

THE HUNDRED-FOOT JOURNEY

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*The Hundred-Foot
Journey*

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Bombay

Chapter One

I, Hassan Haji, was born, the second of six children, above my grandfather's restaurant on the Napean Sea Road in what was then called West Bombay, two decades before the great city was renamed Mumbai. I suspect my destiny was written from the very start, for my first experience of life was the smell of *machli ka salan*, a spicy fish curry, rising through the floorboards to the cot in my parents' room above the restaurant. To this day I can recall the sensation of those cot bars pressed up coldly against my toddler's face, my nose poked out as far as possible and searching the air for that aromatic packet of cardamom, fish heads and palm oil, which, even at that young age, somehow suggested there were unfathomable riches to be discovered and savoured in the free world beyond.

But let me start at the beginning. In 1934, my grandfather arrived in Bombay from Gujarat, a

young man riding to the great city on the roof of a steam engine. These days in India many up-and-coming families have miraculously discovered noble backgrounds – famous relatives who worked with Mahatma Gandhi in the early days in South Africa – but I have no such genteel heritage. We were poor Muslims, subsistence farmers from dusty Bhavnagar, and a severe blight among the cotton fields in the 1930s left my starving seventeen-year-old grandfather no choice but to migrate to Bombay, that bustling metropolis where little people have long gone to make their mark.

My life in the kitchen, in short, starts way back with my grandfather's great hunger. And that three-day ride atop the train, baking in the fierce sun, clinging for dear life as the hot iron chugged across the plains of India, was the unpromising start of my family's journey. Grandfather never liked to talk about those early days in Bombay, but I know from Ammi, my grandmother, that he slept rough in the streets for many years, earning his living delivering tiffin boxes to the Indian clerks running the back rooms of the British Empire.

To understand the Bombay from where I come, you must go to Victoria Terminus at rush hour. It is the very essence of Indian life. Coaches are split between men and women, and commuters literally hang from the windows and doors as the trains ratchet down the rails into the Victoria and Churchgate stations. The trains are so crowded there isn't even room for the commuters' lunch boxes, which arrive in separate trains after rush hour. These tiffin boxes – over two million battered tin cans with a lid – smelling of daal and gingery cabbage and black-pepper rice and sent on by loyal wives – are sorted, stacked into trundle carts, and delivered with utmost precision to each insurance clerk and bank teller throughout Bombay.

That was what my grandfather did. He delivered lunch boxes.

A dabba-wallah. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Grandfather was quite a dour fellow. We called him Bapaji, and I remember him squatting on his haunches in the street near sunset during Ramadan, his face white with hunger and rage as he puffed on a beedi. I can still see the thin nose and iron-wire eyebrows, the soiled skullcap and kurta, his white scraggly beard.

Dour he was, but a good provider, too. By the age of twenty-three he was delivering nearly a thousand tiffin boxes a day. Fourteen runners worked for him, their pumping legs wrapped in lungi – the poor Indian man’s skirt – trundling the carts through the congested streets of Bombay as they offloaded tinned lunches at the Scottish Amicable and Eagle Star buildings.

It was 1938, I believe, when he finally summoned Ammi. The two had been married since they were fourteen and she arrived with her cheap bangles on the train from Gujarat, a tiny peasant with oiled black skin. The train station filled with steam, the urchins made toilet on the tracks, and the water boys cried out, a current of tired passengers and porters flowing down the platform. In the back, third-class with her bundles, my Ammi.

Grandfather barked something at her and they were off, the loyal village wife trailing several respectful steps behind her Bombay man.

It was on the eve of World War II that my grandparents set up a clapboard house in the slums off the Napean Sea Road. Bombay was the back room of the Allies’ Asian war effort, and soon a million soldiers from

around the world were passing through its gates. For many soldiers it was their last moments of peace before the torrid fighting of Burma and the Philippines, and the young men cavorted about Bombay’s coastal roads, cigarettes hanging from their lips, ogling the prostitutes working Chowpatty Beach.

It was my grandmother’s idea to sell them snacks, and my grandfather eventually agreed, adding to the tiffin business a string of food stalls on bicycles, mobile snack bars that rushed from the bathing soldiers at Juhu Beach to the Friday evening rush-hour crush outside the Churchgate train station. They sold sweets made of nuts and honey, milky tea, but mostly they sold *bhelpuri*, a newspaper cone of puffed rice, chutney, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, mint and coriander, all mixed together and slathered with spices.

Delicious, I tell you, and not surprisingly the snack bicycles became a commercial success. And so, encouraged by their good fortune, my grandparents cleared an abandoned lot on the far side of the Napean Sea Road. It was there that they erected a primitive roadside restaurant. They built a kitchen of three tandoori ovens – and a bank of charcoal fires on

which rested iron *kadais* of mutton masala – all under a US Army tent. In the shade of the banyan tree, they also set up some rough tables and slung hammocks. Grandmother employed Bappu, a cook from a village in Kerala, and to her northern repertoire she now added dishes like onion *theal* and spicy grilled prawns.

Soldiers and sailors and airmen washed their hands with English soap in an oil drum, dried themselves on the proffered towel, and then clambered up on the hammocks strung under the shady tree. By then some relatives from Gujarat had joined my grandparents, and these young men were our waiters. They slapped wooden boards, makeshift tables, across the hammocks and quickly covered them with bowls of skewered chicken and basmati and sweets made from butter and honey.

During slow moments Grandmother wandered out in the long shirt and trousers we call a *salwar kameez*, threading her way between the sagging hammocks and chatting with the homesick soldiers missing the dishes of their own countries. “What you like to eat?” she’d ask. “What you eat at home?”

And the British soldiers told her about steak-and-kidney pies, of the steam that arose when the knife

first plunged into the crust and revealed the pie’s lumpy viscera. Each soldier tried to outdo the other, and soon the tent filled with oohing and “cors” and excited palaver. And the Americans, not wishing to be outdone by the British, joined in, earnestly searching for the words that could describe a grilled steak coming from cattle fed on Florida swamp grass.

And so, armed with this intelligence she picked up in her walkabouts, Ammi retreated to the kitchen, recreating in her tandoori oven interpretations of what she had heard. There was, for example, a kind of Indian bread-and-butter pudding, dusted with fresh nutmeg, that became a hit with the British soldiers; the Americans, she found, were partial to peanut sauce and mango chutney folded in between a piece of naan. And so it wasn’t long before news of our kitchen spread from Gurkha to British soldier, from barracks to warship, and all day long jeeps stopped outside our Napean Sea Road tent.

Ammi was quite remarkable and I cannot give her enough credit for what became of me. There is no dish finer than her pearl spot, a fish she dusted in a sweet-chilli masala, wrapped in a banana leaf and

tawa-grilled with a spot of coconut oil. It is for me, well, the very height of Indian culture and civilization, both robust and refined, and everything that I have ever cooked since is held up against this benchmark, my grandmother's favourite dish. And she had that amazing capacity of the professional chef to perform several tasks at once. I grew up watching her tiny figure darting barefoot across the earthen kitchen floor, quickly dipping aubergine slices in chickpea flour and frying them in the *kadai*, cuffing a cook, passing me an almond wafer, screeching her disapproval at my aunt.

The point of all this, however, is Ammi's roadside tent quickly established itself as a cash cow and suddenly my grandparents were doing extremely well, the small fortune they amassed, the hard-currency residue of a million soldiers and sailors and airmen moving in and out of Bombay.

And with this came the problems of success. Bapaji was notoriously tight-fisted. He was always yelling at us for the smallest thing, such as dabbing too much oil on the tawa grill. Really a bit mad for money. So, suspicious of the neighbours and our Gujarati relatives, Bapaji began hiding his savings in coffee

tins, and every Sunday he travelled to a secret spot in the country where he buried his precious lucre in the ground.

My grandparents' break came in the fall of 1942 when the British administration, needing cash for the war effort, auctioned off tracts of Bombay real estate. Most of the property was in Salsette, the largest island on which Bombay was built, but awkward strips of land and vacant lots on Colaba were also disposed of. Among the land to be sold: the abandoned Napean Sea Road property on which my family was squatting.

Bapaji was essentially a peasant and like all peasants he respected land more than paper money. So one day he dug up all his hidden tins and went, with a literate neighbour at his side, to the Standard Chartered Bank. With the bank's help, Bapaji bought the four-acre plot on the Napean Sea Road, paying at auction 1,016 British pounds, 10 shillings and 8 pence for land at the foot of Malabar Hill.

Then, and only then, my grandparents were blessed with children. Midwives delivered my father, Abbas Haji, the night of the famous wartime ammunition explosion at the Bombay Docks. The evening sky

exploded with balls of fire, great eruptions shattering windows far across the city, and it was at that precise moment my grandmother let out a blood-curdling scream and Papa popped out, yelling louder even than the explosions and his mother. We all laughed at this story, the way Ammi told it, for anyone who knew my father would agree it was a most appropriate backdrop to his arrival. Auntie, born two years later, arrived under much calmer circumstances.

Independence and Partition came and went. What precisely happened to the family during that infamous time remains a mystery; none of the questions we asked Papa were ever given a straight answer. “Oh, you know, it was bad,” he would say, when pressed. “But we managed. Now stop with the police interrogation. Go get me my newspaper.”

We do know that my father’s family, like many others, was split in two. Most of our relatives fled to Pakistan, but Bapaji stayed in Mumbai and hid his family in a Hindi business associate’s warehouse basement. Ammi once told me they slept by day, because at night they were kept awake by the screams and throat-slitting taking place just outside the basement’s door.

The point is Papa grew up in an India very different from the one his father knew. Grandfather was illiterate; Papa attended a local school, not very good, admittedly, but he still made it to the Institute of Catering Technology, a polytechnic in Ahmedabad.

Education makes the old tribal ways quite impossible, of course, and it was in Ahmedabad that Papa met Tahira, a light-skinned accounting student who would become my mother. Papa says he first fell in love with her smell. His head was down in a library book when he caught the most intoxicating whiff of chapatis and rose water.

That, he said, that was my mother.

One of my earliest memories is of Papa tightly squeezing my hand as we stood on the Mahatma Gandhi Road, staring in the direction of the fashionable Hyderabad Restaurant. Bombay’s immensely wealthy Banaji family and their friends were unloading at kerb edge from a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. The women squealed and kissed and remarked on one another’s weight; behind them a Sikh doorman snapped open the glass door of the restaurant.

Hyderabad and its proprietor, a sort of Indian Douglas Fairbanks, Jr, called Uday Joshi, were frequently in the society pages of the *Times of India*, and each mention of Joshi made my father curse and rustle the paper. While our own restaurant was not in the same league as Hyderabad – we served good food at fair prices – Papa thought Uday Joshi was his great rival. And here now was this high-society crowd descending on the famous restaurant for a *mehndi*, a prenuptial tradition in which the bride and her women friends sit plumped on cushions and have their hands, palms, and feet intricately painted with henna. It meant fine food, lively music, spicy gossip. And it most certainly meant more press for Joshi.

“Look,” Papa said suddenly. “Gopan Kalam.”

Papa bit the corner of his moustache as he wetly clapped my hand in his paw. I will never forget his face. It was as if the clouds had suddenly parted and Allah himself stood before us. “He a billionaire,” Papa whispered. “Make his money in petrochemicals and telecommunications. Look, look at that woman’s emeralds. Aiiee. Size of plums.”

Right then Uday Joshi emerged from the glass doors and stood among the elegant peach saris and silk Nehru suits as if he were their equal. Four or five newspaper photographers instantly called at him to turn this way and that. Joshi was famously smitten with all things European, and he stood perkily before the clicking cameras in a shiny black Pierre Cardin lounge suit, his capped white teeth flashing in the light.

The famous restaurateur commanded my attention, even at that tender age, like a Bollywood screen legend. Joshi’s throat, I remember, was lusciously wrapped in a yellow silk ascot, and his hair was airily combed back in a silver pompadour, mightily secured with cans of hair spray. I don’t think I had ever seen anyone so elegant.

“Look at him,” Papa hissed. “Look at that little rooster.”

Papa could not stand watching Joshi a moment longer, and he turned abruptly, yanking me towards the Suryodaya Supermarket and its special on ten-gallon vats of vegetable oil. I was just eight and had to run to keep up with his long strides and flapping kurta.

“Listen to me, Hassan,” he roared over the traffic. “One day the Haji name will be known far and wide, and no one will remember that rooster. Just you wait and see. Ask the people then, ask them who Uday Joshi is. ‘Who he?’ they say. ‘But Haji? Haji,’ they say, ‘Haji are very distinguished, very important family.’”

In short, Papa was a man of large appetites. He was fat but tall for an Indian, just six feet. Chubby-faced, with curly iron hair and a thick waxed moustache. And he was always dressed the old way, a kurta, over trousers.

But he was not what you would call refined. Papa ate, like all Muslim men, with his hands – his right hand, that is, the left resting on his lap. But instead of the decorous lifting of food to his lips, Papa stuck his head down in the plate and shovelled fatty mutton and rice into his face as if he’d never get another meal. And he sweated buckets while he ate, wet spots the size of dinner plates appearing under his arms. When he finally lifted his face from the food, he had the glassy-eyed look of a drunk, his chin and cheeks slicked with orange grease.

I loved him but even I must agree it was a frightful sight. After dinner Papa hobbled over to the couch, collapsed, and for the next half-hour fanned himself and let everyone else in on his general satisfaction with loud belches and thunderous farts. My mother, coming from her respectable civil servant family in Delhi, closed her eyes with disgust at this after-dinner ritual. And she was always on him while he was eating. “Abbas,” she’d say. “Slow down. You’ll choke. Good heavens. Like eating with a donkey.”

But you had to admire Papa, the charisma and determination behind his immense drive. By the time I came along in 1975, he was firmly in control of the family restaurant, my grandfather ailing from emphysema and largely confined, on his good days, to overseeing the tiffin-delivery business from a stiff-backed chair in the courtyard.

Ammi’s tent was retired for a grey concrete-and-brick compound. My family lived on the second floor of the main house, above our restaurant. My grandparents and childless aunt and uncle lived in the house one over, and down from them our family enclave was sealed off with a cube of wooden two-storey shacks

where our Kerala cook, Bappu, and the other servants slept on the floor.

It was the courtyard that was the heart and soul of the old family business. Tiffin carts and bicycle snack bars were stacked against the far wall, and under the shade of the saggy tarp were cauldrons of carp-head soup, stacks of banana leaves, and freshly made samosas on wax paper. The great iron vats of flecked rice, perfumed with bay leaf and cardamom, stood against the courtyard's opposite wall, and around these delicacies was a constant thrum of flies. A male servant usually sat on a canvas sack at the kitchen's back door, carefully picking out the black specks of dirt among the basmati kernels; and an oily-headed female, bent at the waist with her sari gathered between her legs, was brushing with a short broom the courtyard dirt, back and forth, back and forth. And I recall our yard as always full of life, filled with constant comings and goings that made the roosters and chickens jerk about, nervously clucking in the shadows of my childhood.

It was here, in the heat of the afternoon after school, that I would find Ammi working under the porch eaves overhanging the interior courtyard. I'd scramble atop

a crate for a hot-faced sniff of her spicy fish soup, and we'd chat a bit about my day at school before she passed over to me the stirring of the cauldron. And I remember her gracefully gathering up the hem of her sari, retreating to the wall where she kept an eye on me as she smoked her iron pipe, a habit she kept from her village days in Gujarat.

I remember this as if it were yesterday: stirring and stirring to the city's beat, passing for the very first time into the magic trance that has ever since taken me when I cook. The balmy wind warbled across the courtyard, bringing the faraway yap of Bombay dogs and traffic and the smell of raw sewage into the family compound. Ammi squatted in the shady corner, her tiny wrinkled face disappearing behind contented claps of smoke; and, floating down from above, the girlish voices of my mother and aunt as they folded chickpea and chilli into skirts of pastry on the first-floor veranda overhead. But most of all I recall the sound of my iron hoe grating rhythmically across the vessel's floor, bringing jewels up from the soup-deep: the bony fish heads and the white eyes rising to the surface on ruby-red eddies.

I still dream of the place. If you stepped out of the immediate safety of our family compound you stood at the edge of the notorious Napean Sea Road shanty town. It was a sea of roof scraps atop rickety clapboard shacks, all criss-crossed by putrid streams. From the shanty town rose the pungent smells of charcoal fires and rotting garbage, and the hazy air itself was thick with the roar of roosters and bleating goats and the slap-thud of washing beaten on cement slabs. Here, children and adults shat in the streets.

But on the other side of us, a different India. As I grew up, so too did my country. Malabar Hill, towering above us, quickly filled with cranes as between the old gated villas white high-rises called Miramar and Palm Beach arose. I know not where they came from, but the affluent seemed to suddenly spring like gods from the very ground. Everywhere, the talk was of nothing but mint-fresh software engineers and scrap-metal dealers and pashmina exporters and umbrella manufacturers and I know not what else. Millionaires, by the hundreds first, then by the thousands.

Once a month Papa paid Malabar Hill a visit. He would put on a fresh-washed kurta and take me by

the hand up the hill so we could “pay our respects” to the powerful politicians. We gingerly made our way to the back doors of vanilla-coloured villas, the white-gloved butler wordlessly pointing at a terracotta pot just inside the door. Papa dropped his brown-paper bag among the heap of other paper bags, the door unceremoniously slammed shut in our face, and we were off with our rupee-stuffed paper bags to the next Bombay Regional Congress Committee official. But there were rules. Never to the front of the house. Always at the back.

And then, business done, humming a ghazal under his breath, Papa bought us, on the trip I am remembering, a mango juice and some grilled corn and we sat on a bench in the Hanging Gardens, the public park up on Malabar Hill. From our spot under palm trees and bougainvilleas we could see the comings and goings at Broadway, a spanking-new apartment building across the torrid green: the businessmen climbing into their Mercedes; the children emerging in school uniforms; the wives off for tennis and tea. A steady stream of wealthy Jains – silky robes, hairy chests, gold-rimmed glasses – headed past us to the

Jain Mandir, a temple where they washed their idols in sandalwood paste.

Papa sank his teeth into the corn and violently mowed his way down the cob, bits of kernel sticking to his moustache and cheeks and hair. “Lots of money,” he said, smacking his lips and gesturing across the street with the savaged cob. “Rich people.”

A girl and her nanny, on their way to a birthday party, emerged from the apartment building and flagged down a taxi.

“That girl is in my school. See her in the playground.”

Papa flung his finished corncob into the bushes and wiped his face with a handkerchief.

“Is that so?” he said. “She nice?”

“No. She think she spicy hot.”

At that moment, I recall, a van pulled up to the apartment building’s doors. It was the fabled restaurateur Uday Joshi, delivering his latest business, home catering, for those distressing times when servants had the day off. An enormous picture of a winking Joshi stared at us from the side of the van, a bubble erupting from his mouth. NO MESS. NO FUSS. WE DO IT FOR YOU, it said.

The doorman held open the door as the caterer, in white jacket, bolted from the back of the van with tin trays and lids and foil. And I remember the deep rumble of Papa’s voice.

“What Joshi up to now?”

Father had long ago done away with the old US Army tent, replacing it with a brick house and plastic tables. It was a cavernous hall, simple, boisterous with noise. When I was twelve, however, Papa decided to move upmarket, closer to Joshi’s Hyderabad Restaurant, and he turned our old restaurant compound into the 365-seat Bollywood Nights.

In went a stone fountain. Over the centre of the dining room, Papa hung a disco glitter-ball made of mirrors, which revolved over a tiny dance floor. He had the walls painted gold before covering them, just like he had seen in pictures of a Hollywood restaurant, with the signed photographs of Bollywood stars. Then he bribed starlets and their husbands to drop by the restaurant a couple of times a month, and, miraculously, the glossy magazine *Hello Bombay!* always had a photographer there precisely at the right

moment. And on weekends Papa hired singers who were the spitting image of the hugely popular Alka Yagnik and Udit Narayan.

So successful was the whole venture that, a few years after Bollywood Nights opened, Papa added a Chinese restaurant to our compound, and a real disco with smoke machines that – much to my annoyance – only my oldest brother, Umar, was allowed to operate. We occupied our entire four acres, the Chinese and Bollywood Nights restaurants seating 568, vibrant businesses catering to Bombay’s upwardly mobile.

The restaurants reverberated with laughter and the thump of the disco, the smell of chillies and roast fish in the air wet and fecund with spilt Kingfisher beer. Papa – known to everyone as Big Abbas – was born for this work, and he waddled around his studio lot all day like some Bollywood producer, yelling orders, slapping up the head slovenly busboys, greeting guests. His foot always on the gas. “Come on, come on,” was his constant cry. “Why so slow, like an old woman?”

My mother, by contrast, was the much-needed brake, always ready to bring Papa down to earth with a smack of common sense, and I recall her sitting coolly in a

cage just upstairs from Bollywood Nights’ main door, pencilling in the accounts from her lofty perch.

But above us all, the vultures that fed off the bodies in the Tower of Silence, the Parsi burial grounds up on Malabar Hill.

The vultures I remember, too.

Always circling and circling and circling.

Chapter Two

Let me think happy thoughts. If I close my eyes I can picture our old kitchen now, smell the clove and bay leaf, hear the spitting of the *kadai*. Bappu's gas rings and tawa grills were off to the left as you entered, and you'd often see him sipping his milky tea, the four basic masalas of Indian cooking bubbling away under his watchful eye. On his head, the toque, the towering chef's hat of which he was so proud. Energetic cockroaches, antennae waving, scampered across the trays of raw shellfish and sea bream to his elbow, and at his fingertips were the little bowls of his trade – garlic water, green peas, a creamy coconut and cashew gruel, chilli and ginger purées.

Bappu, seeing me at the door, signalled for me to come over to watch a platter of lamb brains slide into the *kadai*, the pink mass landing among prattling onions and furiously spitting lemongrass. Next

to Bappu stood a fifty-gallon steel vat of cottage cheese and fenugreek, simmering, two boys evenly stirring the milky soup with wooden trowels, and to the far right huddled our cooks from Uttar Pradesh. Only these northerners – my grandmother decided – had the right feel for tandoori, the deep coal pots from which emerged toasted skewers of marinated aubergine and chicken and green peppers with prawns. And upstairs, the apprentices only slightly older than myself working under a yellow garland of flowers and smoking incense.

It was their job to strip leftover tandoori chicken from the bones, snap beans over a barrel, shave ginger until it liquified. These teenagers, when off-duty, smoked cigarettes in the alleys and hooted after girls, and they were my idols. I spent a good deal of my childhood sitting with them, on a footstool in the upstairs cold kitchen, chatting away as an apprentice neatly split okra with a knife, using his finger to smear a lurid red chilli paste on the vegetable's white inner thighs. There are few things more elegant in this world than a coal black teenager from Kerala dicing coriander: a flurry of knife, a chopping roll, and the riot of awkward

leaves and stems instantly reduced to a fine green mist. Such incomparable grace.

One of my favourite vacation pastimes, however, was accompanying Bappu on his morning trips to Bombay's Crawford Market. I went because he would buy me *jalebi*, a twist of fermented daal and flour that is deep-fried and then drenched in sugary syrup. But I wound up, without trying, picking up a most valuable skill for a chef, the art of selecting fresh produce.

We started at Crawford's fruit and vegetable stalls, baskets stacked high in between narrow walkways. Fruiterers delicately built pomegranate towers, a bed of purple tissue fanning out below them in the shape of lotus flowers. Baskets were filled with coconuts and star fruit and waxy beans, and they rose vertically, several floors up, creating a sweet-smelling tomb. And the corridors, always neat and tidy, the floor swept, the expensive fruit hand polished to a waxy gloss.

A boy my age squatted on his haunches high up on the shelves, and when Bappu stopped to try a new breed of seedless grape, the boy scuttled over to a brass water jug, washed three or four grapes quickly,

and handed them down to us for a taste. “No seeds, you know,” the stall boss yelled from his three-legged stool in the shade. “Brand-new ting. For you, Bappu, we make kilo cheap.”

Sometimes Bappu would buy, and sometimes he would not, always playing the vendors against one another. We took a short cut to the meat market, through the pet stalls and the cages filled with panting rabbits and shrieking parrots. The smell of chickens and turkeys hit you like a village latrine, the throbbing, clucking cages and the glimpse of bald rumps where feathers had fallen out in patches. The poultry butcher sang out from behind a red valley of slashes on the chopping block, a basket of bloodied heads and wattles at his feet.

This was where Bappu taught me how to look at the skin of a chicken to make sure it was smooth, and how to bend the wings and beak for flexibility to judge the chicken’s age. And the clearest sign of a tasty chicken: plump knees.

Entering the meat market’s cool hall, I erupted in goosebumps, my eyes adjusting slowly to the gloomy light. The first vision to emerge from the fetid air was

a butcher mincing stringy meat with a massive knife. We passed rhythmic hacking, the air sickly sweet with death, the gutter-river red.

Sheep with their throats freshly cut hung from a chain of hooks at Akbar’s halal meat shop, and Bappu threaded his way between these strange trees, slapping the meaty hides. He’d find one he liked and butcher Akbar and Bappu would haggle, roar, and spit until their fingertips touched. When Akbar lifted his hand an assistant dropped an axe into the animal we had purchased, and our sandals were suddenly awash in a crimson tide and the grey-blue tubes of intestines shuddering to the floor.

I remember – as the butcher expertly cut and trimmed the mutton, wrapping the legs in wax paper – lifting my head to the blue-black ravens that intensely stared down at us from the rafters directly overhead. They raucously cawed and ruffled wings, their white trails of shit splattering down the columns and onto the meat. And I hear them now, to this day, whenever I attempt something ludicrously “artistic” in my Paris kitchen, this raucous cry of Crawford ravens warning me to stay close to the earth.

My favourite stop at Crawford, however, was in the fish market. Bappu and I always made the fish market our last stop, hopping the fish-gut-clogged drains that had backed up into oily-grey seas, and laden down as we were with our purchases of the morning. Our goal was fishmonger Anwar and his stall in the back of the covered quarter.

Hindus hung yellow garlands and burned incense under pictures of Shirdi Sai Baba on the concrete columns that supported the fish market. Bins of fish came clattering in, a silvery blur of wide-eyed pomfrets and pearl spots and sea bream, and here and there stood sulphuric heaps of Bombay duck, the salted shiners that are a staple of Indian cooking. By nine in the morning the early shift of workers had finished their day, and they undressed modestly under a robe, washing in a rusted bucket and scrubbing their scale-flecked lungi with Rin soap. Black recesses of the market flickered with the glow of coal fires, delicately fanned alive for a simple meal of rice and lentils. And after the meal the rows of men, impervious to the noise, settled down one by one for a nap on burlap bags and cardboard flaps.

What glorious fish. We'd pass oily bonito, the silver bodies with the squashed, yellow-glazed heads. I loved the trays of squid, the skin purple and glistening like the tip of a penis, and the wicker baskets of sea urchins that were snipped open for the succulent orange eggs inside. And everywhere on the market's concrete floor, fish heads and fins sticking out at odd angles from man-high ice heaps. And the roar of Crawford was deafening, a crash of rattling chains and ice grinders and cawing ravens in the roof and the singsong of an auctioneer's voice. How could this world not enter me?

There, finally, in the back of Crawford, stood the world of Anwar. The fishmonger sat cross-legged, all in white, high up on an elevated metal desk amid a dozen chest-high heaps of ice and fish. Three phones stood beside him on the desk – one white, one red, and one black. I squinted the first time I saw him, for he was stroking something in his lap, and it took me a few moments to realize it was a cat. Then something else moved, and I suddenly realized his entire metal desktop was covered with half a dozen contented cats, lazily flipping their tails, licking paws, haughtily lifting their heads at our arrival.

But let me tell you, Anwar and his cats, they knew fish, and together they kept alert eyes on the crate-skidding work going on at their feet. Just a little wobble of Anwar's head or a soft click of his tongue sent workers scuttling over to a pink order slip or to a Koli fisherman's arriving catch. Anwar's workers were from the Muhammad Ali Road, fiercely loyal, and all day they remained bent at his feet, sorting lobsters and crabs, carving the beefy tuna, violently scaling carp.

Anwar said his prayers five times a day on a prayer rug furled out behind a column, but otherwise he could always be found cross-legged atop his battered metal desk in the back of the market. His feet ended in long, curly yellow toenails, and he had a habit of massaging his bare feet all day long.

"Hassan," he'd say, tugging at his big toe. "You still too small. Tell Big Abbas to feed you more fish. Got nice tuna here from Goa, man."

"That no decent fish, man. That cat food."

And from him would come the rasping cough and hiss that meant he was laughing at my cheek. On days when the phones were ringing – Bombay hotels and restaurants placing their orders – Anwar courteously

offered Bappu and me milky tea, but otherwise filled out pink slips and watched stern-faced with concentration as his workers filled crates. On slow days, however, he'd take me aside to an arriving basket of fish and show me how to judge its quality.

"You want a clear eye, man, not like this," he'd say, a blackened nail tapping a pomfret's clouded eye. "See here. This one fresh. See the difference. Eyes bright and full open."

He'd turn to another basket. "Look here. It's an old trick. Top layer of fish very fresh. Nah? But look." He dug to the bottom of the basket and hauled a mashed fish out by its gills. "Look. Feel dat. Meat soft. And the gills, look, not red like this fresh one, but faded. Turning grey. And when you turn back the fin, should be stiff, not like this." Anwar flicked his hand and the young fisherman would withdraw his basket. "And look at this. See here? See this tuna? Bad, man. Very bad."

"Bruised, like heavy battered, yaar? Some no-good wallah give him a big drop off the back of truck."

"Haar," he'd say, wobbling his head, delighted I had learnt my lessons.

One monsoon afternoon I found myself with Papa and Ammi around a table in the back of the restaurant. They pored over the wad of chits on spikes that stood between them, determining in these scratched orders which dishes had moved more in the last week and which not. Bappu sat opposite us in a stiff-backed chair, like in a court of law, nervously stroking his colonel's moustache. This was a weekly ritual at the restaurant, a constant pushing of Bappu to improve the old recipes. It was like that. Do better. You can always do better.

The offending item stood between them, a copper bowl of chicken. I reached over and dipped my fingers into the bowl, sucking in a piece of the crimson meat. The masala trickled down my throat, an oily paste of fine red chilli, but softened by pinches of cardamom and cinnamon.

"Only three order dish last week," said Papa, glancing back and forth between Bappu and grandmother. He took a sip of his favourite beverage, tea spiked with a spoonful of garam masala. "We fix it now or I drop from menu."

Ammi picked up the ladle and poured a slop of the sauce on her palm, thoughtfully licking the slick and

smacking her lips. She shook her finger at Bappu, the gold bracelets jangling menacingly.

"What's this? This not like I taught you."

"Wah?" said Bappu. "Last time you tell me to change. Add more star seed. Add more vanilla pod. Do this, do dat. And now you say it not like you teach me? How can I cook here with you changing mind all the time? Make me mad, all this knockabout. Maybe I go work for Joshi—"

"Aiiee," screamed my furious grandmother. "Threaten me? I make you what you are today and you tell me you go work for that man? I throw everyone of your family to the street—"

"Calm down, Ammi," Papa yelled. "And Bappu. Stop. Don't talk crazy. No one fault here. Just wan' to 'prove the dish. Could be better. You agree?"

Bappu straightened his chef's hat, as if repositioning his dignity, and took a sip of tea. "Yaar," he said.

"Haar," added Grandmother.

They all stared at the offending dish and its failings.

"Make it drier," I said.

"Wah? Wah? Now I take order from boy?"

"Let him speak."

“Too oily, Papa. Bappu skims butter and oil off top. But much better he dry-fries. Make a little crunchy.”

“No like my skimming now. That right? Boy know better—”

“Be quiet, Bappu,” Papa yelled. “You always going on with your palaver. Why you always talk like that? You an old woman?”

Well, Bappu did follow my suggestion after Papa had finished his verbal battering, and it was the only hint of what would become of me, because the chicken dish established itself as one of our bestsellers, renamed, by my father, Hassan’s Dry Chicken.

“Come, Hassan.”

Mummy took my hand and we slipped out the back door, heading to the Number 37 bus.

“Where are we going?”

We both knew, of course, but we pretended. It was always like this.

“Oh, I don’t know. To the shops, maybe. A little break from the routine.”

My mother was shy, quietly clever with numbers, but always there to rein in my father when his exuberances

got the better of him. She was, in her quiet way, the family’s real ballast, more so than my father, despite all his noise. She made sure we children were always properly dressed and that we did our homework.

But that did not mean Mummy did not have her own secret hungers.

For scarves. My Mummy did like her *dupatta*.

For some reason – I am not exactly sure why – Mummy occasionally took me on her clandestine forages into town, as if I alone might understand her mad shopping moments. They were rather harmless excursions, really. A scarf or two here and there, maybe a pair of shoes, only rarely an expensive sari. And for me, a colouring book, or a comic, our shopping adventure always ending in a bang-up meal.

It was our secret bond, an adventure reserved exclusively for the two of us, a way, I think, she made sure I did not get lost in the shuffle of the restaurant, Papa’s demands, the rest of her clamouring children. (And maybe I wasn’t quite so special as I’d like to think. Mehtab later told me that Mummy used to secretly take her to the cinema, and Umar to the go-cart track.)

And, on occasion, it wasn't about a boost from shopping at all, but about some other hunger, something far deeper, because she'd hover before the shops, smack her lips in meditation, and then head us off in an entirely different direction, to the Prince of Wales Museum, perhaps, to pore over the Mughal miniatures, or to the Nehru Planetarium, which from the outside always looked to me like a giant filter from an industrial turbine stuck sideways into the ground.

On this particular day, Mummy had just worked very hard for two weeks closing the restaurant's year-end books, for the tax man, and so, task successfully completed, another profitable year put to rest, she rewarded us with a little foraging trip on the Number 37 bus. But this time we changed buses, journeyed further into the roar of the city, and we wound up in a stretch of Mumbai where the boulevards were wide as the Ganges, and the streets lined with big glass shopfronts, doormen, and teak shelves polished to a shiny gloss.

The name of the sari shop was Hite of Fashion. My mother looked at the bolts of cloth stacked to the ceiling in a tower of electric blues and moleskin greys,

her hands clasped together under her chin, just staring in wonder at the Parsi shopkeeper up on the ladder, as he handed down the most vibrant bundles of silk to the assistant at his feet. Her eyes were teary, as if the sheer beauty of the material were just too much to take in, like looking directly into the sun. And for me that day, we purchased a spanking-smart blue cotton jacket, with, for some reason, the gold seal of the Hong Kong Yacht Club stitched to its breast.

The shelves at the nearby attar shop were filled with amber- and blue-coloured glass bottles, long-necked as swans and as elegantly shaped. A woman in a white lab coat dotted our wrists with oils saturated in sandalwood, coffee, ylang-ylang, honey, jasmine and rose petals, until we were quite intoxicated, sickened really, and had to get some fresh air. And then it was off to look at the shoes, in a pish-posh palace, where we sat on gold couches, the gilt armrests and clawed feet shaped as lions, and where a diamanté-encrusted omega framed the shop's window, in which glass shelves displayed, as if they were the rarest of jewels, spiky heels, crocodile pumps, and sandals dyed hot purple. And I remember the shoe salesman kneeling

at Mummy's feet, as if she were the Queen of Sheba, and my mother girlishly turning her ankle so I could see the gold sandal in silhouette, saying, "Nah? What d'you think, Hassan?"

But I remember most of all that when we were on our way back to the Number 37 bus, we passed an office high-rise where the ground-floor shops were taken up by a tailor and an office-supply store and a strange-looking restaurant called La Fourchette, which was wrapped under a lip of cement, from which protruded a tired French flag.

"Come, Hassan," said Mummy. "Come. Let us give it a try."

We ran giggling up the steps with our bags, pushed through the heavy door, but instantly fell silent. The interior of the restaurant was mosque-like, dark and gloomy, with a distinctly sour smell of wine-soaked beef and foreign cigarettes, the low-hanging and dim-wattled orbs hanging over each table providing the only available light. A couple in shadow occupied a booth, and a few tip-top office workers in white shirts, their sleeves rolled up, were having a business lunch and sipping red wine – still an exotic rarity in India

in those days. Neither Mummy nor I had ever been in a French restaurant, so to us the dining room looked terribly smart, and we soberly took a booth in the back, whispering to each other under the low-hanging copper lamp as if we were in a library. A lace curtain, grey with dust, blocked what little light penetrated the building's brown-tinted windows, so the restaurant's overall ambience was that of a den with a slightly seedy notoriety. We were thrilled.

An elderly woman, painfully thin, wearing a caftan and an armful of bangles, shuffled over to our table, instantly recognizable as one of those ageing European hippies who had visited an ashram and never returned home. But Indian parasites and time had worked her over and she looked to me like a desiccated bug. The woman's sunken eyes were heavily lined with kohl, I remember, but in the heat the make-up had run into the creases of her face; red lipstick had been applied earlier in the day with a very shaky hand. So the overall effect, in the bad light, was rather frightening, like being served lunch by a cadaver.

But the woman's gravelly-voiced Hindi was lively, and she handed us some menus before shuffling off

to make us mango lassi. The strangeness of the place overwhelmed me. I didn't know where to begin with this stiff menu – such exotic-sounding dishes like bouillabaisse and coq au vin – and I looked, panic-stricken, up at my mother. But Mummy smiled kindly and said, “Never be afraid of trying something new, Hassan. Very important. It is the spice of life.” She pointed at a slip of paper. “Why don't we take the day's special? Do you agree? Dessert is included. Very good value. After our shopping, not such a bad thing.”

I remember clearly the *menu complet* started with a *salade frisée* and mustard vinaigrette, followed by *frites* and a minute steak on which sat a dollop of Café de Paris (a delicious pat of herbs-and-garlic butter), and ended, finally, with a wet and wobbly *crème brûlée*. I'm sure it was a mediocre lunch – the steak as tough as Mummy's newly acquired footwear – but it was instantly elevated to my pantheon of unforgettable meals because of the overall magic of the day.

For the sweet caramel pudding that dissolved on my tongue is for ever fused in my memory with the look on Mummy's face, a kindness graced by the inner glow

of our carefree outing. And I can still see the twinkle in her eye as she leant forwards and whispered, “Let's tell your father French food is new favourite. Nah? Much better than Indian, we'll say. That should get him excited! What d'you think, Hassan?”

I was fourteen.

I was walking home from St Xavier's, weighed down with my maths and French books, picking away at a paper cone of *bhelpuri*. I lifted my head and saw a black-eyed boy my age staring back at me from the filthy shacks off the road. He was washing himself from a cracked bucket, and his wet, brown skin was in places turned white by the blinding sun. A cow was collapsed at his feet. His sister squatted in a watery ditch nearby while a matt-haired woman behind them lined a concrete water pipe with ratty belongings.

The boy and I locked eyes, for a second, before he sneered, reached down, and flapped his genitals at me. It was one of those moments of childhood when you realize the world is not as you assumed. There were people, I suddenly understood, who hated me even though they did not know me.

A silver Toyota suddenly roared past us on its way up to Malabar Hill, breaking the boy's mean-eyed spell, and I gratefully turned my head to follow the shiny car's diesel wake. When I turned back, the boy was gone. Only the tail-twitching cow in the mud and the girl poking the wormy faeces just squeezed from her bottom.

From inside the water pipe, shadowy rustlings.

Bapaji was a man of respect in the shanty town. He was one of those who had made it, and the poor used to press their palms together when he made his arrogant way through the barracks, tapping the heads of the strongest young men. The chosen tore through the clamouring crowds and jammed onto the back of his three-wheeler put-putting on the roadside. Bapaji always picked his tiffin delivery boys from the shanty town, and he was much revered because of it. "Cheapest workers I can find," he rasped at me.

When my father refocused the business on the higher-margin restaurants, however, he stopped hiring the young men from the slum. Papa said our middle-class clients wanted clean waiters, not the filthy rabble from the barracks. And that was that. But still they came,

begging for work, their gaunt faces pressed against the back door, Papa chasing them away with a roar and a swift kick.

Papa was a complicated man, not easily put in a box. He could hardly be called a devout Muslim, but he was, paradoxically, careful about staying on the right side of Allah. Every Friday, for example, before the call of prayers, Papa and Mummy personally fed fifty of the very same slum dwellers from cauldrons at the restaurant's back door. But this was insurance for the afterlife. When it came to hiring staff for the business, Papa was ruthless. "Nothing but rubbish," he'd say. "Human rubbish."

One day a Hindu nationalist on a red motorbike roared into our world, and before our very eyes the Napean Sea Road-Malabar Hill division between rich and poor widened like a causeway. The Shiv Sena was actively trying to "reform" itself at that time – the Bharatiya Janata Party was just a few years from power – but not all of the fiery extremists went quietly into the night, and one hot afternoon Papa came back into our compound with a clutch of flyers. He was grim-faced and tight-lipped and went up to his room to talk with Mummy.

My brother Umar and I studied the yellow papers he'd left curling on the rattan chair, the overhead fan making the paper shiver. The flyers singled us out – a Muslim family – as the root cause for the people's poverty and suffering. A cartoon depicted an immensely fat Papa drinking a bowl of cow's blood.

The images come now like postcards, such as the time my grandmother and I cracked nuts under the compound's porch. Behind us we could hear the nationalists shouting slogans into a megaphone. I looked up at Malabar Hill and saw two girls in white tennis outfits sipping juice drinks on a terrace. It was a very strange moment, for somehow I knew how it would end. We were not of the shanty town, or of the upper classes of Malabar Hill, but instead lived on the exposed fault line between these two worlds.

From that last summer of my childhood I can still extract sweet tastes. Late one afternoon Papa took us all out to Juhu Beach. We staggered with our beach bags and balls and blankets through an alleyway ripe with cow dung and frangipani, and out onto the boiling sand, dodging the tinselled horse carriages and their lumpy deposits of hot plop. Papa

spread three tartan blankets out across the sand as we children tore down to the platinum blue water and back.

Mummy never looked so beautiful. She wore a pink sari, her gold-sandalled feet curled under the thigh, across her face the soft, sweet smile of ghee. Kites shaped like fish fluttered loudly above us, and the strong wind made Mummy's kohl-lined eyes run. I snuggled up against the soft heat of her leg as she rummaged in her string sack for a tissue, dabbing at herself in the pocket mirror.

Papa said he was going down to the water's edge to buy my youngest sister, Zainab, a feather boa from a hawker. Mukhtar and Zainab and Arash, the four of us, we ran after him. Paunchy old men tried to recapture their youth with a game of cricket; my oldest brother, Umar, did backflips across the sand, showing off with his teenage friends. Vendors lugged coolers and smoking trays down the beach, singing out their wares of sweetbreads and cashews and Fanta and monkey balloons.

“Why only Zainab get something?” wailed Mukhtar. “Why, Papa?”

“One ting,” Papa yelled. “One ting each. And then no more. You hear?”

The taut kite strings moaned in the wind.

Mummy sat on the blanket, curled into herself like a pink pomegranate.

Something my auntie said must have made her laugh, for Mummy turned gaily, her teeth white, her hands stretched out to help my sister Mehtab thread a garland of white flowers through her hair. That is how I like to remember Mummy.

It was a hot and humid afternoon in August. I was playing backgammon with Bapaji in the compound courtyard. A chilli-red sun had just dipped behind the backyard banyan and the mosquitoes whined furiously. I was about to tell him we should move indoors, when Bapaji suddenly jerked his head up – “Don’t let me die,” he rasped – and then violently pitched forwards onto the spindly-legged table. He shuddered; he twitched. The table collapsed.

When Bapaji died, so, too, did the last scrap of respect we had in the shanty town, and two weeks after he was buried they came at night, their distorted,

rubbery faces pressed up against Bollywood Nights’s window. All I remember was the screaming, the terrible screaming. The torchlit mob pulled my mother from her cage while my father hustled us children and a stampede of restaurant guests out the back door and up to the Hanging Gardens and Malabar Hill. Papa rushed back to get Mummy, but by then flames and acrid smoke leapt from the windows.

Mother was bloodied and unconscious under a table in the downstairs restaurant, flames closing in all around her. Papa tried to enter, but his kurta caught fire and he had to retreat, slapping his blackened hands. We heard his terrible screams for help as he raced back and forth in front of the restaurant, helplessly watching Mummy’s braid of hair, like a candlewick, catch fire. I never told anyone, because there is a chance it was my overactive imagination at work, but I swear I smelt her burning flesh from our safe perch up on the hill.

The only thing I remember feeling afterwards is a ravenous hunger. Normally, I am a moderate eater, but after Mummy’s murder I spent days gorging on mutton masala and dumplings of fresh milk and egg biryani.

I refused to part with her shawl. I was in a torpor for days, Mummy's favourite silk shawl wrapped tightly around my shoulder, my head lowering again and again over lamb-trotter soup. It was, of course, just a boy's desperate attempt to hold on to his mother's last presence, that fast-fading odour of rose water and fried bread wafting up from the diaphanous cloth around my head.

Mummy was buried, as is the Muslim tradition, within hours of her death. There was dust, a choking red-earth dust that got into the sinuses and made me wheeze, and I recall staring at the red poppies and ragweed next to the earth hole that swallowed her up. No feeling. Nothing. Papa beat his chest until his skin was red, his kurta soaked with sweat and tears, the air filling with his dramatic cries.

The night my mother was buried, my brother and I stared into the dark from our cots, listening to Papa as he paced back and forth behind the bedroom wall, bitterly cursing everyone and everything. The fans creaked; poisonous centipedes scurried across the cracked ceiling. We waited, on edge, then... wallop

– the horrible clap that came each time he brought his bandaged hands violently together. And that night, through the door of his room, we heard Papa whisper, a kind of half moan, half chant, repeated over and over again, as he rocked back and forth on the edge of his bed: “Tahira, on your grave I promise, I will take our children from this cursed country that has killed you.”

And during the day the fiery emotions in the compound were intolerable, like a vat boiling and boiling and boiling but never running dry. My little sister Zainab and I hid behind the upstairs steel Storwell closet, curled into balls and pressed against each other for comfort. There was a horrible wail from downstairs and the two of us, desperate to get away from the sound, climbed into the closet and buried ourselves in the hundred scarves that were Mother's simple vanity.

Mourners came, like vultures, to pick over us. Rooms filled with the deathly fug of sour body odour, cheap cigarettes, burning mosquito coils. The chatter was constant and high-pitched, and the mourners ate marzipan-filled dates while clucking over our misfortune.

Mummy’s snooty Delhi relatives stood in silken finery in the corner, their backs to the room as they nibbled on crackling papad and grilled aubergine. Papa’s Pakistani relatives loudly roved around the room, looking for trouble. A religious uncle wrapped his bony fingers around my arm and pulled me aside. “Allah’s punishment,” he hissed, his white head shaking with palsy. “Allah’s punishing your family for staying behind during Partition.”

Papa finally reached his limit with my great-aunt, and he dragged the shrieking woman out through the banging screen door, roughly shoving her into the courtyard. The dogs pricked up their ears and howled. Then he went back inside to kick her sack of belongings out after her. “Come back in here you old vulture, and I’ll kick you back to Karachi,” he yelled from the porch.

“Aaaiee,” screamed the old woman. She pressed her palms against her temples and strutted back and forth in front of the charred remains of the restaurant. The sun was still hard. “Wah I do?” she wailed. “Wah I do?”

“Wah you do? You come into my house, eat my food and drink, and then whisper insults about my wife?

Think because you old you can say what you like?” He spat at her feet. “Low-class peasant. Get out of my house. Go home. I don’t want to look at your donkey face any more.”

Ammi’s scream suddenly hurtled through the air like an axe. In her hands she clutched clumps of her own white hair, like hairy-root onion grass, and she was bloodily raking her face with her nails. There was more roaring and confusion as Auntie and Uncle Mayur jumped on her, pinning down her arms so she wouldn’t do more damage to herself. A blur of *salwar kameez*, a gasping scuffle, followed by a stunned silence as they dragged shrieking Ammi from the room. Papa, unable to take it any more, stormed from the compound, leaving flapping chickens in his wake.

I was sitting on the couch next to Bappu the cook during all this, and he protectively put his arm around me as I pressed myself into his fleshy folds. And I remember the human crush in the living room stiffening momentarily during Papa’s and Ammi’s outbursts, samosas frozen halfway to open mouths. It looked like they were playing some parlour game. For as soon as Papa left, our guests looked furtively about

from the corners of their eyes, reassuring themselves no other unhinged Haji was about to jump out at them, and then happily resumed their gold-toothed masticating and palaver and tea-slurping as if nothing had happened. I thought I might go mad.

A few days later a pudgy man with slicked-back hair and black-framed glasses appeared at our door, smelling of lilac water. He was a real-estate developer. Others came after him, like betel-spitting bugs, often at the same time, outbidding one another on our front porch, each desperately trying to snatch Grandfather's four acres for another apartment high-rise.

It was destiny that our losses coincided with a brief period when Bombay real estate suddenly became the highest in the world, more expensive than New York, Tokyo, or Hong Kong. And we had four unencumbered acres of it.

Father turned icy. All afternoon, for several days, he sat pudgy on the damp couch under the porch, occasionally leaning forwards to order the half-dozen developers shot glasses of tea. Papa said very little, just looked grave and clicked his worry beads.

The less he said, the more frantic became the table-slapping and the red-juiced squirts of betel spit hitting the wall. Finally, however, exhaustion set in among the bidders, and Papa stood, nodded at the man with the hair doused in lilac water, and went indoors.

From one day to another, Mother was gone, for ever, and we were millionaires.

Life is funny. No?

We boarded the Air India flight in the night, the sultry Bombay air pressing against our backs, the smell of humid gasoline and sewage in our hair. Bappu the cook and his cousins openly wept with their palms pressed against the airport glass, reminding me of geckos. Little did I know that was the last we would ever hear or see of Bappu. And the plane ride is largely a blur, although I do recall Mukhtar's head was in the airsick bag all through the night, our row of seats filled with his retching.

The shock of my mother's death lasted for some time, so my recollections of the period that followed are odd: I am left with weird, vivid sensations but no overall picture. But one thing is without doubt – my

father stuck to the promise he made Mummy at her graveside, and at a stroke we wound up losing not only our beloved mother but also all that was home.

We – the six children ranging from ages five to nineteen; my widowed grandmother; Auntie and her husband, Uncle Mayur – we sat for hours on harshly lit plastic seats at Heathrow Airport as Papa bellowed and waved his bank statements at the pinched-faced immigration official deciding our fate. And it was on these seats that I had my first taste of England: a chilled and soggy egg-salad sandwich wrapped in a triangle of plastic. It is the bread, in particular, that I remember, the way it dissolved on my tongue.

Never before had I experienced anything so determinedly tasteless, wet, and white.



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