts with a special cloth on Saturday mornings, before listening to his collection of Indian vocalists.

“You can’t touch that,” I said.

You turned around. The lid of the player was already lifted, the record revolving. You held the arm of the needle, resting its weight on your finger. “I know how to play a record,” you said, no longer making an effort to conceal your irritation. And then you let the needle drop.

How bored you must have been in my room full of girls’ things. It must have driven you crazy, being stuck with our mothers all day long as they cooked and watched soap operas. Really it was my mother who did the cooking now. Though your mother kept her company, occasionally peeling or slicing something, she was no longer interested in cooking, as she had been in the Cambridge days. She’d been spoiled by Zareen, the fabulous Parsi cook you’d had in Bombay, she said. From time to time she would promise to make us an English trifle, the one thing she said she always insisted on making herself, but this didn’t materialize. She continued to borrow saris from my mother, and went to the mall to buy herself more sweaters and trousers. Her missing suitcase never arrived, and she accepted this fact calmly, saying that it gave her an excuse to buy new things, but your father battled on her behalf, making a series of irate phone calls to the airline before finally letting the matter go.

You were in the house as little as possible, walking in the cold weather through the woods and along streets where you were the only pedestrian. I spotted you once, while I was on the school bus coming home, shocked at how far you’d gone. “You’re going to get sick, Kaushik, always wandering outside like that,” my mother said. She continued to speak to you in Bengali, despite your consistently English replies. It was your mother who came down with a cold, using this as an excuse to stay in bed for days. She refused the food my mother made for the rest of us, requesting only canned chicken broth. You walked to the mini-mart a mile from our house, bringing back the broth and issues of *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. “Go ask Parul Mashi if she wants tea,” my mother said one afternoon, and I headed upstairs to the guest room. On my way I needed to use the bathroom. There

was your mother, wrapped up in a robe, perched morosely on the edge of the bathtub, legs crossed, smoking a cigarette.

“Oh, Hema!” she cried out, nearly falling into the tub, so startled that she crushed the cigarette against the porcelain and not into the tiny stainless-steel ashtray she held cupped in her palm, and which she must have brought with her from Bombay.

“I’m sorry,” I said, turning to leave.

“No, no, please, I was just going,” she said. I watched as she flushed away the cigarette, rinsed her mouth at the sink, and applied fresh lipstick, blotting it with a Kleenex, which then fluttered into the garbage pail. Apart from her bindi, my mother did not wear makeup, and I observed your mother’s ritual with care, all the more impressed that she would go to such lengths when she was unwell and spending most of her day in bed. She looked into the mirror intently, without evasion. The brief application of lipstick seemed to restore the composure that my sudden appearance had caused her to lose. She caught me looking at her reflection, and smiled. “One cigarette a day can’t kill me, can it?” she said brightly. She opened the window, pulled some perfume out of her cosmetics bag, and sprayed the air. “Our little secret, Hema?” she said, less a question than a command, and left, shutting the door behind her.

In the evenings we sometimes went house hunting with you. We took the station wagon; the beautiful car your father had bought could not comfortably accommodate us all. My father drove, hesitantly, to unknown neighborhoods where the lawns were all a little bigger than ours, the houses spaced a little farther apart. Your parents searched first in Lexington and Concord, where the schools were best. Some of the homes we saw were empty, others full of the current occupants and their possessions. None, according to the conversations I overheard at night as I tried to fall asleep, were the sort my parents could afford. They stepped to the side as your parents discussed asking prices with the real-estate agents. But it wasn’t money that stood in the way. The houses themselves were the problem, the light scant, the ceilings low, the rooms awkward, your parents always concluded as we drove back to our house. Unlike my parents, yours had opinions about design, preferring something contemporary, excited when we happened to pass a white boxlike structure obscured by a thicket of tall trees. They sought an in-ground pool, or space to build one; your mother missed swimming at her club in Bombay. “Water views, that’s what we should look for,” your mother said, while reading the classified section of the *Globe* one afternoon, and this limited the search even further. We drove out to Swampscott and Duxbury to see properties overlooking the ocean, and to houses in the woods with views of private lakes. Your parents made an offer on a house in Beverly, but after a second visit they withdrew the bid, your mother saying that the layout was ungenerous.

My parents felt slighted by your parents’ extravagant visions, ashamed of the modest home we owned. “How uncomfortable you must be here,” they said, but your parents never complained, as mine did, nightly, before falling asleep. “I didn’t expect it to take this long,” my mother said, noting that almost a month had gone by. While you were with us there was no room for anyone else. “The Dasguptas wanted to visit next weekend and I had to say no,” my mother said. Again and again I heard how much your parents had changed, how we’d unwittingly opened our home to strangers. There were complaints about how your mother did not help clean up after dinner, how she went to bed whenever it suited her and slept close to lunchtime. My mother said that your father was too indulgent, too solicitous of your mother, always asking if she needed a fresh drink, bringing down a cardigan if she was cold.

“She’s the reason they’re still here,” my mother said. “She won’t settle for anything less

than a palace.”

“It’s no easy task,” my father said diplomatically, “starting a new job, a new way of life all over again. My guess is she didn’t want to leave, and he’s trying to make up for that.”

“You would never put up with that sort of behavior in me.”

“Let it go,” my father said, turning away from her and tucking the covers under his chin.

“It’s not forever. They’ll leave soon enough and then all our lives will go back to normal.”

Somewhere, in that cramped house, a line was drawn between our two families. On one side was the life we’d always led, my parents taking me to Star Market every Thursday night, treating me to McDonald’s afterward. Every Sunday I studied for my weekly spelling test, my father quizzing me after “60 Minutes” was over. Your family began to do things independently as well. Sometimes your father would come home from work early and take your mother out, either to look at properties or to shop at the mall, where slowly and methodically she began to buy all the things she would need to set up her own household: sheets, blankets, plates and glasses, small appliances. They would come home with bags and bags, amassing them in our basement, sometimes showing my mother the things they’d bought, sometimes not bothering. On Fridays your parents often took us out to dinner, to one of the overpriced mediocre restaurants in town. They enjoyed the change of pace, having mysteriously acquired a taste for things like steak and baked potatoes, while my parents had not. The outings were intended to give my mother a break from cooking, but she complained about these, too.

I was the only one who didn’t mind your staying with us. In my quiet, complicated way I continued to like you, was happy simply to observe you day after day. And I liked your parents, your mother especially; the attention I got from her almost made up for what I didn’t get from you. One day your father developed the photographs from your stay in Rome. I enjoyed seeing the prints, holding them carefully by the edges. The pictures were almost all of you and your mother, posing in piazzas or sitting on the edge of fountains. There were two shots of Trajan’s column, nearly identical. “Take one for your report,” your father said, handing me one. “That should impress your teacher.”

“But I wasn’t there.”

“No matter. Say your uncle went to Rome and took a snap for you.”

You were in the picture, standing to one side. You were looking down, your face obscured by a visor. You could have been anyone, one of the many passing tourists in the frame, but it bothered me that you were there, your presence threatening to expose the secret attraction I felt and still hoped would be acknowledged somehow. You had successfully wiped away all the other crushes I harbored at school, so that I thought only of being at home, and of where in the course of the afternoon and evening our paths might intersect, whether or not you would bother to glance at me at the dinner table. Long hours were devoted, lying on the cot in my parents’ room, to imagining you kissing me. I was too young, too inexperienced, to contemplate anything beyond that. I accepted the picture, and pasted it into my report, but not before cutting the part with you away. That bit I kept, hidden among the blank pages of my diary, locked up for years.

Your wish for snow had not been granted since you’d arrived. There were brief flurries now and again, but nothing stuck to the ground. Then one day snow began to fall, barely visible at first, gathering force as the afternoon passed, an inch or so coating the streets by the time I rode the bus home from school. It was not a dangerous storm, but significant enough to break up the monotony of winter. My mother, in a cheerful mood that evening, decided to cook a big pot of *khichuri*, which she typically made when it rained, and for a change your mother insisted on helping, standing in the kitchen deep-frying pieces of

potato and cauliflower, melting sticks of butter in a saucepan for ghee. She also decided that she wanted, finally, to make the long-promised trifle, and when my mother told her that there weren't enough eggs your father went to get them, along with the other ingredients she needed. "It won't be ready until midnight," she said as she beat together hot milk and eggs over the stove, allowing me to take over for her when she tired of the task. "It needs at least four hours to set."

"Then we can have it for breakfast," you said, breaking off a piece of the poundcake she'd sliced, stuffing it into your mouth. You seldom set foot in the kitchen, but that evening you hovered there, excited by the promise of trifle, which I gathered you loved, and which I'd never tasted.

After dinner we crowded into the living room, watching the news as the snow continued to fall, excited to learn that my school would be closed and my father's classes cancelled the next day. "You take the day off, too," your mother said to your father, and to everyone's surprise he agreed.

"It reminds me of the winter we left Cambridge," your father said. He and your mother were sipping their Johnnie Walker, and that night, though my mother still refused, my father agreed to join them for a small taste. "That party you had for us," your father continued, turning to my parents. "Remember?"

"Seven years ago," my mother said. "It was another life, back then." They spoke of how young you and I had been, how much younger they had all been.

"Such a lovely evening," your mother recalled, her voice betraying a sadness that all of them seemed to share. "How different things were."

In the morning icicles hung from our windows and a foot of snow blanketed the ground. The trifle, which we had been too tired to wait for the night before, emerged for breakfast along with toast and tea. It was not what I'd expected, the hot mixture I'd helped beat on the stove now cold and slippery, but you devoured bowl after bowl; your mother finally put it away, fearing that you would get a stomach ache. After breakfast our fathers took turns with the shovel, clearing the driveway. When the wind had settled I was allowed to go outside. Usually, I made snowmen alone, scrawny and lopsided, my parents complaining, when I asked for a carrot, that it was a waste of food. But this time you joined me, touching the snow with your bare hands, studying it, looking happy for the first time since you arrived. You packed a bit of it into a ball and tossed it in my direction. I ducked out of the way, and then threw one at you, hitting you in the leg, aware of the camera hanging around your neck.

"I surrender," you said, raising your arms. "This is beautiful," you added, looking around at our lawn, which the snow had transformed. I felt flattered, though I had nothing to do with the weather. You began walking toward the woods and I hesitated. There was something you wanted to show me there, you said. Covered in snow on that bright blue-skied day, the bare branches of the trees concealing so little, it seemed safe. I did not think of the boy, lost there and never found. From time to time you stopped, focussing your camera on something, never asking me to pose. We walked a long way, until I no longer heard the sounds of snow being shovelled, no longer saw our house. I didn't realize at first what you were doing, getting on your knees and pushing away the snow. Underneath was a rock of some sort. And then I saw that it was a tombstone. You uncovered a row of them, flat on the ground. I began to help you, unburying the buried, using my mittened hands at first, then my whole arm. They belonged to people named Simonds, a family of six.

"They're all here together," you said. "Mother, father, four children."

"I never knew this was here."

“I doubt anyone does. It was buried under leaves when I first found it. The last one, Emma, died in 1923.”

I nodded, disturbed by the similarity of the name to mine, wondering if this had occurred to you.

“It makes me wish we weren’t Hindu, so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she’s made us promise we’ll scatter her ashes into the Atlantic.”

I looked at you, confused, and so you continued, explaining that there was cancer in her breast, spreading through the rest of her body. That was why you had left India. It was not so much for treatment as it was to be left alone. In India people knew she was dying, and had you remained there, inevitably, friends and family would have gathered at her side in your beautiful seaside apartment, trying to shield her from something she could not escape. Your mother, not wanting to be suffocated by the attention, not wanting her parents to witness her decline, had asked your father to bring you all back to America. “She’s been seeing a new doctor at Mass General. That’s where my father often takes her when they say they’re going to see houses. She’s going to have surgery in the spring, but it’s only to buy her a little more time. She doesn’t want anyone here to know. Not until the end.”

The information fell between us, as shocking as if you’d struck me in the face, and I began to cry. At first the tears fell silently, sliding over my nearly frozen face, but then I started sobbing, becoming ugly in front of you, my nose running in the cold, my eyes turning red. I stood there, my hands wedged up under my cheekbones to catch the tears, mortified that you were witnessing such a pathetic display. Though you had never taken a picture of me in your life, I was afraid that you would lift the camera and capture me that way. Of course, you did nothing, you said nothing; you had said enough. You remained where you were, looking down at the tombstone of Emma Simonds, and eventually, when I calmed down, you began to walk back to our yard. I followed you along the path you had discovered, and then we parted, neither of us a comfort to the other, you shovelling the driveway, I going inside for a hot shower, my red puffy face assumed by our mothers to be a consequence of the cold. Perhaps you believed that I was crying for you, or for your mother, but I was not. I was too young, that day, to feel sorrow or sympathy. I felt only the enormous fear of having a dying woman in our home. I remembered standing beside your mother, both of us topless in the fitting room where I tried on my first bra, disturbed that I had been in such close proximity to her disease. I was furious that you had told me, and that you had not told me, feeling at once burdened and betrayed, hating you all over again. Two weeks later, you were gone. Your parents bought a house on the North Shore, which had been designed by a well-known Massachusetts architect. It had a perfectly flat roof and whole walls of glass. The upstairs rooms were arranged off an interior balcony, the ceiling in the living room soaring to twenty feet. There were no water views but there was a pool for your mother to swim in, just as she had wanted. Your first night there, my mother brought food over so that your mother would not have to cook, not realizing what a favor this was. We admired the house and the property, the echoing, empty rooms that would soon be filled with sickness and grief. There was a bedroom with a skylight; underneath it, your mother told us, she planned to position her bed. It was all to give her two years of pleasure. When my parents finally learned the news and went to the hospital where your mother was dying, I revealed nothing about what you’d told me. In that sense I remained loyal. Our parents were only acquaintances by then, having gone their separate ways after the weeks of forced intimacy. Your mother had promised to have us over in the summer to swim in the pool, but as her health declined, more quickly than the doctors had predicted, your parents shut down, still silent about her illness, seldom entertaining. For a

time my mother and father continued to complain, feeling snubbed. “After all we did for them,” they said before drifting off to sleep. But I was back in my own room by then, on the other side of the wall, in the bed where you had slept, no longer hearing them. ♦