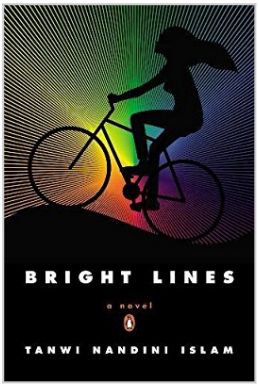

Bright Lines: A Novel

By Tanwi Nandini Islam

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“A Brooklyn-by-way-of-Bangladesh *Royal Tenenbaums.*”—*The Denver Post*

A vibrant debut novel, set in Brooklyn and Bangladesh, follows three young women and one family struggling to make peace with secrets and their past

For as long as she can remember, Ella has longed to feel at home. Orphaned as a child after her parents’ murder, and afflicted with hallucinations at dusk, she’s always felt more at ease in nature than with people. She traveled from Bangladesh to Brooklyn to live with the Saleems: her uncle Anwar, aunt Hashi, and their beautiful daughter, Charu, her complete opposite. One summer, when Ella returns home from college, she discovers Charu’s friend Maya—an Islamic cleric’s runaway daughter—asleep in her bedroom.

As the girls have a summer of clandestine adventure and sexual awakenings, Anwar—owner of a popular botanical apothecary—has his own secrets, threatening his thirty-year marriage. But when tragedy strikes, the Saleems find themselves blamed. To keep his family from unraveling, Anwar takes them on a fated trip to Bangladesh, to reckon with the past, their extended family, and each other.

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Bright Lines: A Novel By Tanwi Nandini Islam Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
"*Bright Lines* is set in Brooklyn during the summer of 2003, the summer of the Blackout, and Ella is a young Bangladeshi woman growing up there, beginning the process of coming out to herself and to her adoptive uncle's family as queer, while also being crushed out on her cousin Charu, whom she lives with. By the time we get to Charu's friend Maya, we are in deep. This is a novel that let me travel a little more fully into this city that I love, even as it reminded me of so much of why I love it in summer."
—Alexander Chee, Vulture.com

"A Brooklyn-by-way-of-Bangladesh *Royal Tenenbaums*. A pot-tinged, PTSD Muslim *Sesame Street*. With sex. Hallucinations, hijabs and handlebars on the always-busy Atlantic Avenue. The New York sense of place in *Bright Lines* rivals the recent memory of Teju Cole's *Open City*."
—The Denver Post

"Tanwi Nandini Islam makes waves with her debut novel, which traverses from Bangladesh to Brooklyn exploring the secrets of three young women."
—Time magazine

"The miracles in *Bright Lines* are the understated moments of family telepathy. . . . An understated queer coming-of-age, a study of how much work it is to be a family, and a snapshot of a disappearing Brooklyn, set against the ghosts of the past, and a search for home."
—NPR.org

"A family, blended in unexpectedly compassionate ways, takes you on a tour of Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue, Bangladesh, and all the ways we make our lives more complicated than they ever had to be. For many of Islam's well-crafted characters, home is a place they've never actually been, but somehow dream to return to someday."
—Ashley Ford, Elle.com

"Vivid and captivating. . . . Spell-binding and a page turner. . . . *Bright Lines* takes place in a Brooklyn that shimmers like a mirage—at once vivid and surreal. . . . A very promising debut that explores family, love, loss, and the painful process of growing up in a way that is both timeless and modern."
—Emma Cueto, *Bustle*

"Tanwi Nandini Islam has given Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* an American cousin where the characters of Bangladeshi origin are situated in America (Brooklyn to be exact) and not London. It's a story of immigrants and their children, family secrets, and feeling like a stranger in a place you're told is home. It's a damn fine first book–easily one of the best debuts of the year."
—Jason Diamond, *Electric Literature*

"Lush and vibrant, Tanwi Nandini Islam comes rushing out of the gate with her debut that has a lot of things (great characters, family story, history), but it's her descriptions of Brooklyn streets and then the effortless move away to a place far away that shows this is a young writer who can control a story with the ease of a tested veteran."
—Vol. 1 Brooklyn

“A brave, honest look at what it was like to be an 18-year-old Brooklynite in 2003, the daughter of Bangladeshi immigrants, teetering somewhere between innate rebelliousness and respect for heritage. Islam is an intuitive and inventive writer, and her story, which bounces between Brooklyn and Bangladesh, is wholly original. Don't miss it.”
—Bustle.com

“A wonderful debut. . . . The beauty of this novel is that it perfectly merges fascinating narrative, honest characters, and the rich history and culture of Bangladesh with the juxtaposition of Bangladesh’s past and future and of that country with America, adding to the reading pleasure.”
—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“*Bright Lines* exudes and explores intimacy in profoundly diverse ways. . . . Each character seems to undergo powerful sexual awakenings. . . . Tanwi Nandini Islam deserves much praise for her fantastic and wonderfully emotional debut novel.”
—*H*yphen magazine

“It's a colorful, vibrant world that *Bright Lines* invites readers to step into and enjoy.”
—Shelf Awareness for Readers

“Every detail in this rich novel is evocative of transformation. . . . A sensitive and subtle exploration of the experience of gender nonconformity across cultures. . . . A transcontinental, transgenerational tale of a family and its secrets.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Islam depicts lush Bangladesh and a gritty Brooklyn very well, and she’s at her strongest when following the free-spirited young women. The characters’ halfhearted feelings toward their Muslim identities provide an original and intriguing backdrop for their misadventures.”
—Publishers Weekly

“Islam presents an unusual, involving, and evocative rites-of-passage tale enriched by multicultural, intergenerational, and gender-role conflicts and questions.”
—Booklist

“[A] refreshing and delicate debut novel. . . . Shuttling between Brooklyn and Bangladesh, Bright Lines explores in fast-paced prose and haunting descriptions of flora and fauna, the very nature of family, revenge, guilt and acceptance.”
—ArtsATL.com

“Bright Lines is the most daring, emotionally dense work I’ve ever read by a debut novelist. I can’t remember the last time a novel kept me breathless, wandering and reconsidering the decisions of my own life. Tanwi Nandini Islam has created a fictive world where race, place, desire, violence and deception beautifully cling to nearly every page, and really every part of her Brooklyn and Bangladesh. She is completely unafraid of insides and outsides of the characters she’s created. I dreamt about Ella and Anwar for weeks long after I finished the book. I’m sure the characters here, and the actual range of Islam’s talent will wonderfully haunt readers for a lifetime. Bright Lines is brilliant and absolutely soulful.”
—Kiese Laymon, author of Long Division

“Whether it’s entirely fictional or not (and I really don’t care) the New York City of Tanwi Nandini

Islam's novel is the one I want to live in! What a radiant, abundant, worldly, sharp and spirited novel! And what a good and powerful imagination, heart and soul seems to have produced it. Bright Lines is very special."
—Francisco Goldman, author of Say Her Name

"Tanwi Nandini Islam is among an emerging generation of American writers giving voice to people, places, and concerns that have escaped the notice of the mainstream. Such is the range of her talent that in her first novel Bright Lines, Islam shows us two locales, Brooklyn and Bangladesh, that are as varied and vibrant as they are restrictive and horrible, no small achievement. Hats off!"
—Jeffery Renard Allen, author of Song of the Shank

About the Author
Tanwi Nandini Islam is a writer, multimedia artist, and founder of Hi Wildflower Botanica, a handcrafted natural perfume and skincare line. A graduate of Vassar College and Brooklyn College's MFA program, she lives in Brooklyn.

PART I

GIRLS ON THE MOVE

Brooklyn

Your house shall not hold your secret nor shelter your longing.

—Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

1

Girls, everywhere. Anwar Saleem stared brazenly at the flock that strode down Atlantic Avenue. He wondered if they noticed him sucking in his paunch, as he stroked the last ribbon of lavender paint across the awning of his apothecary. LOTERÍA Y CIGARILLOS Y SE HABLA ESPAÑOL disappeared into the settling twilight, erasing the last traces of the previous owner's bodega. Anwar wiped his brow. A band of paint stiffened on his forehead. He climbed down, light-headed from the fumes.

On that first Saturday of June, everything in Brooklyn, everything except the sun, seemed to rise. Around the corner, on Third Avenue, petrol vapors blazed from cars in standstill, and traffic shimmered as if recalled in a dream. Trails of a street hawker's incense disappeared into the scaffolding of an art deco phallus, where pigeons clamored in its eaves. Anwar's Apothecary, sober and secular, nestled between Ye Olde Liquor Shoppe and A Holy Bookstore. A shout from the apartment upstairs startled Anwar enough that he nearly lost his balance.

* * *

"Thas not bad for business, now is it, Anwah?" called out the Guyanese street hawker, Rashaud Persaud, from his table down the block.

“Got a very good feeling about this color, my friend!”

“Naw, man, the fire escape! A girl on da move!” Rashaud laughed and pointed to a young girl climbing out of the window above the apothecary.

The girl hopped down the fire escape, her rump facing the street. Anwar craned his neck to see. She peeled off her hijab, revealing hair cropped as short as Audrey Hepburn’s. Mad dash toward the train; the girl did not look back. A fantasy sobered him: Charu the Runaway—slinking outside with her singing hips, those taunting kohl-painted eyes—ready to meet Internet confidants.

He shook this image of his younger daughter from his mind. They’d been having some trouble lately; she was moody, but she was going to NYU—that counted for something, right? Anwar looked once more to admire his brand-new storefront. The color was—feminine—but this last bit of paint could liven up their bathroom walls, which had become tinged gray with neglect. His wife, Hashi, would disapprove. She hated pink-tink, as she told him every time he wore his beloved polo shirt. She rhymed her displeasure: skinny-tinny, Spanish-Tanish, sex-tex. And they always began with the letter T.

Rashaud helped Anwar pull down the heavy, screeching gate.

“Needs some grease,” said Anwar.

“Try this.” Rashaud smacked him a high-five, pressing a Ziploc bag into his palm.

“Trail mix?”

“Majoun. Dates, raisins, walnuts, hash, and honey.”

“Thank you,” said Anwar, shaking Rashaud’s hand good-bye. It was curious how they’d known each other for almost ten years, but how little he knew about his friend. Rashaud had been hawking since he was eighteen, after some problems at home with his mother. But that was as much as he knew. Anwar handed him a New York Post from his back pocket. “And you take this. I’ve gotta quit reading this shit. Gives me nightmares about freak accidents and Mets games.”

* * *

As Anwar made his way home, he nibbled on the majoun. Sweetness coated his tongue. He unbuttoned one more button of his cotton plaid shirt, to let the evening breeze in. He surrendered to the humdrum of dusk, and listened as the voices, wares, wisdoms, and gods changed.

Coralline tendrils of cloud revealed a gaping hole where the sun had been. As he walked down Hanson Place and crossed onto Fulton Street, eateries changed names as frequently as bandits. Farther down on Fulton, he passed a mosque with all the exterior charm of its neighbors, a 99-cent store and a bodega. Anwar never ventured there, and strode past the hennaed beards.

He did not believe in the god of these men.

Years past mingled with the unknowns of tomorrow on these evening walks home. He had lived atrocity during the 1971 war in Bangladesh, questioned the Supreme for allowing it. Thirty-two years later and still the ugliness of the war stayed with him, a dull ache, for the most part. The life he managed to have unnerved him: Hashi, Charu, his home; and of course, his elder daughter, Ella, who could not be called beautiful, but was on the inside. He pictured the perfect end to his day: a cold shower, then sitting in his studio, penning the memoir he never could start, about a pair of vagabonds during the war.

As he left-turned onto Cambridge Place, a maze of dominoes collapsed, each tick synchronized with the blinking eyes of the hustlers who ruled this corner. They nodded at him and he nodded back. There was nothing like this, the brownstone streets of his neighborhood. Children ran through an unleashed fire hydrant, hopscotch chalk erased in the wasteful gush of water. The aroma of grilled burgers brought tears to his eyes; he missed red meat.

As Anwar walked up to his brownstone on the corner of Cambridge Place and Gates Avenue, a hibiscus blossom landed by his feet. He had believed the tree would induce restful sleep in Ella, who struggled with insomnia. Within a year, it was already five feet tall; now, after ten years, it was taller than the house. Ella had slept peacefully, he believed, ever since. It's good to be high, he thought, running his tongue on his teeth for remnants of the majoun.

He saw a solitary light in the kitchen. His wife's beauty salon, the eponymous Hashi's, was closed for the day. His third-floor tenant's apartment: lights off. He mouthed her name, Ra-mo-na Es-pin-al. She worked the night shift today. No glimpses until morning.

Anwar cleared his throat as if to give a speech, but decided to watch the scene in the kitchen window.

His wife, Hashi, cast a fistful of onions into a pot, then several pinches of spice. She dipped a spoon into another pot and had a taste. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then yelled, "Charu! Charu!" A minute later, their daughter Charu entered, giving Hashi a light hug from behind. Hashi turned to look at her.

Anwar tiptoed into the house, hoping to surprise them. He paused for a moment, in the darkness. Do not enter, he thought, suppressing the urge to giggle.

From this angle, Hashi's back was turned. Staccato chopping of carrots filled the room, breaking his reverie. The pot of onions and turmeric hissed in canola oil, splattering grease onto the wall. Charu sat at the table, staring at an array of objects arranged like a daisy on the plaid tablecloth: a pile of empty cigarette packets, some rather compromising photos of Charu at the beach, and the prize, in the center: a condom wrapper, empty of its goods.

"Do—you—want—to—die?" he heard Hashi say.

Charu protested, "Ma, I told you! I was at the beach—that's what people wear to the beach! Those are my cigarettes from a long time ago—I quit! The condom was from sex ed—I just wanted to see what it looked like!"

"You—are—not—my—daughter—You—are—nothing—like—me," Hashi said, her back pumping up and down as she chopped.

"Ma," Charu implored.

"Nothing!"

Anwar decided this was the moment to walk in.

"Er, what is happening, ladies?" he asked. He swiped a carrot from the cutting board. A second later and Hashi would've severed a fingertip.

"Your daughter tells lies and your daughter is doing sex and your daughter is doing smoking and your daughter is not mine," Hashi said. She turned to look at Anwar. She set down the knife and crossed her arms, as if waiting for his response.

Anwar stared at Hashi, and then at their child, back and forth. Hashi's hair was pulled back in a severe bun, her cheeks flushed with anger. She was yellow-skinned, slender, eyes sharp as a hawk's; he still glimpsed traces of that haughty girl he'd been incensed with back when he knew her as his comrade Rezwan's little sister. And Charu, skin tanned by these secret beach excursions, womanish curves she'd inherited from neither him nor Hashi. He imagined Charu's visage as his own mother's. He couldn't remember; she'd died before he'd known her breast. The sole photograph of his mother had been eaten by the elements, marring her face.

Charu's enormous eyes were dead cold. It was a look that often corrupted his daughter's sweet face. Long gone were the days when they rode the subway all the way to Queens for singing lessons.

"Hashi, I am sure Charu's explanation is sufficient," he said.

"No!" Hashi spat.

Guess that's the wrong answer.

"No dinner. Charu will be alone tonight, and I won't hear another word."

"Arré, Hashi, it's not fair—she is a growing girl. She must eat."

"Fine by me!" yelled Charu. "I'm going out, anyway."

"It's almost nine at night. You aren't going anywhere," said Hashi.

"I'm eighteen. It's Saturday night and I can do—"

"Shut. Your. Mouth. You're not eighteen yet. You don't even have a summer job. That would keep you in line." A fleck of spit from Hashi's mouth landed on her chin. Anwar thought better than to dab it away.

"I told you, I'm working. On my clothing line."

"With what money? What fabric?"

Charu inhaled—Anwar knew this was the momentary calm before the storm. If he remembered correctly, Hashi had promised her leftover dresses and textiles from wedding parties.

"I'll be gone soon enough. And I'm never eating this shit again!"

Charu shoved the dining table. Photos flew through the air like a dandelion clock. She ran into her father, and let go a wretched banshee shrill when he didn't move out of her way. She forced her way past, stomped to her bedroom, and slammed the door. A minute later, the sound of objects being thrown against a wall—a stiletto, a dumbbell, anything within her reach. Then, a furious clanging of a Tibetan meditation bell, found at a German exchange student's schnickschnacks sale.

Fathering a teenage girl, rough stuff, thought Anwar, as he picked up a photo that had landed by his foot. In the photo, Charu's lips kissed a dreadlocked boy's ear: Malik. He felt a strange pang seeing the picture, jealousy tinged with admiration. He had suspected his younger daughter was dating Malik. The boy was his intern at the apothecary, and did seem to be around the house often these past few months. The kids had grown up together in the neighborhood. Both were seniors at Brooklyn Tech; graduation was in two weeks. Charu would be headed to NYU, while Malik would be going to the New School. Anwar wondered if this meant they would continue their relations; it was pretty convenient. Malik was a soft-spoken, handsome

Black boy. A solid, sensitive young man, better than what any stern, absentminded father could ask for. Anwar could stand him and that meant a lot.

Anwar wondered how Charu knew this feeling of love. It was further proof of their distance. Had the movies taught her?

Hashi bent over and picked up the photographs.

“I cleaned her room today and came upon this,” said Hashi. “She’s not growing up a good person. Look at this.” She pointed to another photo: bikini-clad Charu, eating a corn dog at Coney Island, pursing her lips around the thing rather—suggestively.

He missed Ella. She was a sophomore at Cornell’s agricultural school—a choice she’d made given her knack for tending their gardens. Ella remained remote, but within his grasp. She never intruded upon Anwar’s sensibility and listened to him about most matters. Her left eye had a tendency to turn this way and that behind her spectacles, and he wondered what she was looking at. If she were here, thought Anwar, her calm would keep Hashi’s nerves intact; she would find some way to make Charu laugh.

His two children were as different as their fathers had been.

* * *

“What on earth is on your face?” Hashi scratched his forehead with her thumbnail. Paint shavings tickled his nose. He’d forgotten about it.

“What is this? Paint? You walked home looking like some madman?”

“I decided to paint the shop today. Such a beautiful day outside—”

“So you decide on this color?” Hashi shook her head. With a damp corner of her apron she tried to wipe the stuff off, but it had crusted over. “Take a seat.” She clumped mashed scoops of rice, lentils, potatoes, and broccoli onto his plate, and sat across from him. “It’s summer. Three months of this and I’ll be an old woman.” She chewed on an unripe tomato as if it were an apple.

“Dinner is very good,” said Anwar, licking the smorgasbord from his fingers. He remembered the enticing smell of grilled burgers on his walk home. “Let’s have some beef next time?”

“It’s a miracle I have energy to cook at all. I’m on my feet all day at the salon,” she snapped, slumping back in her chair. “It is summertime, which means weddings until death does me part.”

“Just suggesting a bit of protein,” said Anwar.

“If you want steak, you cook it.” Hashi took another hard bite of tomato, squirting the table with juice.

Anwar wiped the slimy seeds with his finger and licked them off.

“Disgusting, Anwar,” said Hashi, grimacing. “Aman Bhai called earlier. He asked if he could stay with us for a week or so. I guess the divorce is final?”

“I can’t understand why he doesn’t stay at a hotel or something, not like he doesn’t have the money.”

“Or he should try to work things out with Nidi.” Hashi started clearing the table. It took Anwar a minute to

realize she was fixing a plate for Charu.

“Point is, he should find another place to stay,” said Anwar.

“He’s your brother. He let us stay with him for all those years—”

“We lived in his basement, and I paid him rent, yet never had heat.”

“Well, he may have money but you have me, Charu, Ella. He needs your support. Your love.”

“My love,” repeated Anwar. Bah! His brother did not need his love. Aman owned a triad of pharmacies around Brooklyn, and was indecently self-sufficient for a family member. His wife, Nidi, had fled after years of neglect. And as much as Anwar believed in support and love and other filial bonds, he and his brother did not share them.

“We don’t need another lunatic in this house.”

“Are you calling me a lunatic?” asked Hashi.

Anwar put his hand up to end the conversation before it started. “I need to do some work in my studio.”

“It’s always you in the studio-tudio,” said Hashi.

“Yes, dear.”

“She gets her wild ideas from you, you know.”

“We all flounder before we flourish.”

“You enable the worst in people.”

“I still live with you, don’t I?”

Anwar left Hashi in the kitchen. Above him the patterns of flowers and vines cast in the white molding calmed him, and he felt the evening’s argument subside. He recalled the days before Charu and Ella became women—their first bleeding had changed everything—on walks to P.S. 20; they were tiny girls trundling the street in their snowsuits, looking like miniature cosmonauts. Anwar was the wittiest character they knew, and he captivated them with obscurities: The seeds in one apple produced eight different trees; potato fruit was poisonous; New Delhi had the oldest alluvial soils in the world; cicada larvae took seventeen years to mature. He was their magician, their scientist, their Baba, and they adored him without much effort on his part. Nowadays, it was ever more evident that his girls had grown into adults. He grew flustered by everyday accidentals: Charu walking naked from the bathroom to her bedroom, or Ella sobbing while planting rosemary in the herb garden.

He touched his painted forehead. A raw scrubbing and hot water would get it off. He worried for a second—maybe the stuff was so impenetrable he’d need a toxic paint thinner to remove it.

No, I will leave it be, he thought, smiling sleepily.

Anwar made his way upstairs to their bedroom, climbing with heavy feet. The floorboards creaked, harmonizing with his knees. He had built his home in the spring of 1988, along with a band of men now known as the legendary construction company Brownstoner Brothers. They were the first renovators in

Bedford-Stuyvesant, years before it was sliced into neighborhoods with fancy names ending in Hills or Heights. He'd met the head contractor, a bespectacled Saudi named Omar, his first weeks in the city. Anwar had grown tired of suburban somnolence on Long Island, where he worked in a pharmacy and lived with Hashi and the girls in Aman and Nidi's basement. Each day assaulted his pride, and when he'd saved enough money, he left at once for Brooklyn and drove a black gypsy taxi, vowing never again to shell pills in a pharmacy. Omar was one of his first passengers. He asked Anwar to drop him off at an abandoned property on a tree-lined block. The brownstone stood empty and gutted, windows boarded up with rotting planks of wood, the unforgettable phrase CALL ME DIG BADDY spray-painted over the rusty wrought iron door. Sneakers dangled off the phone lines in front of the house, commemorating the dead. City'll give ya this crack house for a dollah, Omar told him. There'd been a DEA raid on the brownstone, making it available in one of the first housing sweepstakes in the city. It was the first time he'd signed up for anything since the war, besides those Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes.

Anwar won the decrepit 111 Cambridge Place for one dollar, as there were no other bidders interested in such arduous renovations in a notorious neighborhood. The inside of the home lay rotten with water damage, broken stairs, vermin droppings, and a general ill aura. As beautiful and settled as the houses and generations of families surrounding them appeared, their new neighborhood was renowned as a war zone, impoverished and violent and isolated, something Anwar had never imagined existing in America.

It suited him perfectly.

He orchestrated the renovation of the squatter house using his inheritance of his father's lithic Buddhist statues and gold coins from Bangladesh's Pala period. Seeing no use for his father's artifacts, Anwar sold them to Sotheby's for a tidy sum. (His father, an archaeologist trained in the UK, died a second time around for his son's insolence.) He hired Omar and his men at Brownstoner Brothers. Many of them were undocumented young men living underground, surviving on part-time construction and painting work. Hashi begrudgingly cooked the rice, lentils, meat, and vegetables for the workers. Years later, her succulent meals were lauded by the men who had transformed the drug den into a sunlit warren.

They started with a shared staircase between all of the floors in the house. Anwar's chronic indecision between modernity and tradition led him to build two of everything. Two master bedrooms: one for lovemaking, which he and Hashi shared, and one for solitude, which was now his studio. He built two smaller bedrooms for his daughters, with Ella on the first floor, looking outward onto the gardens she so loved, and Charu's room on the second floor, directly above Ella's. As a child, Charu was prone to illness and Hashi wanted her close. Two kitchens: one with a tandoori oven and copperware, the other composed of state-of-the-art appliances. (When they built out the third-floor apartment for a tenant, he relented and permitted the installation of modern appliances; the tandoori sat unused in his studio.) He built two expansive bathrooms. The one in their master bathroom had a slate-tiled archaic stone bath with crevices in the walls for candles.

Anwar debated whether or not to have a Turkish toilet, but Hashi put her foot down, saying, What is the point of America if you still squat like a dog? He built a veranda just outside their master bedroom, which overlooked the backyard. The veranda was a quintessential feature of any respectable flat, a place to smoke and think. Sure, this wasn't a flat. But having lived in Aman's basement for so many years meant Anwar would not live in a house without immediate access to escape.

Hashi had two requests. One, he would pay for her to get a BA in psychology at Brooklyn College, because she'd cut off her studies to marry him and had never gotten over the embarrassment of not finishing school. Two, as a way to even the score of having to cook for the horde of builders, she wanted Anwar to build her a beauty parlor in the garden apartment, the most dilapidated part of the house. He praised her independence,

and was happy that it absolved him of the responsibility of adjusting her to city life. She was lonely in the neighborhood and wanted the company of other women. At first, few neighbors would venture into their half-built home, once notorious for its illegal transactions.

When the final touches were complete and Omar's crew had departed, Anwar planted three hibiscus trees. The scent and beauty of his garden spread an air of nostalgia and clarity on Cambridge Place, and the neighbors praised Anwar for his contribution. Last month, fifteen years after he'd planted the trees, the block association awarded him the coveted Neighbor of the Year award.

* * *

Anwar paused for a moment in front of Charu's bedroom door. He heard muffled whispering, a girlish laugh. Three clangs of a bell and a flat drone saturated the hallway. The sound filled Anwar with an unnamed dread—stop, you are being paranoid. He shook his head at the feeling of dread. There lingered the invisible dust of some old horror, for who knew what had happened in this house before their time here. He imagined the desolation of addiction, women stuffed with bags of rock, beaten in murderous rages. He did not believe in ghosts. But if there were any, he wished them on their way.

Another giggle from Charu's room. And then, there was peace, he thought, making his way to his bedroom.

* * *

All of the ceilings at 111 Cambridge Place had the same beautiful white floral molding. However, in the master bedroom, a door handle was embedded in one of the leaves in the pattern. Once opened, the door revealed a fold-up ladder, which led upstairs to the third floor, to Anwar's studio. To reach the door handle, Anwar stood on a chair and pulled down the ladder. He hoisted himself into the room and sat for moment to steady his trembling knees.

Heaven. He inhaled the wisps of baked blueberry in the air. A refrigerator preserved fresh fruit extracts, yogurts, and soy and oatmeal scrubs for Anwar's Apothecary goods that he concocted in this kitchen. Wicker furniture scored from weekend stoop sales. Leather-bound journals and old magazines created a skyline of paper towers on the floor. Hashi never came upstairs, preferring the make-Anwar-do-it system. She would holler, "I need cleanser!" Then Anwar would send the products down in a bucket attached to a rope.

He unbuttoned his daytime shirt and pants and changed into his night gear, a plaid lungi and a plaid shirt.

Time for a toke, Anwar thought. On the floor was a border of nineteen empty pint-size mason jars, courtesy of none other than Rashaud Persaud, who grew a potent crop out in an abandoned house in the Rockaways. Anwar had never been there. He squatted down and unscrewed the lid. The pungent leafy aroma floated into his nostrils. He plucked a dark green bud laced with purple hues, packed a nugget in a wooden pipe, lit it with a match. One luxurious drag let the evening's quarrel subside.

"Unnh," he heard, as he inhaled. Did I make this sound? Anwar thought. He inhaled and then exhaled again out the tiny arched window. What was this sound? He kept the space vermin-free. He heard drumming, then another long, melodious sigh.

"Unhhhh."

"Hashi?" he asked.

No answer.

Hashi had not come upstairs. The drumming sound beckoned him to investigate the wall he shared with their tenant, Ramona Espinal. A thin wall and a locked door separated them. Only Anwar had the key. He rolled toward the wall, his elbow hitting it with a thud. Drumming ceased. He took another toke. Laughter. He chuckled along. Was Ramona Espinal with a lover? He pictured a sweaty, stubbly mariachi, riding the spur of his boots down her tight, voluptuous hips. I must have seen this on TV, he thought. Ramona was a Mexican nurse-midwife at Brooklyn Hospital, and nearly half his age. He checked his watch. It was a quarter to midnight. She shouldn't be home at this hour.

Drumming commenced. A man laughed. It is the headboard, Anwar realized.

"Anwar!" he heard Hashi shout from below.

"Yes, darling!" As soon as he said it, he clasped his hand over his mouth. Abruptly, the drumming stopped.

"Bedtime, na?" called Hashi. "And the shampoo!"

"Yes, darling."

He rolled away from the wall and opened his eyes. Ah, my old friend. Rezwan's severed head floated around Anwar. He blinked several times and Rezwan's head did the same. Ghastly bits of spinal cord and purple-black windpipe trailed from Rezwan's neck. A machete scar sliced open cheek into mouth, yellow half-moon smile. How many times can I answer for your death? I am sorry for abandoning you.

As if hearing Anwar's thoughts, Rezwan's head nodded yes. Anwar nodded back. He had loved Rezwan, his brother-in-law and comrade, more than any man before or since. Years after the war, in 1985, Rezwan and his wife, Laila, were both shot to death by an unknown gunman. They had planned to settle near Laila's hillside family home in Rangamati, away from the decaying city Dhaka had become.

They were killed mere days before the move.

Rezwan's anti-government views about President Ershad were well known in Dhaka. But Anwar did not believe the gunman was an unknown assassin or a government operative.

He suspected it was an act of revenge.

Yet Anwar was too far away to investigate. There were weightier matters involved. Ella had been spared, having slept over at her grandparents' flat that evening. Upon hearing the news, Anwar and Hashi begged to bring Ella to New York, to live as their daughter. It took two years for Hashi's parents to agree to let them take her.

Today would have been Rezwan's thirtieth wedding anniversary, Anwar remembered. Married on a pristine beach in Cox's Bazar, barefoot upon the striated black-and-white sands. Save for Anwar, Hashi, and their immediate family, all the other guests were villagers whom Rezwan and Laila had met while installing tube wells in the surrounding villages. That day, one of Anwar's happiest—rice wine, song and dance aplenty—was etched in his mind forever. He realized that besides the bride and groom, many of those in attendance had suffered for years afterward, poisoned by arsenic-laced well water.

"We die. Memory is fragmentary. I believe in nothing," said Anwar to his friend. "But there are times when scripture relieves a sense of flailing."

They moved their lips in recitation, Arabic into Bangla into Arabic again, scraps of Surah al-Noor (The Light).

See how Al—h created the Seven Heavens and Earth

Made the Earth, a niche

Made the moon, a lamp

Made the sun, a glass, a brilliant star

Lit from a blessed tree neither of the east nor west

Its oil luminous though no fire touched it

Light upon light

Speak to us in parables, knower of All—

I must be with your sister now, thought Anwar. Rezwan stuck out his tongue and disappeared into an air vent. Anwar wanted to hold the closest thing to his dead friend, his daughter, Ella. But she had not yet come home.

2

A quiet backpack-clad figure walked to 111 Cambridge Place. Ragged from a bus ride, Ella considered turning back to the steep hills and collegiate abandon of Ithaca, where night skies held the ancient grand stars like Alphard the Solitary, in the constellation Hydra. Down here in Brooklyn, stars lay stitched under a veil of gray-black clouds and light pollution, lost to city dwellers.

The wrought-iron front gate was unlatched. Ella paused for a minute. It didn't seem like anyone was awake. She made her way around the side of the house to the backyard. She did a quick walk-through—the garden looked healthy; it was something she worried about at college. She circled back to the hibiscus tree that led into her cousin's room. She stepped onto the tree's lowest branch and climbed up to Charu's second-floor window. Through the sheer curtains, Ella could see the selection of mood enhancers: a Virgin de Guadalupe pillar candle, burning sticks of Nag Champa, white Christmas lights framing the bed. And there was Charu, strutting around in a pair of lacy black panties and bra. Ella flushed, shamed by her spying. She blinked her eyes a few times to make sure what she was seeing. Her eyes weren't so—reliable.

* * *

It was hard coming home. Ella was drawn to her uncle's rambling anecdotes and flower gardens, but she loathed her aunt's curling iron and frills. She never quite felt she was in her aunt's favor. She switched between calling Anwar "Uncle" or "Anwar," and he didn't seem to mind either way, understanding that if her mood permitted intimacy, she'd allow it. She never called Hashi "Ma." But for Charu, words failed her. The word sister—in any language—missed the mark, though she knew Charu felt that they were sisters. Charu was the one person for whom Ella would do anything. She had been a bright-eyed bouncy toddler with an infectious laugh, and Ella, scrawny and nearsighted, had claimed the role of protector.

As they grew up, Ella loved everything about Charu, even her contradictions: The same girl who despised capitalist materialism owned enough fine threads to open a used-clothing store; the same girl who scoffed at other girls for idiotic flirting was a clever coquette. She demanded an end to anorexic beauty ideals, but lamented her "third world body": protruding belly, scrawny arms and legs. Charu, the unapologetic fashion

chameleon—on certain days she dressed in plaid shirts and baggy khakis; other days, monochromatically. And once, when she was a sophomore and Ella was a senior, Charu channeled pop culture celebrity with short shorts and stilettos made to stab a man in the chest. She changed right back into jeans and a T-shirt when chided by the dour-faced Principal Jenkins.

At Brooklyn Tech, Ella fell in line with the smart and lonely characters whose sights were set on the Ivy League. Her senior year she was known as the "hot Indian chick's sister." Charu's entry into the school gave Ella an ounce of attention (and, she suspected, pity) for inheriting the short end of the genetic stick. She remembered once when walking home from school, a boy on the street said, Dang, you ugly, and Charu shouted, Shut the fuck up, mushroom dick! The boy let it slide the second his eyes made contact with Charu's. Ella mumbled they should keep moving—he didn't go to their school and they'd never see him again. Charu seethed the entire walk home. Ella knew that if she herself had said such a thing, the kid would harass her more. But he hadn't done anything but laugh, for he, like Ella, was not immune to Charu's charm. Charu aligned herself with outsiders, with fringe dwellers. She accepted the weird, the freakish, the perverse, the gothic, and the queer. She loved people different from her; Ella was a perfect complement. As Charu grew curvy, Ella's muscles became long and limber. Ella refused the pains of contacts and was damned to thick glasses with plastic frames.

During Ella's senior year, two springs ago, while planting rosemary in the herb garden, she realized she was in love with Charu Saleem. From that day, Ella lived in constant suppression. She'd grinned at Charu in the hallway, and it was easy to avoid her in the twelve-floor behemoth of a school, since she had her schedule memorized. Charu never fathomed Ella's infatuation, and remained free and uncomplicated with her cousin. Charu changed in and out of her clothes all the time without a thought to decency.

Ella never let her mind wander to Charu's body at nighttime, committed to being chaste. She pondered why, over and over. The word lesbian felt as foreign to her as the word sister. There were other kids in school who were more comfortable with being queer, and formed clubs and events that she seemed to get invited to. The idea of belonging to a group because a crush on Charu would "qualify" her as a member—that just wasn't okay. It wasn't like anyone else had ever caught her attention at school, and during those sleepless nights, Ella wondered if anyone ever would.

Once during a game of Taboo, Charu's clue was like you, and upon learning the word was adopted, Ella stormed off, not speaking to Charu until the next afternoon. She walked around with fists clenched, and developed a teeth-grinding habit that would last for years. Anwar attributed this behavior to a sedentary adolescent lifestyle and asked her to help him build the fence for the vegetable garden. This worked for a while; she was too exhausted at night to desire. But after the fence was built, the old insomnia persisted. It was Hashi who cured her, with lovers rock. The Guyanese hawker Rashaud Persaud had brought the reggae CD as a gift to Hashi during a salon visit. Finding no use for "such slow" music, Hashi passed it on to Ella, who listened to it every night till she left for college. She stopped seeing images in her dreams—she dreamt as though born blind.

* * *

And now, seeing her cousin in her bedroom, Ella hesitated for a second before rapping on the window. Even though Ella had wrapped up her sophomore year at Cornell, met some good folks, she flushed with that same embarrassment.

Charu's face switched from seductress to sister. "Ella!" She hugged her cousin through the window.

"Charu," said Ella, lightly returning her hug. Charu hugged back tighter, and pulled Ella through the window into her bedroom.

“Shit, I wasn’t expecting you!”

“Who were you expecting?”

“You’ll never guess who I’m dating.”

“Who?” This takes the cake for shitty guessing games.

“Malik. Can you believe it? After all these years?”

Ella scanned her memory—Malik? Ah, Anwar’s intern. Same year in school as Charu. Skateboarder extraordinaire. Stupid bastard. “How’d that happen?”

“He just offered to teach me how to skateboard. See?” Charu pointed to a scab on her knee. “Isn’t that awesome?”

“Yeah, awesome.”

“Should I wait in the nude? Should I wear this?” Charu grinned, holding up a lace teddy. “I made it.”

“God, Charu, I don’t know about that stuff.” Ella grimaced at the lingerie. “Did you two . . .” She let the sentence fade. “Wait, you made that?”

“No, we haven’t had sex yet. Maybe tonight’s the night. And yes, I’ve been hittin’ the sewing machine like crazy.”

“It does look a little crazy in here,” said Ella, looking at the mess everywhere. Charu’s sewing machine was covered with lace and fabric swatches, paper patterns, pins, and spools of thread.

“Well if they’d let me go to FIT, like I wanted, I wouldn’t be hoarding all this shit.”

“I’m sure if you made more of a case—” Bullshit, thought Ella. While the Fashion Institute of Technology was Charu’s first-choice public school, Ella knew Charu blaming Anwar and Hashi was a load of crap. When it came down to it, Charu had chosen NYU and a pretty decent financial aid package because of the slightly higher probability that she would meet a straight guy.

The unmistakable sound of a shaking tree interrupted Ella.

“Shit, he’s here!”

At the same moment, they heard Hashi’s militant footsteps approaching Charu’s room. Charu fumbled to turn on the overhead-light switch, her signal to Malik that it was not safe to enter. The rustling of the branches stopped. Just as Charu yanked on a terry cloth bathrobe, Hashi turned the doorknob without bothering to knock. Ella saw the heat of resentment rise in her cousin’s face and could not help but laugh.

Hashi pushed her way through the door, carrying a plate of food. “Charu—it is late! Have your dinner.”

“I’m not eating this late, Ma.”

“Then go to bed, now.” Hashi sounded tired, with a hint of sadness. She took the plate back. The shawl arranged around her head slipped to her shoulders, exposing a fringe of gray hair along her temple.

Hashi pointed to Charu's bed and her eyes narrowed. "What's this, some Hindu puja? You'll burn yourself alive. Stop the fire!"

"Ma, aren't you going to say something?"

"What—" started Hashi, then she noticed Ella. "Arré, Ella? You're home!" She leaned in to give Ella a kiss on the cheek; then she took a step back. "How on earth did you get in? I didn't hear the front door."

"You know Ella's burglar quiet, Ma," said Charu.

Ella stared at the floor, deciding it was the smartest thing to do.

Hashi's gaze wandered to the window, as if she sensed something awry but could not locate it. She walked over to the closet and opened it. After finding nothing, she gave Charu one last killer look. She patted Ella's shoulder.

"Maybe you can bring some sense into your sister," said Hashi. "It is good to have you home." She left them without saying good night to Charu.

"Goddamn, the woman's an evil psychic," Charu said, exhaling.

"She knows you," Ella said, starting to leave. "Have a good—"

"No, El, stay a bit. She'll get suspicious if you leave right away. It's better if she thinks I'm awake talking to you."

"You've got it twisted, but—all right."

Charu turned off the light, and once again, Malik could be heard climbing the hibiscus tree.

The tree shook with the expectation and longing of an eighteen-year-old. Malik tapped the window. Charu slid it open. His feet were on a branch; his hands gripped the sill. His short legs, back, and arms were taut and straight—he resembled a small bridge. He reached for Charu's arm, but she lacked the strength to pull him in. She gestured for Ella to help her.

"Thanks, guys," Malik said, as they struggled to hoist him into the room, trying to be quiet. He looked around, sniffed with pleasure at the scent of incense trailing. He was bathed in cologne, and his black plastic-frame glasses slipped down his nose. Ella couldn't stop herself from appreciating the nerd in him. He wore cutoff shorts and a black tank top with a screen-printed red fish skeleton, FISHBONE scrawled across. He presented Charu with a gift: a pink rose, with two Valium pills taped to the stem. "It's good to see you, Ella, how you been?" Malik offered her his hand. Ella shook it, firmly.

"You got two pills?" Charu joked. "Guess there's limited perks to you working in my uncle's pharmacy," she said. She dropped the flower on the bed and pulled him closer.

"Hey, your dad's gonna kill me if he finds out I'm giving his daughter drugs," said Malik. "I'm a lucky dude for getting this gig, but I gotta say, I miss ol' Anwar. I might still help him out a couple days a week."

"He won't even know you're getting them from Aman's pharmacy," said Charu. "Should we take 'em now?"

"Naw, let's hold off for a minute, sugar."

“Too late!” Charu popped a pill into her mouth.

“Well, shoot,” said Malik. “You want this one, Ella? I didn’t realize you’d be here.”

“No. I’m good.”

“A’ight. Well, fuck it. Here goes,” said Malik. “Got water?”

Charu fished a water bottle from under a pile of fabric. “It’s not old. Promise.”

Malik took a swig and swallowed.

“My uncle’s got the personality of a prison warden, huh?” said Charu.

“Dude’s getting a divorce. I got sad today, hearing him talk about his wife.” He looked around, as if Hashi might appear behind him. “Your mom asleep?”

“She’s been killing me softly, but yes, the wicked witch sleeps.” Charu gave him a few tiny pecks. He let Charu kiss his ears and looked at Ella. She looked back at him with undisguised loathing.

“I—uh, brought this film I thought we could watch,” he said.

“Oooooh, that’s sweeeeeet, Maliiiik,” Charu said.

Why do girls add so many vowels when they’re into someone? Ella wondered. “I’ve got to sleep,” she said. “That bus ride did me in.”

“It’s—it’s good for inducing sleep,” Malik stuttered, excited. “It’s a French film set to this incredible music and y-you-you-just watch this bit of forest grow from nothing into, well, a forest.”

“C’mon, Ella, I haven’t seen you in months! I’ll be studying and taking Regents all next week!”

“Yeah, right,” Malik said, and they laughed.

Ella frowned, but sat down on the bed. The longer she stayed, the longer she would be able to keep an eye on Charu.

Charu put the DVD into her computer, and sat between Ella and Malik, spreading a thin kantha blanket over their legs. Ella was practically pushed off the side of the bed, like a pineapple-flavored Life Saver, unwanted, at the end of the pack. She kept glancing to see if Malik was petting Charu, but he kept his hands by his sides, eyes on the screen as if he wasn’t using the film as a ploy to bed her cousin.

After a while, Ella relaxed. The film’s music wafted over her. She took off her glasses to rest her eyes. Her vision was in the negative nines, and most things were fuzzy outlines until she put her glasses on. Around the time of her parents’ death, something else had started happening, usually set off by a headache or stress. From twilight until she slept, she would see bright lines and shapes, plants, or people. And now, the time-lapse frames of the documentary became a riotous, psychedelic hallucination of blossoms, fauna, the curling, spreading, mixing within a microcosm.

Ella’s visions ranged from meditative to wacky. A waning moon over a placid lake, a bevy of Egyptian blue monarchs, a television set bouncing up and down around the room. For much of her childhood, she assumed her eyes were making up things for her to see; she’d wondered if she were going insane. And she worried

that telling Anwar and Hashi might then involve seeing a shrink. Or being sent back to Bangladesh.

She'd even taken a couple of classes to make sense of her visions. Her Neurological Disorders seminar mapped the fearsome world of disorders and delusions, from migraines to schizophrenia. In the Hallucinations class, Ella devoured any literature she could get her hands on to figure out the cause. Getting an MRI at the medical center was easy enough, but she always found excuses to not make a doctor's appointment. Poring through study after study led her to two conclusions: It was either a tumor or trauma that caused her phantasms. Each case bore a resemblance to Ella's. Lilliputian beings or kaleidoscopic visions at dusk. Perpetual insomnia. Yet it didn't happen every single evening; rather, something would set it off, if she was stressed or dehydrated or had a migraine. Ella wondered if years of depression, another possible cause, had done her in. She'd tried therapy in fourth and fifth grade, upon her teachers' suggestion, but she didn't ever find comfort in talking about herself.

She couldn't figure out a way to tell Anwar and Hashi that she hallucinated without worrying that her aunt would fall into hysteria. So Ella picked up a prescription for antidepressants, after telling one of the student health center counselors her story. She hadn't yet taken the pills the shrink so readily prescribed.

* * *

Coming home stirred up thoughts of the parents Ella had barely known. Anwar spoke about Rezwan and Laila like they were characters in an epic. Freedom fighters. They survived a war, only to be murdered just before her third birthday. There was one black-and-white photograph of them, perched against a graffiti wall marked with sickles and hammers. Rezwan Anwar, undeniably regal, in aviator sunglasses, standing next to Laila, nearly six feet tall, her arms holding baby Ella. She stood with her head cocked to the side, daring the camera to capture her. A teenage boy stood beside Rezwan, almost hiding behind his enormous bell-bottomed pant leg—Ella vaguely remembered the boy hugging her good-bye when she left Dhaka. Her only lucid memory of her homeland was leaning into her grandfather Azim's chest in the car en route to the airport. He hummed a fisherman's tune, smelled of sweat and cloves.

There was wriggling on the bed. Charu was kissing Malik wildly; he flopped and gasped like a fish struggling in the open air. Ella was rigid. She had drifted off but was now witness to the spectacle. She was anxious to leave, anxious to watch. Charu squinted with the cunning of a girl who believed she knew how to pleasure a man, but then she started giggling; she must have felt the release of the Valium. Malik shushed her, to no avail.

Ella Anwar, orphaned, adopted, with her wayward visions, her frizzy hair, her large hands and feet, a bass voice. She longed to nestle in the burning that filled the air. She edged herself off the bed, leaving them to each other.

* * *

Crisscrossed parquet floors creaked under Ella's step. Gold leaf wallpaper, beloved of the old Brooklyn bourgeoisie, gleamed in the dimness. On either side of the stairs were two archways: To her left were the living room and kitchen; to her right was her bedroom, and a bathroom behind the stairs. Hashi called this the "guest bathroom," a bad habit from the renovation days, though Ella was the only one who ever used it.

She saw something looming in the living room—a headless naked figure. She went inside and touched the form. Just one of Hashi's mannequins, idiot. She hurried back to her side of the house, to go to the bathroom. She scrubbed her hands raw and splashed water on her face. She looked up at the mirror. Mirrors were never a part of Ella's day. Long arms and legs and coarse hairs everywhere. She was rough as a prehistoric man. She wore an oversize T-shirt with relaxed-fit Levi's. She'd had these clothes since her freshman year of high

school. Ella pressed her nose against the mirror for a closer facial evaluation. Her pores—at least what she thought might be pores—were enormous. She scraped her nose with a nail, loosening tiny, hardened yellow flecks. Damn, you ugly.

* * *

Ella took in her old room—one wall with three rows of framed pen-and-ink botanical drawings, freshman biology textbooks on a bookshelf, a poster of Simone de Beauvoir. The windowed wall was painted verdigris, with the bed pushed up against it for the best view of the garden. Everything was just as she'd left it when she was home over Christmas break, except—she blinked her eyes several times to be sure—there was a person sleeping in her bed.

This was a girl; Ella could tell from the slope of the body under the sheets and the scent of floral shampoo. Ella got on her hands and knees and stared at the girl. She was lithe, hair shorn in a pixie; a small diamond studded her nose. She shivered in her sleep. Somehow, she was familiar, but Ella did not know how she knew her. She found herself matching the sleeping girl's breathing. She wasn't about to climb into the twin bed with a stranger. For an evening without hallucinations, this was the weirdest (and maybe worst) night Ella had experienced in a long time.

The summer air was warm and crisp. The sky had not yet brightened. She moved past the headless mannequin, the overwhelming smell of onions in the kitchen, out the sliding back door. She would sleep outside.

3

The songs of sparrows stirred Charu awake at dawn. Soft computer glow beamed on the high ceiling, eerie as an alien confessional. Ella's glasses sat in the mess, an artifact left behind in a raid. In her high, Charu had lost track of her sister, who had managed to slip out of the room.

After four months of chaste skateboarding and two-slices-and-a-soda specials at Luv 'N Oven, things between Charu and Malik had changed in the past week. Each day after school, a new lesson, the unfurling of their desire. Monday, riding the G train back and forth between Queens and Gowanus, kissing. Tuesday, humping jeans over jeans in his empty apartment in Bed-Stuy. His mother worked interminable shifts at JFK airport at the British Airways counter. Malik missed her, but freedom (and free trips to the West Indies) was a fair trade. Wednesday, he rolled Charu a joint (the most potent shit, courtesy of Uncle Bic); they ate Luv 'N Oven and watched Total Request Live, which killed the vibe. Thursday, he churned her insides with strong bassist fingers. Playing chords in your pussy, he had chuckled. It hurt terribly. But it was the first time she could ever remember something that hurt terribly but felt good all at once. Maybe Chinatown massages or tattoos or gym class, but she didn't know much about those things either.

Charu closed her laptop and watched Malik sleep. Her mouth watered, wanting to nosh and suckle flesh like a newborn. She raked him with her teeth, tasted hard salty shoulder, vein ridges along his sinewy arm, a slim wrist and musky fingers. He whistled air from his nose. She straddled the morning tent that sprouted from his underwear and bent down to kiss his snoring mouth. His locks lay gnarled on his chest like a prized fleece. She sucked his breath and kissed him harder. He heaved and gasped as if drowning and pushed her aside.

"Whaaat?"

"I—I—couldn't breathe," said Malik. "Stop."

She flinched at his tone. “Maybe you should leave,” she told him, peeling herself off his body.

He took a few more deep breaths. “Relax. No need for salt, sugar,” he said, chuckling. He spread his fingers over her belly. She stiffened, but let him suck on her breast, eyes still half-asleep. She pressed against him to imprint a raspberry star, one more in a galaxy of bruises.

He pulled her closer, swiped a condom from her bedside table.

“Wish we could listen to music,” he said. “Maybe we should just wait to do it in my house.”

She ripped the wrapper with her teeth. “We can’t wait.” She handed him the condom, uncertain.

He slipped it on and rubbed himself on her thigh. She took a few deep breaths and closed her eyes.

Malik grinned and she grinned back. She looked up at him as a drop of his sweat fell onto her cheek. The silver cross on his neck brushed her mouth, and she opened to swallow it. She clasped the charm under her tongue like a thermometer. Rays of morning sun filtered inside her eyelids. Somewhere, far away, she heard the crackle of thunder.

She opened her eyes to find Malik’s face stricken with fear.

“Oh shit,” he wheezed. He jumped out of bed and froze, then brought a finger to his lips.

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