

A woman in a red dress standing in profile against a textured, aged background. The woman is shown from the waist up, facing right. She has her hair styled in a bun. The background is a warm, yellowish-tan color with a mottled, aged texture. The title is enclosed in a dark, ornate, scalloped-edged frame.

THE WORLD
WE FOUND

— A NOVEL —

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The World We Found

a novel

Thrity Umrigar



HARPER

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Dedication

for
gulshan
hutokshi
perveen
always

Epigraph

“Suppose the world were only one of God’s jokes, would you work any the less to make it a good joke instead of a bad one?”

—George Bernard Shaw

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Book One

Chapter 1

The tooth broke three days after she received the awful news. There was no blood. No pain, even. For three days she had believed that it was her heart that had broken into tiny fragments, but turned out it was another part of her body that decided to mourn the news. No pain, no blood. Just a moment of puzzlement as she bit into the soft French toast she made for breakfast this morning and felt something hard and brittle in her mouth. She spat out two small pieces into her cupped hand. Adish stared at her for a stunned second and then said, “Oh, no. What happened?”

She stared back at him, unable to reply, transfixed by the rightness and wrongness of the broken tooth. On the one hand, she was not yet fifty and in the pink of health, as her mother would have said. Much too young to be losing teeth at breakfast. On the other hand, the evidence before her was appropriate, an outward manifestation of the brokenness she’d felt ever since the phone call from Armaiti. An uncharacteristic acceptance descended upon Laleh, in contrast to the denial she had felt since Armaiti called with news about her cancer. Then, she’d felt like a wild animal, lassoed by the tyranny of the telephone cord. No, no, no, she’d shaken her head as she got off the phone.

She rose from the table and headed into the bathroom. She rinsed her mouth with cold water, and only then did she look up into the mirror. It was a side tooth and a stubble was still attached to her gums, and yet, how irrevocably it altered her appearance. For some absurd reason, it reminded Laleh of the New York skyline after the towers went missing, a gap that drew attention to what was absent. Until now, her teeth had been as sturdy and even as piano keys; but then, until now her oldest friend in the world had not been dying. It was right somehow, in this week of reminders of mortality, that she sacrificed something, too.

Still, she regretted the timing. She and Kavita were meeting in a few hours—not enough time to call the dentist and get an emergency appointment—to go to Mrs. Lokhanwala’s old address. They had not seen the woman in almost thirty years, and given the crucial nature of their mission, Laleh would’ve preferred looking her best. The broken tooth was already making her self-conscious. Laleh usually prided herself on not being vain, though the truth was, being beautiful, she could afford to give up on vanity. But now, she promised herself that she would simply not smile during her visit to Mrs. Lokhanwala’s. If the woman—who would be, what? seventy-five? eighty?—was still alive, that is. She didn’t allow herself to think of what they’d do if Nishta’s mother had died or moved.

She heard Adish enter the bedroom and the next second he stood before her, leaning into the doorway of the bathroom and gazing quizzically at her. “You okay, janu?”

She nodded, smiling with her mouth closed. “I’m fine.”

“Sure you don’t want me to go with you today? I could leave work for a few—”

“No need to. We’ll manage. I’ll call you if there’s anything.”

He ran his index finger gently over her lips. “Shall I call Sarosh to see if he can fit you in later th

afternoon?”

“That would be great.”

“Because you remember the party tonight, yes? I’m sure Sarosh can make you a temporary crown.”

“Oh, shit. I totally forgot.” She made a pleading face. “Can’t you just go without me?”

In reply, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “Bye. Let me know what happens.”

She grumbled lightly to herself as she got her things ready for her bath. Adish knew how much she hated his work parties, how lonely the empty prattle—the fake heartiness and fake humility—made her feel. They almost always fought on the way home from one of these affairs. And yet he persisted in asking her to go. Last week, after Kavita got held up at work, she had dragged Adish to a play, and in exchange he had extracted a promise to accompany him to Girish Chandani’s party tonight.

Ah well, Laleh thought as she entered the shower. There were more important things to think about this morning. Nishta, for instance. They had to find Nishta. To relay to her Armaiti’s final wish. Even though there had been years of silence between Armaiti and her. Even though such a wish may mean nothing to Nishta. Even though she had disappeared from all their lives, leaving only still air in her wake.

Kavita was driving, and, watching her steady, competent hands on the wheel, Laleh smiled to herself. She remembered Kavita as she’d been in college, a shy, dreamy girl who carried her guitar around everywhere. Hard to believe that that poetic, pensive girl was now one of the top architects in the city. Laleh sank into the leather seat and sighed inaudibly, feeling a lifetime removed from the young, impetuous, idealistic woman she’d been. From the time when Kavita-Armaiti-Nishta had been one word in her book, one beating heart. Where were they all now? One dying in America, one missing, and only Kavita still in her life.

“What?” said Kavita, ever attuned to Laleh’s moods.

Laleh shook her head, unable to speak, her mind snagging on the memory of a certain golden afternoon. They had gotten together at Nishta’s house to study, but what Laleh remembered now was the four of them lying on their backs on Nishta’s bed, their knees bent at its edge, so that their feet touched the floor. “Those Were the Days” blasted on the stereo and they sang along lustily and loudly. “*La la la la, la la,*” they sang at the top of their lungs, kicking their legs in time to the music. And suddenly, Armaiti had leapt out of bed and began to dance, dance with such loose, comic abandon—her hair flying about, tossing her head back and forth, flaying her rubber-jointed arms and legs—the others rose to their feet and joined her. By the time the song ended, they were all laughing and sweating and exhausted. And then, as if she’d not been the agent of all this happy chaos, Armaiti said critically, “What a morbid song, yaar.”

“What’re you thinking?” Kavita asked.

“Nothing. Everything. About how young we were once.”

Kavita looked rueful. “Know what’s really sad? I used to think that everybody had that much fun in their teens. That everyone had the kind of friendships we did, felt as much passion and joy.”

“I didn’t,” Laleh said promptly. “I always knew what we had was rare. Always. Even then. My own children don’t have it, Ka. They have lots of friends, don’t get me wrong. But it feels superficial to me. All they talk about are iPhones and designer jeans. And they want nothing to do with politics. It’s crazy.”

“It’s a different time, Lal. They’re growing up in a different India.”

“Bull. That’s what Adish says, also. But what’s changed, Kavita? All the old struggles are still

there, no? So they build a few dozen new malls for people like us. What does that change?"

~~How her father used to scoff at her and Armaiti when they would talk about building a better country. "A new India?" Rumi Madan would thunder at the dinner table after listening to the two teenagers talk matter-of-factly about the imminent revolution. "What do you girls think this is, school play? What 'new India' are you two going to build? Darlings, if there is to be a new India, it will be built by the politicians and the businessmen. Above all, the businessmen. Not by a couple of little girls pretending to be revolutionaries."~~

Laleh blinked back the tears that rose unexpectedly. Ever since the phone call from Armaiti, the past had become more vivid than the present. She had sleepwalked through the past few days, unable to focus on anything.

And now, the past loomed again, in the form of Nishta's old apartment building. A thousand memories flooded Laleh's mind as Kavita searched for a parking space on the tree-lined street. And although she had felt a great urgency to locate Nishta's parents ever since Armaiti had called with the news, Laleh now felt herself moving slowly, as they exited the car and walked toward the building. When they reached the entrance, she and Kavita stood wordlessly for a second. Then Kavita exhaled loudly and they entered the familiar lobby. Their eyes scanned the large wooden board for the Lokhanwalas' flat number. "Look," Laleh said. "They're still here. Thank God."

"The lobby still smells the same," Kavita said, and Laleh nodded as they approached the elevator. "Yup. Like sandalwood."

They rang the doorbell twice before the servant girl answered. "Hello. Is memsahib home?" Kavita asked.

"Who is calling?"

Kavita hesitated. "Just tell her . . . it's some old friends."

The girl threw them a skeptical look before putting on the door chain.

"Yes?" A wizened face peered out at them a few seconds later from the slight opening in the door. "How can I help?"

"Auntie, it's us—Kavita and Laleh. Nishta's college friends. You remember us?"

There was a puzzled silence and then the old woman cried out softly. There was a rustling of the door chain before she threw the door open. "Kavita. Laleh. I cannot believe. What brings you here? Come in, come in."

A minute later they were sitting across from Mrs. Lokhanwala in her large, airy living room, the three of them staring at each other, all of them too polite to comment on the changes time had wrought. "What will you take?" the old lady said at last. "Coffee? Tea?" And before they could answer she was calling out, "Deepa. Bring three cups of coffee. And some snacks."

"Auntie, please. Don't go to any trouble," Laleh said. Her mind was whirling, trying to reconcile the fact that the stylish, trim Mrs. Lokhanwala—had they ever known her first name?—was now an old lady. The living room itself looked frozen in time—the same cream-colored walls, the gray floor tile, the beautiful teak rocking chair.

"My God, you two look just the same," Mrs. Lokhanwala said. "I would've recognized you anywhere."

They smiled shyly. "You, too," Kavita lied. "And what news of Nishta?"

At the mention of her daughter's name, a curtain fell over the old woman's face. The smile vanished. Her eyes turned cloudy. "You don't know?" she whispered.

Laleh leaned forward. "Know what?" she said.

"We don't have any contact with her. My husband—he forbade any relations. She married

Muslim boy, you know.”

Laleh realized that she'd been holding her breath. “Yes, we know,” she said. “Iqbal was a friend of ours.” She forced herself to keep her tone neutral. “We had hoped that after all this time, you know that there might have been a reconciliation.”

Despite her tact, the older woman recoiled, as if she'd been slapped. She stared out at the balcony for a minute before turning to face them again. “What brings you here today?” And before they could answer, “And whatever happened to that other Parsi girl—the fourth one? What was her name?”

“Armaiti,” Kavita said.

“Ah, yes. So much I've thought about all of you over the years.” Mrs. Lokhanwala smiled. “So lively our house used to be, with all of you here.” Her face fell. “Now it's just me and my husband, you know. Our son—you remember Arun?—is settled in Australia. Anyway, how is Armaiti? You see her often?”

“Fine,” Laleh said automatically and then she caught herself. “Actually, auntie, she's not fine. She lives in America, you know. And”—it was still hard to say the words, but she forced herself—“we just found out that she has a serious illness—a brain tumor.”

“Arre, Ram—” Mrs. Lokhanwala's hand flew to her mouth. “How could that be? That sweet little girl?”

For a moment Laleh saw Armaiti as Mrs. Lokhanwala did—a teenager forever. She swallowed. “Yes, well . . . And that's why we're trying to find Nishta. Armaiti wants to reconnect with her, you see.”

The woman's face was impassive. “I wish I could help you,” she said.

Laleh suppressed the wave of anger that rose within her. “Does Nishta never try to contact you either?” she asked evenly.

Mrs. Lokhanwala's eyes darted around the room. “Every year she sends me a birthday card,” she said. “But my husband doesn't allow me to open. I just throw it away. Or return it.”

Laleh stared at a spot over the old woman's left shoulder. She had saved every note her children had ever written her, from kindergarten on. She tried to imagine throwing away a birthday card from Ferzin or Farhad, asked herself what the children could ever do that would make her renounce them. She couldn't come up with one plausible scenario.

The servant girl came in with a tray and set it carefully down in front of them. Laleh grabbed Kavita's arm and pulled her to her feet as she stood up. “I'm sorry, but we have to go,” she said. She wanted to get away from Mrs. Lokhanwala's presence before she said something that she would regret.

“At least have a cup of coffee,” Mrs. Lokhanwala protested, but her voice was drained, flat, and there was a look of understanding on her face.

“I'm sorry, auntie,” Laleh insisted. “We are already late.” She would be damned if she took a sip of anything in this household.

Kavita took a few steps to where Mrs. Lokhanwala was sitting and put her hand on her shoulder. “It was nice seeing you again,” she said softly. “Both of us have such good memories of this house.”

Laleh felt a faint flush on her cheeks, reading a rebuke of her rude behavior in Kavita's thoughtfulness.

Mrs. Lokhanwala took Kavita's hand in both of hers. “I know it must seem strange,” she began, but Kavita was already backing away.

They didn't say a word to each other as they rode the elevator five floors down. The silence held as they walked out of the building gate, crossed the two-lane street, and made their way toward the car.

Finally, Kavita turned to Laleh. "I wish we'd never gone there," she said.

~~"I know. What kind of mother turns her back on her child?"~~

"I get the feeling it's the husband who's controlling the situation." She mimicked Mrs. Lokhanwala. " 'My husband doesn't allow me to open the card.' "

"Listen," Laleh said fiercely. "If Adish told me I couldn't talk to my children, I would pull my tongue out with pliers before I would comply."

Kavita sighed. "She's from a different generation, Laleh."

"Excuse, please," a soft voice said behind them. They turned around. It was the Lokhanwala servant girl. She was holding an envelope in her hand. "Memsahib wanted me to give you." She handed the envelope to Kavita, looked up toward the building, and then walked briskly away.

They followed the girl's line of vision in time to see a figure leaning over the fifth-floor balcony. But a second later the person had moved indoors. It was obviously Mrs. Lokhanwala, making sure that the servant had carried out her instructions.

Kavita turned the envelope around. It was addressed to Mrs. Lokhanwala and there was a return address, which someone had circled in red, with an arrow pointing toward it. And with the same red ink pen Mrs. Lokhanwala had written in large, shaky letters, "Do not judge me. Please."

Kavita and Laleh looked at the piece of paper, and then each other. They glanced at the now-empty balcony, and then back at the envelope. When Laleh finally looked at Kavita again, her face was red. "I feel like a total piece of shit," she said.

Chapter 2

Armaiti had been weeding for an hour, ignoring the waning light of the day, when she noticed the dead cardinals.

There were two of them and they lay facing each other, their eyes open, their beaks nearly touching, as if they had been kissing. Their bright-red feathers were bleached to a rusty brown, which told Armaiti that they had been dead for a few days.

Putting on the gardening gloves that she usually forgot to use, she lifted one of the birds gently, half-expecting it to stir and fly away. It felt impossibly light and bony, as if all that plumage was just a dazzle, a sleight of hand to cover up a hollow core. The thought made her feel tenderly toward the dead bird. Turning it in her hand, she examined it for a wound, a mark where a cat or a larger bird might have attacked it, but saw nothing. She looked up at the June sky, as if expecting an answer. There was no overhead tree from which the pair could've fallen. Maybe the birds had simply tumbled out of the sky, she thought, the way whales sometimes beached themselves on the shore, for no apparent reason. The thought of these beautiful, red creatures falling to earth made her eyes fill with tears.

She was holding death in her hands. The thought unnerved her and she hastily set the bird down. But then she remembered, and she grimaced. She was holding death in more than just her hands—her entire goddamn body was playing host to it, throwing it a grand old party. To take her mind off the subject she checked her watch again. Still too early to hear from the others. The others. After all these years, that's still how she thought of them. Laleh, Kavita, and Nishta. Would they find Nishta? Find her in time? She so badly wanted to see the three of them again. But now, only now, while her body was still hers. Still hers, most of the time. Not later, when things would get ugly, when her diseased brain would be calling the shots.

Armaiti pushed herself off the ground and for a second the earth wobbled before righting itself again. But the next instant she was distracted by a sharp stab of pain in her knee as she rose. She usually thought of all pain as something to ignore, like a person with bad table manners. Today, she noticed. For the past two weeks, ever since the biopsy report had come back positive, she had been attentive to every whisper and whimper of her body.

She went into the wooden shed behind the garage and returned with a trowel to dig a hole to bury the birds. She laid them side by side in the small grave and then covered them with dirt. Later that week, she thought, she would plant some petunias over the spot.

It was getting too dark to stay out in the yard much longer. And Richard and Diane were indoors, putting together a dinner she knew she'd be too tired to eat. Still, she would try. For their sake. She had brought enough heartbreak into their lives, for the second time in five years. First the divorce, and now this. Diane, now a junior at Harvard, had still been in high school back then.

Why had she been so resolute to divorce Richard? Armaiti wondered as she put away the gardening

tools. He had begged her not to go through with it, had sworn that Blossom Greer meant nothing to him. But what had sealed their fate was that Richard had no explanation for the affair. He looked bewildered and incredulous as she felt. And that unnerved her. If there was no reason, no discontent that explained his infidelity, then it meant that something restless and untamable lived inside of Richard. Armaiti found it unacceptable, this mysterious threat to their life together, whose very ordinariness was their greatest triumph.

“What if it happens again?” she had said to him.

“It won’t,” he’d stammered.

“How do you know?”

“I . . . I . . . just . . .”

Two days later she called their lawyer.

But although Richard had been out of the house for five years, he still was what he had always been—her closest friend in the United States. Now it seemed to her as if they’d just been play-acting—the cheating husband, the outraged, unforgiving wife. How silly, how *unnecessary* it all seemed now. As she crossed the lawn and walked toward the house, Armaiti was struck by a thought: she had been afraid of the dangerous, unpredictable thing residing in Richard’s heart, and it turned out that she had been carrying her own dangerous, unpredictable thing, nestled in her brain. As she pushed open the screen door, she marveled at the bleak irony of fate.

They had broken the news to Diane five days ago, and it had not gone well. They had waited until she came home from Harvard for the summer to tell her. And as if the shock of telling your only child that you’re dying of a brain tumor—how lurid those words sounded, even now—and that you have six to eight months to live—like lines from a cheap movie—wasn’t bad enough, she also had to break the news about her decision to refuse treatment.

Diane had remained calm, had kept her emotions under control as they told her about the unexplained headaches, the MRI, the biopsy. Her demeanor reminded Armaiti of the old days, when her four-year-old daughter would put on her lipstick and wear her shoes around the house, convinced that stepping into her mother’s shoes made her a grown-up.

The trouble came a few minutes later. “When’s your next appointment?” Diane said. “I wanna go with you to discuss treatment options.”

“There isn’t going to be any treatment, honey. I decided against it.”

Diane looked puzzled. “Meaning . . . ?”

“Meaning I’m not going to get better. Even with treatment. It’s a glioblastoma—a very aggressive tumor. Inoperable. Did I already tell you that?” Armaiti willed herself to go on, even though Diane looked as if with each word she was hammering a nail into her face. “I have six months or so, Diane. Maybe more. Who knows? You can’t ever pin these doctors down. Not that they would know, either. How could they?” She heard the jittery quality in her voice and forced herself to slow down. “And I don’t want to ruin that time with radiation and all that nonsense.”

“‘All that nonsense?’” Diane’s voice was shrill. “Mom? We’re talking about something that could save or extend your life.” She shifted in her chair to face Richard. “Dad? Say something. This is nuts.”

Richard’s face was blank. “I’ve spent all week arguing with her, honey. Her mind’s made up.”

Diane looked incredulous. “Are you guys frigging kidding me?”

“Watch your language,” they both said automatically but Diane interrupted them. “Screw my language,” she said, rising to her feet and looking around the room wildly. “This is bullshit. I can

believe—”

“Diane,” Richard said. “Control yourself.”

She flung her father a hostile look. “I can’t believe you’re letting her do this. That you’d just let her . . .”

“He’s not doing anything.” Armaiti’s voice was more emphatic than she’d intended it to be. “It’s my body. If I can’t choose . . .” Her voice shook with outrage. But the next second her anger faded, and she took in her daughter’s stricken face. “Listen. You don’t know what I’d give to spare you this.”

“Then start with the treatments. I’ll take next semester off. I’ll help you through it, I promise.”

Armaiti reached out and pulled Diane back down on the chair next to hers. “I don’t want to lose you, honey,” she said. “I—I watched my mother go through cancer treatment years ago. It was awful. And in the end it didn’t make much difference.”

“But that was more than twenty years ago,” Diane said fiercely. “And it was in *India*. Things are so much more advanced now.”

Armaiti nodded absently, remembering the small, dark bedroom in which her mother had died. After staying up half the night holding her mother’s hand she had finally dozed off for a few minutes. When she awoke her mother’s hand was cold and she was dead. Armaiti had sat holding that hand, taking in the bald head, the sunken eyes, the bony forearms whose papery skin was covered with bluish-black marks. She had not cried. Not then. Instead, she’d gone into the living room and phoned her Uncle Jamshed and asked him to call for the hearse. Then she’d padded into the other room and crawled into bed with her sleeping husband, letting some of his warmth seep into her. She had not awoken Richard until she’d heard the ambulance pull up outside the building. Then she shook him awake and he knew by her expression, and they stared at each other for a long moment before she rose to answer the doorbell.

“Mom? Are you listening?” Diane’s voice had the streak of impatience that she’d first developed at thirteen and never lost. But now Armaiti heard something else in that voice—concern and fear, as if the fact that her mind had wandered for a second was proof of something more sinister, of the danger lurking in her cells. Get used to it, she told herself grimly. She had noticed that same thing in Richard already, a dual note, an undercurrent, a second melody that ran under the first one. Never again would she be allowed the old luxuries of forgetfulness or unpredictability. Now they would be measured against the backdrop of her illness.

“I am, darling,” she replied. And then, realizing that Diane was waiting for a response: “I’ll see you. Let me think about it.”

“Yeah, right,” Diane said. “We all know what *that* means.” She rose from her chair and looked down at them. “I’m going out for a while.”

“When will you be back?” Armaiti asked automatically, hating herself even as she did.

Diane looked away. “I don’t know. I need some air.”

They heard the side door slam a few moments later. “I wish she had a boyfriend,” Armaiti sighed. “It would make this so much easier for her.”

“Armaiti,” Richard said quietly. “We’ve just told the kid that her mother is . . . is . . . very sick. And refusing treatment, to boot. I don’t think a boyfriend would lessen the shock.”

Armaiti smiled ruefully. “You’re right.” She turned to face Richard. “I know you don’t agree with me, either. But I need you to support me, okay? I’m not sure I can fight Diane by myself.”

He made a small gesture with his right shoulder. “I’m here,” he said simply.

Richard stayed with her until Diane came home, at nine that evening. There was a faint smell of alcohol on her breath. Armaiti fought against the lecture that percolated on her lips. Diane was a good

kid, responsible. She'd probably had no more than a beer.

"Listen," Richard said as he rose to leave. "I have a meeting downtown tomorrow. Why don't you guys meet me at Roxy's for lunch?"

Armaiti turned toward Diane. "Hon?"

She shrugged. "Whatever."

It was another warm, breezy spring day the following afternoon, and despite Diane's sullenness and monosyllabic responses during the drive downtown, Armaiti felt her spirits lift as they walked toward the restaurant. But the momentary uplift was soon flattened by another, contradictory, emotion—for the first time since the diagnosis, a needle-sharp regret threaded through her. How lovely, how light, how pleasurable this afternoon would have been without the knowledge of what was to come, and what already was lurking in her body. It would've been an afternoon like any other, an untroubled day in a long chain of such days. There would be none of this ticking awareness of how finite, how precious, this time with her daughter was; she wouldn't have been aware of the miraculous sun on her face, wouldn't have wanted to run her fingers lightly but greedily over the surface of the beautiful stone buildings they passed. She was storing memories, she realized, imprinting this day onto her mind, and for a moment Armaiti thought she could cry over what she had lost—the ability to live unselfconsciously, unreflexively. Involuntarily, her hand reached out for her daughter's, and, to her relief, Diane let her grip her hand.

"I love you," she said. "More than I can ever say."

Diane gave her hand a squeeze. As they reached the restaurant, they spotted Richard sitting at a table by the window and waved. He rose as they entered the restaurant and approached him. "How beautiful my family today?" he said, and suddenly Armaiti felt beautiful. He'd always had this ability to make Richard.

They were through with lunch and sharing a chocolate torte for dessert when Richard said, "Oh, by the way. Jordon called this morning." He wiped a piece of dark chocolate from his mouth before adding, "She wanted to know if we're going to Nantucket this year. I told her—under the circumstances—I don't suppose we will."

They had been to Nantucket every summer of Diane's life, to a cottage Richard and his sister had inherited from their parents. Armaiti swallowed her disappointment. "Guess not." She knew that Richard was just being sensible, of course. But a small part of her resented him for not asking her before telling his sister no.

"Do you feel like going *anywhere* this summer?" Diane asked and Armaiti thought she heard a plaintive note in her daughter's voice.

"Actually, I do," she said, surprising even herself. "I feel like traveling to Bombay. To see everybody . . . one last . . . again." She had no idea if she'd said this just to spite Richard for not consulting with her about Nantucket.

There was a short silence. "That will be hard, won't it, hon?" Richard said quietly. "I mean, it's a tough city even at the best of times."

Two things happened as Armaiti heard those words. One, she realized that she was posturing, that she had no real desire to navigate, in her present condition, the hot, humid, crowded city of her birth. But it was the second realization that took her breath away. It was a longing so acute, so piercing, that it felt like a living thing, something that dwelt in her heart silently, invisibly, and was now making its presence known.

Bombay! The cool, tranquil rooms of Jehangir Art Gallery. The crazy, colorful, exuberance of Fashion Street. The intoxicating freedom of walking down the seaside at Marine Drive in storm

weather. The gastronomical ecstasy of biting into a chicken roll at Paradise, the mayonnaise, golden the sun, oozing off the side.

And, above all, the company of the other three. The four of them taking the train to Lonaval leaning out of the open doorway, feeling the wind on their faces. Spending entire afternoons listening to music at Rhythm House. Watching reruns of *The Way We Were* and *Spartacus* at Sterling on Saturday mornings.

Laleh, Kavita, Nishta. The names blended into one and became a prayer, souvenirs from a paradise lost. “Babe? You okay?” Richard was asking, and Armaiti nodded, unable to speak.

She looked up, saw their puzzled faces, and pulled herself together. “I—I was just thinking of—of friends, and I suddenly . . .” But her words were so weak, her description of Lal, Ka, and Nishta “friends” so inadequate and small, that Armaiti stopped. Jane Stillman was a friend, and so was Susan Jacobs. But it wasn’t the same. She had never been on a demonstration with Jane; had never held hands and stared down a line of policemen with Susan. Laleh and the others had not just been friends they had been comrades. And although the word had fallen into disrepair since the Wall came down, suddenly felt alive and shiny to Armaiti, plump with meaning and significance, as luminous as love.

She had not known that she was crying until she heard Diane’s voice, immeasurably mature and older than it had any right to be, say, “It’s okay, Mom. You need to cry. It’s good for the soul.” Hearing the words she’d said to her daughter on numerous occasions made Armaiti want to laugh. She realized that they thought she was crying about the diagnosis but there was no way to explain that she was grieving not so much over her aborted future as over her aborted past. The four years of college now seemed to have gone by too quickly. There was no real explanation for why she had not stayed closer touch after leaving for the U.S. Unless it was this: coming to America itself was a kind of defeat—the inaudible but clear admission that their days as young radicals had drawn to a close.

“Mom,” Diane said, a new urgency in her voice. “Is there anything you want to do? I mean . . . other than visiting India? And even that”—Diane turned to flash her father a defiant look—“if you really, really wanna go, we should just do it. I’ll go with you. It’ll be okay.”

Armaiti smiled. Diane reminded her of Laleh in some ways—the indignation, the puppy-dog fierceness, the relentless desire to protect. It seemed preposterous that Laleh would never get to know her daughter. And Ka. There was that unresolved thing with Ka. She remembered how brittle Kavita had been around Richard at the time of the wedding. What a shame.

Diane was waiting for an answer. “Your dad’s right, honey,” Armaiti said. “Traveling to India would be very difficult at this time.”

“So have them come here to see you.”

Armaiti glanced at Richard. You can jump in at any moment, her look said, but he stared back at her, his face impassive. She sighed. “It’s not that easy, darling,” she said. “I’m sure they have their own lives. Besides, I haven’t spoken to Ka and Nishta in donkey’s years.”

“Mom,” Diane said. “These are your oldest friends. I heard you talk about them all through my childhood. I’m sure if you called and—I’m sure if they knew how sick you were, they’d come see you.” She scowled suddenly. “And maybe they can knock some sense into your head. I certainly can’t.”

But there’s so much you don’t know, Armaiti thought to herself. Of how complicated things go despite our love for each other.

“Mom?”

“I know you mean well, sweetie. But I haven’t really kept up with the others. So it would strike me as a little selfish to ask them to disrupt their lives just because I’m . . .”—she forced herself to say the

word—. . . dying. Don't you think?" All the while thinking, When did I become this sensible, practical, middle-aged schoolmarm?

Richard cleared his throat. "Now, that's ridiculous, Armaiti. First of all, you have no idea what their reaction will be. And, second, I've met your friends, remember? I suspect they'll be more than glad to do whatever they can."

"That was a long time ago, Richard. Times—and people—change."

Richard leaned back in his chair and gazed at her. "Well, all you can do is ask. We can cover all their expenses."

She opened her mouth to argue but just then saw Diane lean slightly toward her father. It was a sight she had come to recognize—and dread—over the years. It meant father and daughter had joined forces against her. "That's settled, then," Diane said, as if Armaiti had just acquiesced.

They had talked about it all the way home and there was no denying the dance her heart was doing at the thought of a reunion. Besides, even if they didn't come, it would be nice to be in touch with the others again. Maybe she could just talk to them on the phone every few weeks.

Still, she was nervous. Except for an occasional e-mail, she hadn't been in touch with Laleh for several years. And now, out of the blue, to lay this on her and Kavita. What she was asking for was preposterous, no question. "You're sure?" she'd asked Diane just before picking up the receiver the next morning.

"Mom," Diane groaned. "For Christ's sake. What's the worst that can happen? Just call."

"Okay. *Okay.*"

She dialed half of Laleh's number and then stopped, struck by a thought. "When should I ask them to come? Which month?" she asked Richard.

She caught the flash of pity in Richard's eyes before he looked away. "Soon," he said. "Soon."

Now, as she entered the kitchen, Armaiti was thankful for Diane's insistence. Laleh had immediately said yes. Kavita had phoned her two hours later. And the possibility of a visit had lightened the mood in the house. Not that Diane was any closer to accepting her decision to forgo treatment. She was still stomping around the house, making snide remarks, and generally making her opposition known. Let her, Armaiti thought. Let her hold on to her anger. It will get her through these next few months.

Diane was pouring boiled potatoes into a colander when she walked in. "Can I help?" Armaiti asked and Diane handed her the masher. "Can you mash? And don't skimp on the butter, either." She eyed her mother critically. "You're looking kinda skinny. Gotta fatten you up."

Armaiti smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

They decided to eat dinner on the screened-in porch. As they sat down, Armaiti removed her cell phone from her pocket and placed it on the table. Richard covered her hand with his. "It's not time yet," he said. "It's just mid-morning in Bombay, remember?"

She smiled. "I know. I'm just so nervous they won't find Nishta's parents."

"If it's meant to be, they will. Now, relax." He clicked his wineglass to her water glass. "Bon appétit."

Armaiti watched with something akin to awe as Diane wolfed down the grilled salmon dinner that Richard had cooked. Had she ever had an appetite like that? she wondered. She doubted it. No woman ate that heartily in the India she'd grown up in. And definitely not in her family. When Armaiti was a child, her mother's favorite word had been "ladylike." "That's not ladylike, deekra," she'd say if Armaiti asked for a second helping of cake at a birthday party, or, "That's not dainty, dear," if she

blew her nose too vigorously. Her mother's life was ruled by one commandment and measured by one yardstick: ~~What Will the Neighbors Say?~~ And Armaiti, protective of her mousy, frail, widowed mother, had for the most part gone along. That is, until her best friend, Laleh Madan, had read *What If?* by Lenin and passed it on to her. Then Armaiti's life was guided by the opposite principle: ~~Scream What the Neighbors Say.~~ Damn their petit bourgeois neighbors and the hypocritical platitudes that came out of their mouths.

"So, are Auntie Laleh and Kavita coming for sure?" Diane asked with her mouth full.

"I think so," Armaiti said, thankful that they could talk normally about this subject at least. "They're trying to."

"And Auntie Nishta?"

"Don't know." She glanced at the cell phone, willing it to ring. "We should hear from Laleh in the next hour or so."

Chapter 3

They had just called Armaiti with the good news about Mrs. Lokhanwala, and now Kavita was dropping Laleh off at the dentist's office. Adish, true to his word, had gotten her an emergency appointment.

"You sure you don't want me to wait with you?" Kavita asked again.

"No. Don't worry. Either Adish will come or one of the kids will pick me up."

"The kids. How are they?"

"Fine. Indestructible. Ferzin loves college—everything but the studying part, that is. And Farhad . . . Farhad. Goofy, easygoing, not a care in the world. God knows what will become of him."

"He'll be just fine. Honestly, you don't know how lucky you are."

Laleh shot her a sidelong glance. "Yah, you and Farhad have always had a special bond." There was pleasure in her voice.

"It will be nice to meet Diane," Kavita said. "Finally."

"Yes."

"But can I tell you something, Laleh?"

"What?"

"I'm really upset that Armaiti won't try radiation. I don't blame Diane for being furious. I mean, this is madness, no? To not try and fight?"

Laleh sighed heavily. "You know what Armaiti's like, Ka. She's always been like this. She's always mild-mannered and genteel, but made of steel on the inside. Stubborn as anything."

Kavita nodded. They were both quiet for a moment, and then Laleh said, so softly that Kavita was unsure that she'd heard her correctly, "I should've been the one who landed in the hospital."

Kavita took her eyes off the road for a second. "What do you mean? She's not in the hospital. She's home."

"Not now. Then."

"What?"

"Don't you remember? After the march? She was in the hospital with a concussion."

It took her a minute to realize what Laleh was referring to. "You mean in 1979? After the laathi charge?"

"Exactly."

"Huh." Kavita waited, wondering why Laleh was bringing up ancient history. When she realized that Laleh was not going to amplify, she asked, "What's making you think of this now?"

Laleh looked at her, a furtive expression on her face. "I'm just wondering if the tumor happened because . . . she had that awful concussion, remember? And the amnesia?"

As pragmatic as she is, Laleh can be so damn dramatic at times, Kavita thought. Thank God she

married someone as even-tempered and easygoing as Adish. “That’s crazy talk, Lal,” she said.

“Is it?” Laleh said noncommittally. “In any case, if I’d been there that day, I could’ve protected her.”

“Protected her? From those police goons? The bastards went crazy that day. Believe me, I know. I was there.” An image of the dank jail cell and the humiliation that followed rose in Kavita’s mind, but she pushed it away. She had spent a lifetime running away from the room of laughing men and she wasn’t about to reenter it now.

“And I wasn’t,” Laleh was saying. “That’s just it.”

Why were they talking about an incident from thirty years ago? Now, when they had more urgent things to talk about? “Laleh, this is silly . . .” she began.

“I know. I know.” Laleh shook her head. “Just forget it.”

Kavita looked at her for a moment, puzzled. It’s the shock about Armaiti, she told herself. She wasn’t thinking straight. She cleared her throat. “Anyway. When do you want to go see Nishta?”

“As soon as possible.”

“It’s too bad they’re not listed in the phone book,” Kavita said. “This address sounds like it’s out in the boonies. It will be maddening to go all the way there if she’s not home.”

“I know. But it can’t be helped. I promised Armaiti we would try.” Laleh stared out of the window for a moment. “I still can’t believe we’ve lost touch with Nishta and Iqbal so completely. I didn’t even know they’d moved from Mazgaon.”

“Now, don’t go blaming yourself for yet another thing.” Kavita’s tone was teasing but firm. “The car was pulled away from us. Remember how weird Iqbal acted at your house-warming party?” She entered the gates of the medical building, parked the car, and leaned over to give Laleh a kiss. “Today was a lucky day,” she said. “We’re going to see Nishta soon. Focus on that.”

“You’re right. Listen, how about if I call you tonight and we figure out a time to go see Nishta this week? I can go any day except Thursday—that’s my day at the women’s shelter.”

“Righto. Call me before ten, okay?”

Laleh frowned. “Oh, wait. I just remembered, I have a stupid party to go to tonight. I’ll call you tomorrow. First thing.”

“Okay,” Kavita nodded. “See you.” She was anxious to get away now, to be alone in the car, to savor the memory of the brief phone call to Armaiti earlier today. How happy Armaiti had been at the news of Mrs. Lokhanwala’s unexpected help. “Oh, thank you, Ka,” she’d said, and Kavita had shivered, remembering in a flash the first time Armaiti had shortened her name and how it had felt like a feather brushed across her face. The four of them had gone to Juhu Beach for the day and she and Armaiti had lain on the hot sand, their hands occasionally touching each other’s, staring up at the newly scrubbed sky. Kavita had felt languid, lulled into sleep by the heavy, salty sea air, and she had woken up singing into wakefulness every time Armaiti’s hand brushed against hers. It was the most delicious combination of aliveness and dreaminess she had ever experienced. And just then, in response to something she’d said, Armaiti had rolled over on her side and propped her head on her elbow to look down at Kavita’s face, inches from her own. “What you don’t realize, Ka,” she said, and then the rest of her sentence disappeared into the shimmering afternoon air, because the nickname had landed on her like a kiss and all she could see then was Armaiti’s hair set on fire by the sun, the flecks of light in Armaiti’s warm, brown eyes, Armaiti’s golden face against the denim-blue sky, obscuring, no, taking the place of the sun.

Kavita waited until Laleh disappeared through the front door of the dentist’s building, then pulled out of the gate and made a left turn onto the busy street.

Armaiti. Had she ever loved anyone as much? What she now had with Ingrid was so different. ~~Kavita remembered the countless nights when she had lain alone in her single bed, pining away for~~ Armaiti, trying to stop her hands from roaming her body, to intellectualize the slow heat climbing up her limbs, to explain away in anthropological terms the sexual desire that left her mouth dry, to not see the face that loomed before her tightly shut eyes, to not hear the name that threatened to escape from her parted lips. Armaiti. Armaiti—the steady eyes, the wry, wicked humor, the good, kind heart. And then the parts that Kavita saw in the not-seeing: the thin, sensual lips, the clear brown eyes, the pert breasts, just large enough to fill a woman's hand, the generous hips that would fit perfectly against her own.

It was India. It was the late 1970s. The West, with its women's movement and gay liberation movement and its permissiveness and promiscuity, was at least a planet away. It was India in the late 1970s, and the country was still coming to grips with the nightmare of the Emergency years, and corruption was endemic and food prices and college tuition were rising, and public services were breaking down. How could any moral individual worry about the clamoring of her own heart? It was India in the late 1970s and how would anyone even know what name to give this strange, unseemly obsession with another woman? Occasionally Kavita's mind would circle around the forbidden word but then she'd remember what her older brother Rohit had once said: "Homosexuality is what men do to each other in prison." What did anything that ugly have to do with her and this tender, protective feeling that she felt around Armaiti? She could call it love, yes, but she loved Nishta and Laleh, too, though they were not the reason she looked forward to college every day. And since there was no word, no description for what she felt, it was easy—or at least possible—to subsume that desire, to channel the basic unjustness of her situation into a desire for justice for all the world's dispossessed. She didn't—couldn't—count herself as one of the dispossessed, not in the India of the late 1970s, not in a place where malnourished children and lepers with holes for noses haunted the streets, and most of her countrymen couldn't read or write their own names.

A car cut in front of her and Kavita slammed on her brakes, setting off a protest of car horns behind her. She barely noticed. Armaiti was dying, would probably be dead before she turned fifty.

Armaiti, almost fifty. It seemed impossible. She wondered what Armaiti looked like now, added twenty kilos to the slim, lanky girl she'd known to create a matronly figure, gave the sharp-faced girl a triple chin, made the lithe, nimble, movements slower and more deliberate.

It didn't work. She kept remembering Armaiti in the college cafeteria as the sun came in through the dirty windowpanes and lit up her face; Armaiti on piano and she on guitar as they learned the chords to a Moody Blues song; sitting beside her at Marine Drive as they watched the evening sky turn orange and gold; the two of them caught in a sudden downpour, soaking wet before they could even get their umbrella open, and laughing all the way home.

She had never told Armaiti about how she felt. Back then, they never discussed matters of the heart. The only boys they had talked about were named Lenin, Marx, and Mao. Of course, Adish and Iqbal had always buzzed around Laleh and Nishta, but the girls acted as if they barely noticed them. Nonchalance. That was their posture, their affect. How different they had been from the other teenage girls—passionate, yes, but about the political, not the personal. Broken hearts, broken fingernails, broken promises—all the things that their classmates fretted over, they dismissed. The four of them had been an odd bunch, eccentric and unconventional. They smoked, drank, swore. Claimed to believe in free love. But in many ways they were as virginal as nuns.

Why? Kavita now demanded of herself. Why were we so damn guarded? As close as we were, in some ways we were almost shy around each other. Her mind flipped back to what Laleh had said a few

minutes earlier, the guilt that she felt about being absent the day of the march. Had Laleh really been carrying that burden all these years? And she? Why had she never told the others about what the police inspector had done to her in the lockup the night of the march? How his deputy had penetrated her with his fingers, how the men in the room had laughed at her humiliation? How the episode had nearly unhinged her, how it was the first step in her journey away from the political activism she'd once thought would be her life?

The memory of one humiliation yielded another. And although this one was fainter, the memory of it still made sweat form on her upper lip and Kavita lowered the car window to let in fresh air. The year after Armaiti had left for America, Kavita had mailed her a Valentine's Day card. She had debated whether to do so for weeks and finally, unable to conceal or reveal her true feelings, she had settled on a humorous card—and then signed it, *Love you always*. It was the closest she could come to letting Armaiti know. She had waited for weeks for an acknowledgment, a reply, and when none came, hope turned into shame and self-recrimination. Stupid, stupid, she chastised herself. Finally, a powder-blue aerogram arrived in the mail—a news-filled letter from Armaiti that talked about her classes, the books she was reading, the Leonard Cohen concert she'd attended, droll comments about life in Ronald Reagan's America, a board game called Risk that she was addicted to, and a classmate named Richard.

After all these years Kavita could still remember the coldness that had spread through her stomach when she'd read Richard's name. Because without knowing, she had known. Armaiti would've never mentioned a boy's name unless she was serious about him. And this was her way of gently rebuffing Kavita's declaration.

Kavita pushed down on the accelerator, absentmindedly running a red light as she came to a resolution. If they went to America—*when* they went to America, with or without Nishta—she would tell Armaiti. Not about the night in jail, perhaps. But about the other thing. About love. About how it had bloomed, unexpected and delicate, even in the inhospitable, barren soil of India in the 1970s.

Chapter 4

Adish Engineer dipped two fingers into the silver bowl and dabbed his eyes with holy water from the Bhika Behram well. It felt cool against his tired eyes. He nodded to the few other Parsi worshippers gathered around the well and then made his way to a private corner where he could pray. He unbuttoned the lower buttons of his shirt so that he could reach for the *kusti*, the woven strings of sacred threads, that rested on his *sudra*, the thin undershirt that was a symbol of his faith. He untied the *kusti* from around his waist. “*Ashem vahu*,” he prayed with his eyes closed.

Even more than the cool sanctuary of a fire temple, Adish liked coming here to pray. Unlike the cloistered, dark, exclusive cocoon of the fire temple, which only Parsis could enter, the Bhika Behram well stood in the center of a large, mosaic-tiled room that was open to the busy street. Adish loved the incongruity of being in this tranquil, airy space while all around him horns blared and vendors yelled and the Bombay office crowd moved at its usual frenetic pace. He liked concentrating on his prayers to the point of blocking out the sounds of the thriving metropolis around him. He relished the scene from the rose garlands and the rich smell of the oil lamps lit by his fellow worshippers. He enjoyed being in the company of the elderly, old-fashioned Parsi gentlemen who gathered here to pray, took pleasure in touching his forehead and saying a respectful “*Sahibji*” to them. It calmed him down, the place, took him away from the stress of business and family.

And he needed to get away from family—from Laleh, specifically—for an hour or so. Even though they’d made up before going to bed, some part of him was still fuming at how badly she’d behaved at the party last night, how brazenly she’d insulted Girish, their host. Sure, she had been in pain from the dental work. Sure, she was reeling from the heartbreaking news about Armaiti. But still and all, her behavior had been inexcusable.

The party was so big that they had been there for an hour and still not met their hosts. “How much longer do you want to stay?” Laleh yawned. “I’m tired.”

“Remember how willingly I went to the theater with you last week?” Adish grinned. “Did I ask you to leave during the intermission?”

“Don’t you dare compare this wretched party to that heavenly experience.”

“Shh. Keep your voice down.” Adish tossed back the last of his scotch. “Okay. Let’s go pay our respects to Girish before we leave.”

“You go. I can’t make any more small talk.”

“Laleh.” Adish took her hand and discreetly pulled his wife across the room to where Girish was holding court, his entourage around him. In his beige cotton shirt and blue jeans, Girish looked more like a young, hip movie director than what he was—a prominent real estate developer who was the heir to a textile fortune. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Engineer,” he said to Laleh, after Adish introduced

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