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WIXENS AND WIRGINS

by

Shereen Inayatulla

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2004

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Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-92472-6
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-92472-6

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Canada

The thing about fiction is that it's fictional.

—Rie Ishihara

I dedicate this to my mother who urged me to read
and my father who saved what I wrote.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Alan Sears who made breakfast memorable, Di Brandt for encouraging me to ghazal, Dale Jacobs and the air sitar, Heidi Jacobs for showering me with honorary brown support, and a giant thanks to Susan Holbrook without whom I would quit school to try out for *Cats*.

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The Aunties and Uncles

Scores of them gather in your parents' modest house for dinner parties. Squash-boobed women with earsplitting voices wear vibrant-coloured saris and pointy little pumps. They tap around the kitchen watching Mom set countless dishes of steaming orange curries on the dining room table. She smiles shyly when they compliment her. Compliments and gossip are never in Urdu.

"You vorked too hard. You always owerdo it. Hairstyle is wery nice."

The Aunties don't hug, they smother you against powdered bosoms. They wear dark blue eye shadow, frosty cinnamon lipstick, and they smell like Eaton's fragrance aisle. The Aunties speak quickly with giant hand gestures, bobbing their heads from side to side. Their heavy gold earrings jingle and swing. They offer to help you drop ice-cubes in glasses and arrange the cutlery in a fan-shaped design.

"Vhat you are studying in school? Vhy you always vear black? Vhen you vill get married?"

You receive Pot of Gold wrapped in tissue paper. The rich Aunties bring Godiva. They're also the ones who wear real mink coats and opal rings because their husbands are doctors. You contemplate shoving Greenpeace pamphlets into their pockets. Mom says they can afford everything but manners because even *those* Uncles chew with their mouths open.

The Uncles are only an inch or two taller than you. They have silvery comb-overs, brass-rimmed bi-focals, and perfectly rounded bellies. None of them wear wedding bands, but they sport tie pins with Canada's provincial flowers on them. Their pants are hitched up too high and their shirts are tucked in too tight. Sometimes you can see the outline of their boxer shorts hem. They wear white sport socks and tweed jackets that match neither shirt nor pants.

"Nixon was a crook but this vun's a dictator. Did you vatch Barbara Valters last week? That Twenty Twenty is good program eh?"

You offer them pop but they prefer ice water. The Uncles toothpick openly after dinner. Dad takes them to the basement to examine the new Ab Roller. They smile when you help serve small glass bowls of rice pudding. The Uncles never say thank you, but pat you lightly on the back and suggest good economics courses you can take, instead of wasting time in art history.

"You helped cook today? When you vill graduate? When is your vedding?"

You are the one on the phone under the stairs in the laundry room. You're talking to the love interest you're not supposed to have, recklessly consuming the box of Godiva (only half-glancing at the descriptive chocolate map). It's eight, no nine, no ten o'clock and you can't wait to meet for a drink. One with alcohol, perhaps even a double.

"They're spies." You sniff and scarf down the oval-shaped hazelnut cream enclosed in dark chocolate. "Auntie and Uncle made sure Mom was in earshot when they cornered me. They spotted me at the Sushi King... with a *friend*, they say. Do you think they saw the sake? Shit, my dress had no sleeves and ohmygod, your hand was on my knee."

Your lover is trying to be a good listener, but thinks you're way too old to be living in fear of your parents.

"This Auntie woman isn't even related to you."

"That's not the point."

"God. You've gotta move out. How can you live your life for them?"

"I'm not. Not forever."

"Did we say ten-thirty or eleven?"

You know this won't last, the lies, your lover, the top tray of chocolates. Dessert and chai are almost over and the Aunties and Uncles need to say goodbye to you. More breasty hugs, more patting, and a few judging eyes on your neckline. You want to hide here as long as you can, but your legs are starting to cramp and the cement has turned your butt into a block of ice. You go upstairs, remove the velvet tea cozy, and have a scorching cup of chai that sears your tongue scarlet before you go out.

Call Vaiting

Hello?

Halloh?

...Yes?

Yes.

...Mom?

Halloh? That is you?

Of course it's me. You called my number.

You vere sleeping?

Yah... kind of.

Oh sohrry. Goh back to sleep.

No, it's ok.

Noh, you must sleep.

No, it's ok.

You wery sure?

Yah. How are you guys?

Hovareyou?

Good. How are you?

You eat breakafust?

No, I just got up.

But it's soh soh late. Vhy you always sleep late?

I was up late last night.

Where you went?

...Um to my friend's.

Oh, that girl's house?

Which girl?

That one.

...Um no, it was a different friend.

Oh? You were studying together?

No. We...watched a movie.

Your father and I saw some nice movie.

Oh yeah? Which one?

That one with cute boy. You will love it.

What's it called?

I don't know all that. By the way, your uncle had triple bypass.

He did? Is he ok?

He's ok. We talked to his wife. Your father wanted me to tell you.

How is your studying?

Good I guess.

You very busy?

Yeah. But I'm really excited because I got an A and the prof said
that I was th—

Oh, you must wait. I have a beep. You wait ok? Wait.

Ok.

Ok?

I said ok!

...Halloh?

Mom, it's still me.

Oh, wait.

--

--

--

Halloh?

Hello.

Halloh?

Mom, I'm here!

Oh. That was Firdose. She gave you lots of love.

Thanks.

She loves you so so much.

That's great. So my prof said--

Did I tell you her son is getting married?

Um... I think so.

I hear she's a real nice girl.

Who?

The girl! Who else am I talking about?

How the heck am I supposed to know?

I newer met. But Firdose told me she's nice garl. She liwes in States,
you knoh Denwer?

Yah, I know Denver, Mom.

I hear she's real nice. They're soh happy.

Terrific.

The families are soh happy, you knoh. They're fust cousins.

Ohmygodmom! Don't tell me all that crap.

Newer say crap. It's bad vord.

That's incest. I don't want to hear about it ok?

Ok, ok! It's not incest. Anyvay, she's a dactar.

A brown doctor? Woowee, that's a shock.

Vhy you hawe to be soh soh sarcastic? Vhy you think ewerybody
must liwe like you?

I don't!

Just because they don't liwe like you, you get mad on them?

I'm not mad! You just cut off my story.

Vhat story?

Nevermind.

Noh newermind! Vhat story... oh your professor gawe you A plus. I
vas listening. I had to take beep in case it vas important. Anyvay, tell me
your story.

That's it.

Noh, go on.

No, that's all there is.

You wery sure?

Yep.

Vell, vee just vanted to call and ask hovareyou.

Ok... and it was an A not an A plus.

You hawe bought grohceries?

...Um not yet.

Vell you must buy grohceries.

No, I think I'll starve myself this week.

Vhy you hawe to be soh soh cranky all the time?

Mom, I don't need you to tell me when to buy groceries!

I'm just vorried ok?

Fine, then worry.

You don't vant me to vorry?

Just forget it.

I hawe to vorry. I'm your mother.

I said ok. Say hi to Dad.

You vant to speak to him?

...Um no it's ok.

He's right here hawing lunch.

Just say hi for me.

I microvawed some leftower roti and dhal for him.

That's good.

You must goh and eat your breakafust now.

I will.

It's getting soh soh late. You must eat.

I just said I'm going to!

Ok! Don't hawe to shout ok?

Well, stop repeating things, then.

Vee'll call you in fiwe days ok?

You don't have to do that.

Ow course vee hawe to.

Whatever.

Vill you be home?

I don't know.

Vell if not, vee leawe message ok?

I guess.

Ok. Soh, that's all?

Yep.

Ok.

Bye Mom.

Vee miss you.

Me too. Bye.

Ok, bye.

Bye.

Bye... halloh?... ok bye.

Two Shades of Grief

We were laughing so hard I almost choked on my mango milkshake when Alex got the call. Sticky yellow liquid spilled out of my mouth. I can no longer remember what was so funny.

I knew I should wear black. The church was warm and people clustered, speaking in muffled voices. I slid into the second last pew, shamed by the dress slinking halfway up my thighs. I tugged at it, but it glided back up within seconds. My mother made me wear floor length skirts to the mosque. I thought it would be ok if I went shorter in a church where no one would go to hell for exposing their legs. But no one else was dressed like me. I flattened moist palms over the bare skin between my knees and the hem of my dress.

During the eulogy, questions overwhelmed me. Didn't it seem unnatural to them to trap the body inside a thick wood coffin? Wouldn't it take longer to decompose that way? If they farted in church would they have to pay penance? When I was seven, my mother threatened that if I let gas out during prayers, I would have to start all over again. I often wondered how Allah would catch an intimate detail like farting, and worried he could see me naked in the shower too.

Everyone cried. They all responded on cue as the minister spoke. The girl next to me fiddled with the corner of her hymn book. Her hands

were a lovely apricot cream. When their heads lowered in prayer, I stared at my dark bare knees.

I had never seen Alex weep before. He sat on the porch steps while the reception was still going on, looking small and exhausted. His shoulders quaked and he squeezed my waist while I stood between his thighs. I pressed his face against my stomach with warm hands, and thought about all the times he made me laugh so hard I'd have to bolt to the toilet and pee.

We drove to my apartment, silence so heavy that my voice thundered when I finally spoke. I wished I had known more of what to expect, what to wear, and say to his family.

"Well, I was a bit too distracted to give you a handbook," his eyes narrowed as he gripped the steering wheel.

The only other funeral I had been to was when I was four-years-old. I was frightened, so my mother carried me in her arms the entire time. Women draped flowery pallios over their heads and took turns urging my aunt to be strong. She held her husband's gold cuff links as she cried. Her fingers trembled. None of the women approached the body.

I explained to Alex that it was customary for a widow to wear white for the rest of her life. I watched my aunt donate her shiny saris to younger relatives and a girl who begged outside the kitchen window daily.

Alex glared at the road. "Loss is loss. You think death has a colour?"

That night, Alex threw his wine glass across my bedroom. "You didn't even look into the coffin." The shards looked like ice floating in blood.

He started buttoning his shirt. "You barely said two words to my mother."

I didn't bother to tell him about my exchange with his uncle during the reception, the way his eyes snaked up and down my body. "No *really* sweetheart. With an exotic face like that, where are you *really* from?"

Alex snatched my dress off the chair and shook it at me. "And all day long you've been worried about this? You could have worn a fucking tiara and I wouldn't have cared."

I thought about how small his body looked, sitting on the porch. His face in his hands, then on my body.

"The problem is you make yourself different."

My warm hands on his face.

"You put colour on everything, like the world is a bloody colouring book. Tell me, how brown do you feel when your skin isn't next to mine?"

He heaped his body on the bed beside me, and we sat in wake for hours before I walked him down the crooked stone steps to his car. The sky was still deciding between night and morning. Before he drove away,

he looked up at me, and opened the door just a crack. I can no longer remember what I wanted him to do in that moment. It clapped shut again.

I stood there, waiting for the mango dawn to swallow each trace of grey.

How to be a Wirgin:

Daydream all the time. In the bath, on the bus, while the Imam with bushy nose hairs drones away during Friday prayers. Know that he's out there. Imagine his butterscotch skin, feathery black lashes, and toothpaste ad smile. Hope he has a streak of badass, skipping prayers to play pool with his white friends, fasting only once in a while. Plan your life with him, pushing the shopping cart while he chooses the produce. Wonder if he's sitting in an anthropology class somewhere staring out a window at piles of snow, fantasizing about you.

Wear lipstick everywhere (in case you run into a brown person who has an available son), even when you're at Pharmasave past midnight buying a box of Kotex. Ignore the plethora of tampons and squirm when you imagine using them. Assume they are only for white girls who have already had sex. When douche commercials appear on TV dash to the kitchen and heat up a samosa. Eat it in two quick bites and be secretly thrilled you don't have to fast while you have your period. Don't make eye contact with your father when you return to the couch.

Curl your long hair every morning with Miss Clairol hot rollers for extra body. Bleach the hair on your arms and upper lip. Poke at what may be buds of cellulite. Flip through *India Today* to confirm that wide-legged salwars are still in fashion. Notice Bollywood actresses don't have visible pores. Ponder how to get rid of yours. Write to your aunt in Bombay and

ask for a tube of skin lightening moisturizer. Eat cucumber to purge wrinkle-causing toxins. Smile sweetly whenever elderly brown folks look your way, you never know whose grandsons are on the market these days.

Follow your parents' rules most of the time in fear of Allah's wrath. Make them practice your friend Victoria's name several times before she comes over, and rush her to your bedroom without introducing them. Don't listen when they tell you to study biology. Refuse to be set up with your first cousin in Hyderabad. Argue that Adam and Eve must have been primates and that's why the Qu'ran and Professor Silverstein are both right. Help your mom in the kitchen when their friends come for Ramadan dinners. Learn to make nan. Smile shyly when your mom tells the ladies that yours turns out soft and tasty. Hope the pretty ones will pass this information on to their sons.

Lust in private. Watch *Days of Our Lives* when your mom is still at work and wish you had a flat stomach like white women. Do fifteen crunches before bed for a week. Give up. Make friends with the Mennonites in your class and commiserate about curfews, not being allowed to go to bars, and the difficulty of finding guys who aren't inbred or look just like you. Be grossed out at Cosmo's tips on how to give a good blow job and decide that missionary style is definitely the way to go. Dream of your wedding night and pray it will be as romantic as when

Hope and Bo first did it. Wonder about penis shapes, texture, and movement and feel guilty. Think about Allah watching you think about it and feel even guiltier.

Be disgusted with the heavily pierced lesbian five rows ahead of you in Victorian Literature and fear that she might hit on you. Read *Jane Eyre*, love it, and weep for Rochester at the end. Be snobby to the hot Arab guy with green eyes who asks to borrow your Psychology notes. Hope your indifference makes you that much more attractive to him. Be annoyed when he doesn't show up at the library photocopiers like he said he would, and beat yourself up for driving handsome boys away.

Use guys named Mike and Dan in Astronomy as a way to practice co-ed interaction. Hope that they'll introduce you to their brown roommates. Be disappointed when you meet the roommates and realize the cute one has a white girlfriend and the other one's skin is very dark. Get annoyed when the dark one, Raj, starts hanging out with you and Dan every Monday at lunch. Drool over their sandwiches while you fast. Find yourself both flattered and repulsed when Dan asks if he can give Raj your number. Dismiss the thought of returning his call but wonder what you'd think of him if he weren't dark and Hindu.

Tell your mom Raj is your Jupiter project partner when he keeps leaving messages with her all week. Run into him at the bookstore. Get into a sparking debate over whether or not the professors should strike.

Roll your eyes when he announces he's a socialist. Let him pay for your paperclips before you run to catch the bus home. Say you're going to the library to study with Liz Penner then meet him at the Thai place in The Village. Don't move away when his leg rests against yours under the table. Find yourself mesmerized that his eyes are so dark you can't actually see his pupils. Worry that you've been slightly racist until now. Blame it on your mom's caste system baggage that she passed onto you. Congratulate yourself on being self-aware.

Keep lying about where you are. Let him hold your hand in an empty room at the art gallery but don't take your eyes off the doorway. Disagree with the Imam's view on the role of wives and get into a raging argument about it with your mom on the car ride home. When you see your parents' friends at the movie theatre, yank him into the last row. Ask to be excused from Friday prayers and say you have to study during that time or else you'll end up with B's. Tell them you can't fast because you need more energy to keep up with school.

Kiss him behind the study room in the Criminology department. Still feel his mouth hours later as you remove your lipstick. Don't answer his calls for the next three days. Do two extra prayers before bed. Get a C on your final paper about evolution and assume Allah is punishing you. Help your mom clean the deep freezer and plan a menu for the big dinner party she's having after Ramadan. Offer to make the nan and rice

pudding. Meet him on the fourth floor of the library and forget to take off the silver chain he gave you. Tell him you can't hang out anymore because you have to focus on school. Ask him not to call. Say he's ridiculous for thinking about converting. Avoid his eyes.

Give up soap operas to study for finals. Get introduced to miscellaneous engineers at your parents' dinner party. Force smiles. Fake excitement for their sisters who are younger than you and have recently gotten engaged. Half-listen to them count the pieces of gold jewelry their fiancés have promised to buy for the wedding day. Clear away the cups and saucers as they squeal over bridal magazines.

Escape to the kitchen to do the dishes. Stare blankly at the little blue flowers on your mom's good china. Recall that there is an identical set stored away in the linen closet for when you get married. Count the weddings you'll have to go to this summer. Decide to register in Women and Religion for intersession. Rinse the plates carelessly and arrange them in a crooked row on the dish rack. Look out the window at the streetlights twinkling in puddles of melting snow.

Whitener

Mom always made two and a half cups of chai, one for Dad, one for herself, and the half cup for me. She'd wiggle her finger from side to side and warn me that caffeine stunts growth. Once, she allowed me to take it to school for lunch in a thermos, after I'd begged for weeks. My classmate, Georgia Adams, told the whole class I was drinking stinky tea from Pakistan so I never took it again.

Mom added milk before sugar, never in reverse order, and I marvelled at the cloud of white, its power to lighten the liquid in seconds.

"This is what the British did to India," she said on more than one occasion. "They invaded and conquered like milk in your chai. But they never bothered to sweeten the taste." She smoothed her long thick ponytail. "But you mustn't worry much about all that here in Canada. Don't bite the hand that feeds you."

One summer, Mom took me to the Museum of Man and Nature. She looked prettier than ever, her full glossy hair pinned up in a bun and light spots of peach in her cheeks from the heat. She had just given me a pixie haircut, and I was wearing my new denim overall shorts and tan boat shoes.

"These are the Indians," she pointed to angry looking mannequins with feather headbands and loin cloths. "Not our kind of Indian. But the British couldn't tell the difference."

"They look scary," I whispered, eyeing the stuffed buffalo with a bloody arrow piercing its side.

"No, they're just worried," Mom tugged at the collar of her maroon cotton shirt and fanned herself with the entrance ticket. "They know what's coming next."

At home, Mom wore salwar kameez made of heavy linen and embroidered flowers. But whenever we went out, she'd change into baggy pleated jeans and button down shirts. For PTA meetings she always wore the same charcoal grey pantsuit, and constantly yanked the hem of her blazer.

"If you run around wearing the wrong clothes here, even the geese and squirrels stare at you," she warned me whenever I paraded around the house in a tablecloth sari.

When my feet got tired, Mom took me to the museum's coffee shop and ordered two cups of tea.

"We're out of milk," the cashier apologized. "Would you like some Coffeemate instead?"

Mom frowned but accepted, handing her a starchy new bill. More than once, I heard her scoff under her breath at the Queen's face on Canadian money.

"I can't stand that useless woman," Mom crumpled her nose. "And soon enough they'll make new coins with her good-for-nothing son's face."

We took a seat, and Mom blew on my tea to cool it. She emptied the packet of white powder. It dissolved immediately.

"Well hello there," a voice called to us.

It was Georgia Adams and her mother, approaching our table.

"I thought that was you. Hi there Afshan," Mrs. Adams placed her hand on my shoulder and gave me a perfect white smile.

Georgia didn't look at me, she was staring at Mom. I shifted in my seat and glanced between Mom, Georgia and Mrs. Adams, who was a beautiful grown-up version of her daughter. They had locks of honey-coloured hair down to their shoulders and almond eyes, and they smelled like Mango Musk. Georgia was wearing a ruffled white sundress and sparkly sandals. She always wore fashionable clothes to school and that made her the most popular girl in the third grade.

"Will you be at the PTA meeting next week, Sha- Shana?" Mrs. Adams' eyebrows arched upward.

"Shahana," Mom corrected.

"Oh yes. Sorry."

"I think I'll be there," Mom smiled politely and toyed with the top button of her shirt. "...if my husband finishes work early enough to drive me."

Mrs. Adams' eyes grew wide. "Well, if you need a lift please call."

Georgia's eyes were fixed on Mom, examining her from head to toe. My ears burned as I watched her.

"Did you finish your project on Peru?" I blurted out.

All three of them turned and stared at me.

"Afshan, Mrs. Adams was talking. Don't interrupt," Mom's eyes narrowed.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"That's all right," Mrs. Adams smiled.

Georgia was staring at me now. "I finished it two days ago. My mom helped me."

"Oh," I looked at my new shoes and swung my feet farther back under the chair. "I'm almost done too."

"Where'd you cut your hair?" Georgia pointed to my head.

Mom began to smile and put her hand over her mouth. She always did that to hide her crooked front tooth. "Don't ask her that," she chuckled.

"Did you cut it, Shana?" Mrs. Adams winked at Mom then turned to me. "It's very cute."

I felt my cheeks get hot.

"It's Shahana. You think she looks nice? I'm not very good yet. I'm still practicing," Mom shook her head from side to side.

"It's fine, isn't it?" Mrs. Adams half-hugged her daughter.

Georgia gave me a watery smile then looked up at her mom. "I want to see the Eskimo room."

Mrs. Adams and Mom exchanged goodbyes.

"See ya," Georgia said, giving Mom one last glance.

"Drink it before it gets cold." Mom pushed my cup towards me.

"I don't want it," I stared at the beige liquid. The steam had stopped rising. "Why did you tell them about my hair."

Mom shrugged. "Why not? Your friend asked didn't she? At least take a few sips."

"It tastes gross," I slid the cup back to her and stared at the empty packets of whitener. "She's not my friend." I kicked the leg of the table and a bit of liquid splashed out of my cup.

"Why are you cranky now? If she's not your friend, who cares what I tell her?"

Tears crept into my eyes.

"You want her to like you?" Mom stared into me.

I nodded.

She pointed at the room of Indians, "Look at them. Just be glad for what you have."

I slouched and listened to her drink, wondering what those Indians drank instead of chai.

How to be a Wixen:

Take Women's Studies courses, even during the summer. Ask the one guy in your Feminist Theory class out on a date and tell him you like his nail polish. Over Ethiopian food, figure out he's only in class to meet cool women but let him go down on you later that night anyway. Read *Delta of Venus* on humid afternoons and break the spine at your favourite girl on girl orgy scenes. Feel your ears burn when the woman with a dragonfly tattoo eyes you too long in the campus coffee shop. Stare hard at your book. Wonder what to say if she talks to you. Go to a Michael Ondaatje reading and dissolve in your seat at the sound of his voice. Succumb to horniness and duck out before it's finished to shred Mr. Feminist Theory's clothes off his body.

Use tampons. Cut the sleeves off all your t-shirts and feel a bit butch when you wear them with your second-hand men's jeans. Start shaving the sides of your head and stop shaving your armpits. Consider getting a nipple ring. Cram all your salwar kameez into a Rubbermaid bin and tell your mom to ship them to relatives in India. Inform her that you refuse to wear clothing designed to repress women. Ignore the look of disappointment on her face as she caresses the chiffon trimmed with gold.

Stick your finger in your mouth and make barfing noises every time your mom announces that one of her friends' daughters is engaged.

Fight with her about ditching weddings you've been invited to. Tell her seven receptions times seven presents all within the month of June costs as much as summer tuition. Say you will take no part in observing the institutionalization of quixotic commitment. Add that you ardently oppose the colonizing force of "couple-dom" while gesturing quotation marks beside your ears. Roll your eyes at the look of despair wrinkling her face.

Go out with your friends when your parents host dinner parties. Get ploughed, and think about the matchmaking conversations your mom is probably having while you grind with a gaggle of guys on the dance floor. Judge those guys for being mainstream and snarl when they ask for your number. Notify them that you don't fuck anyone who blindly endorses the workings of patriarchy. Walk away when they stare at you blankly. Take out your disgust by going over to Feminist Theory's house and doing him against the pantry door.

Move to The Village with the friend your mom calls 'that tomboy girl Amy.' Stick pro-choice magnets on your fridge. Feel wimpy for hiding Amy's lesbian porn under the bathroom sink when your mom brings over samosas and fans. Throw a nude vegetarian potluck and invite the woman from your Third Wave night class. Flirt with her but nervously decline her suggestion that she stay over. Drink the leftover margaritas with Amy until morning and discuss her vibrator speeds and settings. Make a pact that it's ok to have loud orgasms even if you're both home.

Get defensive and tell her that Captain Feminist Theory is just as much your booty call as you are his. Accept her apology. Give her raunchy details about the dirty things you say to him. Laugh so hard you pee a bit. Tell Amy she's ageist for calling you an old hag and collapse into dizzy sleep.

Use your birthday money for a subscription to Ms. magazine, popsicle makers, and a martini shaker. Dodge behind the organic rice cakes when you spot brown people at Superstore. Sketch your vulva and display it in the student centre art exhibit. Ask the balding events coordinator to "please stick my pussy by the window" and feel daring as his face reddens like a pomegranate. Book an appointment to get a tattoo. Shudder. Cancel it. Get your navel pierced instead. Buy tank tops from preteen boutiques in the mall so they'll ride up your belly. Like how they make your boobs look and from there on in stop wearing bras.

Remind Feminist Theory Jerk you're only interested in a fling. Fall in love with him anyway. Realize he doesn't love you back. Announce you're breaking up with him. Change your mind. Keep fucking him until he stops returning your calls. Find out he's dating the treasurer of the Women's Centre. Fantasize about ringing his doorbell and kicking him in the nuts but leave sobbing messages on his voice mail instead. Spend two months moaning on the kitchen floor in your pajamas, eating peanut butter soy ice-cream sandwiches, with Ani Difranco blasting on repeat.

Worry that this agony is your punishment, that Allah really does exist and wanted to teach you a little lesson. Replace that worry with rage.

Decide you're not radical enough. Dye your hair violet and cut it yourself. Join a separatist feminist listserv. Switch from tampons to the reusable cup. Go to a bell hooks reading and stay after to get her autograph. Read *Sex for One* and tell all your friends they *have got to* borrow it. Go dancing with Amy. Hit on her friend with the pink wig and plastic pants. Slide her hand up your dress in the empty bus home. Ask her to get out with you at your stop. Be surprised at how much you like her body, her voice, fingers, her. Call the next evening. Plan to meet in front of the Korean restaurant where you've been dying to eat but decide to skip dinner when you see her walking toward you. For the next thirty-two hours, leave bed only to pee and forage in the cupboards for food. Feel anxious when she goes.

Don't sleep all night. Wake Amy and tell her you think you're having a stroke. Climb into her bed and snifle while she rubs your back. Think of the spicy warmth of your mom's kitchen and clutch your knees to your chest. Wait until the next afternoon to call and ask if you can go over for dinner. Feel your stomach plummet when your mom tells you they're going to a ghazal party at their friends.' Lie when she asks if you're ok.

Turn your ringer off. Slump on the sofa and stare at the wedding photograph of your parents until dark. Say you're not hungry when Amy brings you a plate of tofu spinach lasagna. Check your messages. Call her back immediately and wind up talking for hours. Agree to watch her band play next weekend. Do a quick tap dance when she says "it's hard to concentrate on anything else right now." Reheat the lasagna. Eat it with your fingers as you sit on the fire escape and listen to the sirens drone off in the distance. Hope that there will be a few more days of summer. Look forward to fall colours and wonder what shade to dye your hair next.

Nosing Brown

fawn, '96 Nissan Sentra
snails up driveway
bent sold sign
dandelion clusters
back door slides
black silk pigtails
short-sleeves scalloped
cotton cherries
ruffled hem
royal blue pants
shins
boy's loafers, brown
front door
hard tongue claps
front door slaps
palms curve hips
denim pleats
red buttoned blouse
flip flops, blue
smaller feet, same loafers, hop
dark knees
maroon swimming trunks
yellow t-shirt
pout
marble-black eyes
neon green plastic visor
thick arms
gold bangles, slide, stuck
little feet off ground
keys
pigtails circle tree
tongue claps
step foot flip flop
bent knee
pigtails circle tree
tongue claps
clap
clap
pigtails
step loafers hop brown
screen door
swing slap

-Great. They're back.
-They're back?
-Yep.
-Great. Hopefully they'll go inside quietly and--
-Oh, that poor kid.
-What? Mismatched again?
-Worse. They put her in a dress with pants.
-Like a salwar kameez?
-Yah but it's not. It's a dress with pants.
-In this heat? Poor kid. Wait, what did she just say?
-And they're too short. Clam diggers or something.
-God.
-Did you hear what the mom said?
-Yah, I heard something.
-I think she swore.
-English or Urdu?
-Couldn't tell.
-Oh, here's number two.
-Wearing clown clothes?
-You got it.
-Thank God Mom didn't dress us like that.
-She did, but in the seventies everyone dressed bad so no one noticed.
-What if they did though? What if they thought we were fresh off the boat too?
-Well at least we weren't like this.
-God, her voice is so shrill.
-She just called the girl a balah.
-What's that one mean again?
-Disaster. I think.
-Great way to instill self-esteem.
-Seriously.
-Good, they're inside.
-For now anyway.

He doesn't listen. I told him we should have it assembled by a professional but he says he can do it. And now look at it. Flimsy. What's the point? It's useless. Why he can't listen? What can I do, tell me. And all day long these two have been eating my brain. This one doesn't sleep until midnight, wants to watch the Late Show with her father. The other one wakes up at six in the morning and jumps on our bed. Always jumping. Why he can't sit quietly and make drawings? No cousins to play with, what do kids do in this country? Send parents to mental hospitals with "I'm bored, I'm lonely" all day long. And then they grow up like the gorillas next door, walking around in sleeveless tops, as though they're some kind of movie actresses. Now look at this. He's taking it apart and he has to start all over again. It can't carry weight, let alone their jumping. How are they supposed to play on it? Tell me. I told him to read the instructions carefully but he never listens. Thinks he can do everything by himself. So now we have to take it apart. All over again, same thing. Who knows if it will work this time anyway?

-What are they building?
-Fuck if I know. Look at his pants.
-Nice. They go great with that mustard yellow disco shirt.
-And why the white gloves?
-Tell me no one talks about Dad like this.
-Gloves. It's thirty degrees out.
-What on earth is that thing supposed to be?
-Who wears gloves in the summer? What the hell?
-Is it like a cover thingy for a garden?
-What kind of cover?
-You know, a greenhousy thing or something.
-Why would they need a greenhouse?
-Why would anyone wear gloves in the summer.
-Good point.
-But what are all the springs for?
-Who knows. Oh look, the kid's eating dirt.
-I wonder if the McLeans are watching from their deck.
-God I hope not. What will *they* say?
-What if they think all brown people are like this? It's so depressing that these people have to give everyone a bad name.
-Yah really.

-Who was that?
 -I want two pieces.
 -I want three pieces.
 -Next door. She brought pie. I hope there's no lard in it.
 -I want two, Mummy! Mummy?
 -The unfriendly people?
 -No the other side.
 -I get three. I GET THREE.
 -Shh! Sit down and keep quiet or you won't have any.
 -I want two, Mummy.
 -I said sit down.
 -What's her name?
 -Some Mc-something. First name is Emma. I asked her to come for tea next Sunday.
 -Why Sunday? Don't they have church? You should have told her Saturday.
 -Who goes to church here? All these women sunbathing in skimpy bikinis outside. You think they go to church?
 -Mummy! I want two!
 -Keep quiet and wait. I'm coming. I'll unpack the good cups with the peacock feather design.

-Oh my God.
 -What? What are they doing?
 -Mrs. McLean was on their front step.
 -Really? Move over.
 -I think she took them pie.
 -Oh my God.
 --
 --
 --
 -Well that was nice of her I guess.
 -I guess.
 -I thought she doesn't bake pie anymore because of her arthritis.
 -She's must be having a good day.
 -Maybe she feels bad for the kids. Thinks they're deprived.
 -What do you think she said?
 -Who knows. Hopefully, she gave them fashion tips.
 -Oh c'mon.
 -What?
 -We shouldn't be so mean.
 -Whatever.
 -No really, we're getting cruel.
 -Well it's not like they've made an effort to be nice to us.
 -True but still.

training wheels
streamers
pigtales
wagon
loafers
pedal
-Hello.

-HELLO! HELLO!

-What's your name?

-My cousin is Roshan. This is my bike.

-MY BIKE.

-No, it's my bike.

-Ok. Move. SHE SAID MOVE, MUDU!

-Do you like Coca Cola?

-Yes. I drink Coca Cola.

-Ok.

-Do you want some Coca Cola?

-I'll go get it ok? Wait.

-We'll get Coca Cola! Wait!

-Oh jeez, they're on our driveway. How am I supposed to pull in?
-Just park on the road.
-We shouldn't have to.
-Then I'll ask them to move. Just hang on.

-Um hi.

-Hi, um, can you two maybe move onto the lawn? My sister wants to park the car...

-My name? Uh, I'm Roshan.

-It's a very nice bike. Can we move over a bit.

-Thanks.

-Uh yes. Do you?

-Ok. Watch the car ok?

-Good. Thanks.

-Um...

-Oh, I...

-What are they saying?

-They're bringing us a coke.

-They are?

-Yah.

-Well what should we do? I'm not really dressed for company.

-They said to wait.

-Should we?

-Well isn't it rude not to?

-Hello!

-Please come in for something cold to drink.

-This is my mom!

-Look, I told you to change that yucky dress. Go now! Sorry, they don't listen, you know? Please come in, where's the other one?

-I guess. I hear their mom.
-Are you not wearing a bra?
-I told you I'm not dressed for company.
-But we just went to the mall. Strangers saw you like that.
-It's not ok? I think they're coming, should I go change?
-Mom would shit bricks if she saw you like this.
-Well it's a good thing they're at the lake then isn't it? Since when did you become a puritan?
-Look, they're coming back out. Go change.
-Ok, ok.
-And see if we have any cookies or something.
-Cookies?
-Yah, for the kids.
-Ok I'll be back.

-Ok. Hi! It's nice to finally meet you.

-Well, ok. If it's not too much trouble.

-Yes, I see.

-My sister? Oh, she'll be right over. She's um, she's changing too.

How to be a Wife:

Stare at the curled black and white snapshot of him. Use your fingernail to smooth the crease cutting his eyes and hold it close for a better look. Examine his thin mouth. Frown when you notice his eyebrows are joined in a way that reminds you of the crazy rickshaw driver who used to take you to school. Find Saskatchewan on your father's squeaky globe, pressing your other finger on the dot of Calcutta. Imagine touching snow and wonder if it feels like powdered sugar. Cup your hands in front of your face in prayer and ask that he doesn't swear, gamble, or drink like the Hollywood movie stars. Glance at yourself in the mirror while dusting and hope they'll curl your hair for the wedding.

Hunch forward as relatives and guests stack jasmine garlands around your neck. Wriggle under your ruby and gold brocade gharara when sweat trickles down your chest. Feel your breathing quicken. Ask for a glass of water. Remember your mother's yellowed skin and vacant eyes. Stroke her heavy bangles that now circle your wrist. Crush fifty rupees into your little sister's hand. Whisper *behave* into her ear, let your lips graze her hair. Hold your father's collar. Keep gripping as he forces you away. Climb into the gleaming white Herald decorated with rows of orange paper flowers. Remember the mixed fragrance of rosewater and sandalwood every time you look back at these photographs.

Let him place his hand on your arm. When he finally speaks and tells you his name remind him that you already know. Giggle as he lowers his eyes. Agree when he asks before removing your dupatta. Be still when his body quakes against yours. Release your breath, unclench your palm, and place it on his damp neck. Smile shyly at his distant relatives who come to meet you for the next three days. On your second last morning at his family's house, spend hours in the kitchen making paratha with his sister. Overhear her tell his mother you're spoiled and lazy. Cry quietly once he falls asleep.

Ask him to lift the heavy bags onto the conveyor belt. Look away when his mother weeps on his shoulder. Refuse the cinnamon gum he offers during takeoff. Clench the arms of your seat for ten hours until the pilot welcomes you to Frankfurt. Hurry through the airport to reach the next gate. Take in a blur of women with pale hair, all of them taller than you and him both.

Try to hold snow on your finger. Ask him to teach you to use a clothes dryer. Explain to the grocer what you mean by okra, then give up and buy potatoes instead. Go for drives on the outskirts of town and marvel at how much sky there is. Thank him when he treats you to chocolate parfaits. Remind him to mail the letters to your sister on his way to work. Be flattered when you feel him watching your body as you reach for plates on the top shelf. Nod when he compliments your masoor dhal

and roti. Worry about the large money orders he sends home every month for his nephew's college fees. Wonder why he must gurgle mouthwash so loudly. Fight over the cost of the colour TV. Insist that the black and white one works perfectly well. Don't mention the soles of your winter boots are cracked. Put off asking for a new pair.

Press his hand on your belly and wait for a flutter. Crave tamarind on buttered toast. Rush her out of the room for midnight feedings so that his sleep isn't disturbed. Give her your index fingers to grip as she discovers her knees and feet. Take photographs of saffron rice pudding in her hair. Send them to your father. Use the next Family Allowance cheque to buy her Strawberry Shortcake shoes, the ones with velcro that she spent three days crying for. Suspect that they are too tight for her. Shout when she finally admits they are and it's far too late to return them.

Worry that Miss Bancroft is too young for this job when you meet on parent teacher night. Read from *James and the Giant Peach* while she eats her bedtime snack, cheeks dimpling as she chews. Help her brush the tough-to-reach molars and when she protests, remind her of dentist drills. Borrow a video from the local library, with cartoon diagrams of vaginas and embryos. Watch it with her and be relieved when she doesn't ask questions. Wait until she goes out for a bike ride, sigh and take extra strength Tylenol with chai.

Announce you're coming along for the drive when she asks him to take her to the mall. Dislike her loud giggling schoolmates and notice one of them is already wearing a bra. Insist he go with you to her band concert. Say that her saxophone solo was on key when she bursts into tears on the way home. Warn her that tampons are dangerous and buy her peanut butter ice-cream for cramps. Make her favourite masoor dhal and rice whenever the braces are tightened and she begins to look too thin.

Tally the price of ice-skates and band trips. Start part-time at Joey's Bulk Bin. Call to make sure she gets home safely and isn't watching filthy soap operas. Droop in your seat at the dinner table and crash halfway through the nine o'clock news. Argue about which one of them should have taken the garbage out. Sign up for driver's ed with her. Shrug disappointedly when she doesn't sit next to you in class. Threaten she'll have to quit work at Dairy Queen if she starts getting B's. Let them both stay up with you when your sister calls with the news of your father. Thank her for bringing you macaroni in bed.

Stutter the first time a boy phones for her. Refuse to let her go out wearing that shirt. Decide on a curfew and try to explain that it's for her own good. Tell him you think she's been lying to both of you. Find a receipt for the Liquor Store crammed under a jewelry box on her dresser. Put it back immediately and don't let him see it. Stop sleeping through

the night. Forget to pick up his suits from the cleaners. Lie when he asks what's wrong. Sit in the living room glancing between the window and grandfather clock. Yell so loud that you wake him up when she gets in twenty minutes late. Keep screaming through her bedroom door slammed shut, slapping his hand off your shoulder.

Cry in the bathtub when she starts packing for university. Rub his shoulders when he returns from the bank. Take your gold wedding bangles to be appraised. Remember your mother's thin hands and hollow eyes. Tell him the money is your annual bonus. Wrap homemade jalebi in layers of foil and courier them during her mid-terms. Leave messages with her boisterous roommate. Pour over the postcard she sends from a weekend trip to Montreal. Agree when he offers to take you for a drive. Stare at the passing fields of stark snow. Let him treat you to a chocolate doughnut. Sweep her bedroom, buy a fern for her window, and wait for the holidays to come.

You are a dragon and I am a rat

Drunk on boxed wine, I tug you downstairs and we fuck behind the daybed. Our savage chaos of fingers and teeth is quashed beneath a riot of party voices. I start telling you it's my first time with a woman. You mute me with apricot flesh. Nobody notices us leaving by ten, or my bed sheet toga tucked into rainbow panties. Your thumb circles my teak shoulder blade as the taxi speeds our shadows to your dorm. My skin singes raw against waxed linoleum while your roommate puffs faint snores three feet from our bodies. We live on cold tofu and fresh strawberries all clammy June. I dye your hair fuchsia before you take me to the protest. You shatter the side window of a fur warehouse with two bricks, and I bolt ahead of you when alarms start whining. After, I crush my hammering chest against yours, choking on reckless laughter. You speed your dad's '78 Dodge Ram south to Morden, parting crimped oceans of flax fields, churning dust clouds behind. We steal crumpets from The Good Cheese Bakery, and sleep in the cab through three nights of lashing storms. I pretend we're caught in an Indian monsoon. My lips lace your collar bone, describing the plump drops of tropical rain. Your palm sweats between my thighs, my belly fevers against your back. You tell me your dad preached in Asia when you were young. He taught you the Chinese zodiac, and bought postcards of half-naked Hindu idols. You mention he's offered you work on the farm this fall. You say it's for money,

I soak your hair crying. Our bodies don't shift until morning. I eat the last crumpet while you fill the tank. Heat smuggles moisture out of the corn fields. I ask you just once to head south toward Emerson. You press my face in the damp curve of your neck, and stare at the ashen road ahead.

Dhobi Walla

I was told never to touch him.

"He's dirty. You don't want to catch his germs," Mummy warned.

She placed an enormous aluminium bucket full of dirty clothes next to the grey compound wall and disappeared inside the house. I stood in the doorway in a short pink sundress and watched him sort through the laundry, glittering silks mixed in with my faded Miss Piggy t-shirt.

He stopped, held up the t-shirt and looked at me, smiling. His pupils were like smooth black marbles surrounded by whiteness. He had short, oily hair, yellow teeth, and big elfish ears. I was repulsed and fascinated by the darkness of his skin, the shade of baking chocolate melting in a pan. I ran into the house.

"He's mute," Mummy told me the night before, when I asked why he only gestured back when given washing instructions. I didn't know what mute meant so she explained it to me.

"Was he born like that?" I inquired as she helped me into floral pyjama pants.

"Probably. People in slums don't have enough money to go to the hospital so he never got his problem fixed by a doctor." She kissed my forehead. "Now go to sleep."

I flopped backwards onto my pillow and watched her tuck in each corner of the mosquito net hanging from the four-post teak bed. Surrounded by the filmy white mesh just like a fairy princess, I drifted into a hazy nonsense. I dreamt he was singing the birthday song to me in a high discordant voice. It scared me awake.

There was nothing to do inside the house. Everyone was rushed and preoccupied, too busy for me. I poked my head into the kitchen where Nani fussed over bubbling pots. She shouted stern orders at her young servant Divya. I was tempted to join Nani and help her roll dough for mini-sized roti, but feared of the cockroaches always scampering across the floor. My aunt, Khalama, was polishing a silver tea set at the kitchen table. Her daughter Rafia was at school and wouldn't be back until three o'clock. Mummy was changing bed sheets in the next room.

"I'm boooored," I whined to Khalama.

"You are? Well go play some nice game outside," she suggested in her buttery voice. She wiped away long loose strands of hair with the back of her hand.

"There's no one to play with. Divya's busy," I rolled my eyes back and stuck out my tongue.

"Well can't you play hopscotch alone?" The pallor of her lavender-coloured sari slowly slid off her shoulder as she spoke.

"No. I'm scared of the Laundry Man."

"Dhobi Walla?" Khalama giggled at my clever English translation.

"He won't hurt you. Why are you afraid?"

I climbed onto a wooden stool next to her chair and jumped off, landing on both feet. My shiny black ponytail bounced against the back of my neck. "Because he's black and smelly too." I didn't bother to mention that he had smiled kindly at me only minutes before.

Khalama shook her head in disapproval. "How do you know that? You've smelled him?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Wait like a good girl. I will read you a nice story after lunch okay?"

"India's boring. I want to go home now."

Mummy came out of the bedroom carrying dirty linen. "Don't be fussy," she narrowed her eyes and glared at me. "Go outside and play until lunch is ready."

"I want hotdog."

She put one hand on her hip and stared at me. "We'll go home in three weeks and you'll cry because you miss Nanni's cooking. You should be happy and enjoy it now."

For the entire month we'd been in India, I had devoured her soft roti smeared with giant globs of strawberry jam. I loved it more than eating pink Froot Loops.

Mummy slipped her feet into a pair of flip flops and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" I ran up behind her and tugged the edge of her emerald green pallo.

"Don't pull! I'm going to give this to Dhobi Walla," she held up the used bed sheets.

"Let me." I tried to yank them out of her arms.

"I thought you were afraid of him." Khalama laughed.

I ignored her and kept pulling.

Mummy sighed and relented. "Don't drop them. And stop fussing."

I cradled the sheets and walked back out into the compound.

Dhobi Walla was squatting next to his bucket and washboard, scrubbing the armpits of Mummy's pink blouse. He was shirtless and shoeless, and his khaki shorts had smears of black dust on them. His dark bony knees pointed straight up to the sky. He shifted his eyes towards my small approaching figure. Then careful not to frighten me, he continued washing as though I weren't there.

A few feet away from his body, I stopped moving and gaped at the sight of his dark skin glinting in the sunlight. I wondered if his bare arms were as smooth to touch as glass. One of the white pillowcases slipped down from my bundle, landing on the dirty cement. I quickly glanced around to check if Mummy was watching from the doorway. She wasn't

there. When I looked back at Dhobi Walla he was staring at the fallen pillowcase. His eyes moved up and met mine. I stood there frozen.

He raised one hand out of the washing bucket and pointed at the pillowcase with his crooked dripping finger. If I reached down to pick it up I would drop the other bedding. Dhobi Walla stood up, his knees cracked. I watched him move, afraid he expected me to hand the sheets directly to him. Mummy would never do that.

He wiped beads of sweat from his neck with a soapy palm, leaving a shiny wet streak across his skin. Dhobi Walla lifted the aluminium bucket containing all the laundry he hadn't washed yet, and placed it close to my feet. I unloaded my little arms. Relief. I picked up the pillowcase and squashed it on top of the overflowing pile. He gave me a yellow smile and returned to washing.

I continued to stand and observe his work for what felt like a long time. The sun scoured the compound pavement and the harder Dhobi Walla scrubbed, the more sweat dripped off his face.

"I speak English," I belted out. "ENGLISH!"

Dhobi Walla's hands kept scrubbing while he looked up at me. Unsure of whether or not I was yelling in anger, he didn't smile.

"That's mine," I shouted and pointed to my Miss Piggy t-shirt that was now a sopping clump.

Dhobi Walla looked at the t-shirt. He made a wringing gesture and pointed at me. Delighted, I snatched up the t-shirt and squeezed it as hard as I could, eyes closed, nose scrunched. Water trickled down the front of my sundress.

I stopped and panted. Dhobi Walla grinned and bobbed his head with approval. I put the t-shirt down and examined my slippery fingers.

"It's a hand-me-down from my sister. She's at home with my Dad."

Dhobi Walla kept smiling, glancing between me and his work.

"Her birthday is March the second," I continued. "...and mine is next month." I wiped my hands on my chest. "I'm going to have a birthday party and have confetti cake with purple flowers made of sugar."

I finished my sentence with a clumsy pirouette, watching my dress balloon like a tutu. Spotting a piece of white chalk by the compound wall, I hopped over on one foot to retrieve it. I scratched crooked hopscotch squares into the cement.

As Dhobi Walla's washing pile grew smaller, I entertained the both of us. I told him I had come to India to see elephants and had even seen a baby one at the zoo. Dhobi Walla listened and washed, squatting the entire time. His hands moved rapidly. When he was finished, I watched him wring the clothes and hang them to dry. He re-wrung my t-shirt and I was amazed at the sea of liquid that poured out of it.

Dhobi Walla stood near the gate, waiting patiently for Mummy to come out and pay him so he could leave. I stuck out my lower lip, pretending to pout. Dhobi Walla's smile stretched across his face. He plucked a cluster of jasmine off our shrub. The plant had climbed up the compound wall and was beginning to coil around the gate. He reached forward, offering the tiny white flowers to me.

My cousin Rafia wore fresh jasmine in her hair to school everyday. I loved the sweet musky fragrance that followed her when we played together. I cupped my hands together and he placed the delicate petals in them.

"Kiran!" Mummy's sharp voice lashed at me from the doorway. She stomped across the compound and grabbed my arm.

Days ago, I had seen Mummy pay Dhobi Walla by placing his hard earned rupees on the ledge of the compound wall. When I asked her why she did that she told me we were never to touch him directly.

"He's dirty. You don't want to catch his germs."

This time, Mummy said something angrily to Dhobi Walla in his language. She slammed the money down on the ledge and pulled me inside. I craned my head around, but Dhobi Walla didn't look at me. He picked up the rupees and shut the gate behind him.

"You foolish girl." Mummy scolded once we were inside. "I told you once didn't I?" She tore the jasmine out of my hands. "Go wash with soap. Then hurry up and come for lunch."

Divya was summoned to help me turn on the tap. She patted my head as I washed, tears dripping off my cheeks.

I ate lunch in puffy-eyed silence. Afterwards, Khalama read to me as promised from an old hardcover book of English fairy tales. The spine creaked as she opened it. I leaned against her and floated into a world of puff-sleeved princess that kissed talking frogs into men.

Regular. And You?

A red sheet of paper stuck to the waiting room door reads: *Patient will not be notified if test results are normal.* I'd rather have the nurse call me if my results are fine. Celebrate with me. C'mon, I'll open a bottle of Merlot and we can raise a glass to normality over the phone.

I leave behind six vials of blood, eyes squeezed shut, then walk home under the hovering November grey. What if I get a call from the clinic? I'll eventually have to die in a hospice because my family believes that HIV-AIDS is Allah's punishment for pre-marital sex and being a homo. Often it's a combination of the two. They'd disown me on the spot, drop me like a hot pakoda. I've never understood punitive justice supporters, unless it deals with ex-boyfriends. And what if my friends were to stop their lives and rush to my bedside? They'd try to convince me they truly want to be there, but I'd still feel like a big fat burden. Mom always tells me blood is thicker than water and I wonder if she's right.

"The only people you can count on to make life-altering sacrifices for you are your family members," she told me after Dad died and my uncle let us move in with him. She rocked me to bed until I was old enough to stop asking when Dad was coming back. "It's okay to be sad and miss him," she said. "We all do."

The phone is ringing and my key fusses in the dead bolt. I snatch up the receiver, and pant into my sister's ear.

"I just stepped in. I had um...a dentist appointment. What's wrong?"

"It's Dania. Her teacher called me this morning and said she touches herself in school... right during class."

"Touches herself?"

"Yah. You know, *touching*."

"You mean masturbating?"

"Oh God! Don't say that word!"

"Well that's what it is."

"I don't know what to do. Don't you think it's unhealthy, especially for a five-year-old?"

Actually, it sounds fine to me. Most people in my life do it at least once a day. Maybe you should try it too. More appealing than humping your deadhead husband doncha think?

Of course I can't say this to her so instead I start laughing. She gets angry, we argue, and hang up. Then she complains to Mom about how insensitive I am for finding her moment of crisis amusing. A few weeks later, Mom relays this information to me via email adding that she too is disappointed in my 'increasing lack of respect.'

"Families dick us around as much as they want and we just have to put up with it," Jake says to me as I cry on his cashmere sweater. "It's a universal rule."

"Well, I think it's a dysfunctional one," I sob and wave the printed off email. "Increasing lack of respect? How could a lack even increase?"

He rubs my back with his warm hand. Lovely. It's the first time I've cried in front of Jake and I must admit his gentleness is a nice change from the last knob I dated.

Twenty minutes later, we fuck on the batik area rug, still with a condom even though we've been tested and cleared.

"He thinks I'm being paranoid. He said so afterwards," I whisper to Suzie during our coffee break the next day. "I just don't like taking chances with all the diseases out there. It's too soon in the relationship, my gut says no."

"Where's the gut located?" Suzie starts pressing her stomach.

I shrug. "I don't even know what a gut is."

"Maybe you're afraid of intimacy." She scarfs down a carrot stick. "Most straight folks are, that's the word on the street. It's the root of their hetero problems flah flah flah. Right up there with fear of commitment."

"Not intimacy. Gonorrhoea." I slouch in my swivel chair. "Shit, whomykidding? You're probably right."

"Oh stop." She chugs some of my chocolate soy beverage.

"You're okay. You're bendy enough."

"Thanks Oprah. You've absolved me."

We go for drinks after work and get buzzed on Bloody Marys. Then on the subway, we have a loud debate over whether or not the plural of Bloody Mary would be spelled M-A-R-Y-S or M-A-R-I-E-S. Some people watch while others, desperate to avoid us, examine their crotches.

"No you crazy dumbass, cuz that would be the plural of Marie, as in Osmond, as in several of her," Suzie snorts.

"Goddess forbid. We sure don't need more of that," I howl. The subway stops and we get hurled into each other, attracting more stares from strangers.

"Oh, whatchyall looking at? Go be status quo," Suzie hollers at them as we exit, laughing hysterically.

I come home to find a letter from Sarah.

I have a lump. Lee was the one who found it last month as we were (you guessed it) in the sack. The biopsy is scheduled for next Tuesday and I know I should have called you but I wasn't ready to talk yet. Please don't be mad okay? If it's malignant, there will be surgery, chemo, and radiation. The doctor says it's because I'm young. They want to do it all to prevent anything from coming back later. They say these treatments are standard.

I open the bottle of wine Jake brought over last night. We didn't drink it because he was too exhausted after our talk about safer sex and went straight to sleep. It's Beaujolais but it'll do. I call Sarah.

"Do you have liquor?" I slur into the phone.

"Liquor? You bet I'll lick her." She chuckles and I hear her crack open a can of beer. "I looked at wigs yesterday."

The thought of Sarah without her spiked black hair makes my gut gnarl with worry, like suddenly it gets how serious this is. "A little early for that, no?"

"I need to be prepped. What if I get a big old bouffant thingy? Kinda Barbara Bush. I think they'd take me more seriously at work if they thought I was a Republican."

"We live in Canada."

"Yah, still. Oh, and I've decided I'm definitely going to demand pot for chemo side effects. You should come visit, we'll get baked and watch *Happy Days* reruns in French."

"Me, I tink Pot-sie n'est pas si beau like le Fonz."

Sarah snickers. It ends up being one of our marathon phone sessions, the kind where we keep on having to stretch the cord all the way to the bathroom so that we can pee. We've been doing this once every couple of months since she moved to Ottawa. Ridiculous phone bills are routine.

The next morning, I stop at my neighbourhood drugstore for Tylenol. She's working the early shift. Her name tag reads *Robyn Glasgow, Pharmacist*. She's been here just over three months and remembers my

name. The first time I met her, I was supposed to be refilling my birth control prescription. Instead we discussed iron supplements, and I went to a different pharmacy for the pills. She has a flirty smile.

"Hey there! Looks like you're feeling rough this morning."

Suzie and I saw her dancing at The Purple Palace a week ago. I couldn't stop watching her Viking blonde hair float across her back, allowing glimpses of a tattoo between her shoulder blades. She wore a strappy red dress and enormous black boots. Suzie kept nudging me to go talk to her. Eventually, she came over to our table and bought me a gin and tonic. We could hardly hear each other's voices over the music but it didn't matter because I was completely distracted by her mouth. I tried to make it look like I was just reading her lips, to understand what she was saying instead of imagining them on me.

I smack a bottle of Tylenol onto the counter. "Hangover. Started with cocktails, ended with a bottle of bad wine."

"Ouch. Are you sure all you need is Tylenol?"

"Why, have you got any morphine?"

"No, but I hear the best cure for a hangover is to have a beer..."

She's asking me out? My gut starts crushing my bowels. "Oh. Well, what time are you done here tonight?"

I remove my sunglasses and we sear each other with lusty eyes.

Robyn Glasgow, pharmacist, I want to taste your neck and tear every

stitch of fabric off your body. Don't you think we should fuck until our stomachs roar with hunger, your hands between my thighs and your mouth on any part of me? Can I at least just kiss you?

"And then I kissed her," I confess a week later. Jake gets tearful.

"Look, beginnings are always tricky. I like you and I think we can make this work."

"But I cheated! And I want to do it again. Doesn't this matter to you?"

"It was just a kiss. We don't have to break up over it. So what if you're attracted to women? You're curious, I think it's natural.

I glare at him. "Monkeys are curious."

"Don't be ridiculous," he looks straight at me, and resembles a confused puppy that just doesn't get why it's not okay to piss on the floor.

"Actually, I think I'm being rational."

He rolls his eyes. "So all of a sudden you're a lesbian? Just like that? Gay gay über gay?"

I take his sweater off the coat hook and hand it to him.

He sorts through my CDs, taking the ones he lent me. Listening to them was supposed to have enriched my life. I never did get past The Kinks,' playing *Lola* on repeat for hours. Jake rifles through my Gladware and retrieves the rectangular one he brought brownies in. I stand there wondering how long I have to wait before I can call Robyn.

"What if she thinks I'm desperate?" I solicit advice from Sarah who's getting anxious for her biopsy results. I've been calling her every second night. She says the drama in my life distracts her a little bit. "What if I'm rushing into things? How long is reasonable?"

"Hmm. I'd say two weeks." She answers.

But I can only wait two hours before Robyn is in my bed, her mouth sticky and my back arching.

I want to tell my mother. I know this will be ugly but I feel euphoric and I want her to know more than anyone else. My gut stages a coup. I throw up twice before I dial her number. She waits in iced silence for several minutes before she tells me never to call her house again and hangs up. My sister phones me six days later, hysterical.

"You're tearing the family apart. Don't you have any fear of God? You've always been selfish but this time you've gone too far. I don't understand what we've done to deserve this. Why can't you just be normal?"

This time, I am the one to end our conversation. But before I do, I answer her question.

"If anyone understood what it is to be normal, no one would have things to talk about. No reason to call. Especially me."

She Doesn't Work

After she beats the faded dusty Persian rug against the compound wall, feeds the lanky beggar at her kitchen window, stews the okra with red lentils, chases a cockroach out of the sugar bowl, finds the tie that matches his suit, oils and braids the child's hair, drains two cups of chai, and whispers her morning prayers, she is ready to begin her day.

She crumples a list of legumes and spices in her left hand, and elbows customers blocking the narrow winding market lanes. People are shouting orders at one another, fighting for lower prices. A young man with a toothless smile pinches her thigh as he passes. She smacks the back of his neck with an open palm.

"You filthy beast!" She hollars.

Everyone presses aside as mule-led carts roll by, the drivers flapping their tongues in high-pitched sounds to clear the way. The air is choked in rancid sweat, fabric dye, and dung. She shelters her bare midriff under warm palms. It's almost noon and she hasn't felt any kicking yet today.

"Come look, see what we can make from a coconut," a dark wiry boy stands on crooked wooden crates and shouts in a nasal voice. "You will see," the boy continues as she walks past him, "a coconut is very versatile. See this chair? It is made of coconut shell. And this drum here, also coconut. Think of all the tasty dishes we make with coconut milk. How else can we enjoy chutney and halva? And coconut improves your

health. It keeps you strong and young. Yes it's true. A coconut is very versatile. Buy one and you will see for yourself. Versatile indeed."

Her hands sift through bins of rice, whitening with dust and powdered husk. Fingertips stain from scooping turmeric and paprika into small paper bags. A splotch of orange syrup from a tray of jalebi soaks into the border of her turquoise crepe sari. Two feathers catch in her loose bun while the butcher with a charcoal birthmark covering his left cheekbone tries to sell her an underfed chicken. Its thin neck dangles over his fist. She glares into his shifty eyes.

"You think I'll be cheated, you good for nothing village idiot?"

He chuckles through the side of his mouth as she turns to walk away. "Well then hot-tempered dog, feed your husband grass for dinner."

She curses over her shoulder all the way to the sari shop. Every week she stitches and sells three cotton salwars to the shop owner for his bin of ready-made items. He never pays her properly, insisting that his rent is increasing like water rising in a flood. He complains that her work is of poor quality. Today, the owner's daughter Sapna is in the shop, a soft-spoken girl with thick glasses and curly hair.

"Five? You've been busy this week," Sapna smiles at her and hands over nearly triple the amount of what she usually gets.

"I hope to do more next week. My little one's been asking for new chapals. These things cost money you know." She presses her lower back and smiles weakly.

"Wait one minute," Sapna goes into the back of the shop and returns with a small sack of sugar.

"Oh, I mustn't take it. My husband wouldn't like my asking for help."

"Not to worry." Sapna forces the sugar into her basket. "It's a gift for all your hard work."

On the walk home, she rubs the tear-shaped gold pendant hanging from her neck. Sapna's gift has bought her one more week before she'll need to bribe the officer for extra rations of sugar.

After she serves the okra and lentils over rice, sews a button on the child's school uniform and bathes her in the tepid water, soaks split peas for tomorrow's dinner, listens to her husband read the newspaper headlines, unrolls the bedding, and checks the kerosene lamps, her water breaks. She squats over towels and gives birth to a son before her husband returns with the doctor.

This baby, with almond eyes and a full head of ink black hair, is her sixth. He lives for three hours, and preparations for his burial begin first thing the following morning. By noon the next day, he lies between two siblings in the quiet dank earth. Eight pregnancies, one still-born, one

case of typhoid, and three miscarriages, she sheds her tears by noon so her day will continue and supper is fed as usual by dusk.

One of the two that lives is so bony, she balls socks between her knees when she sleeps. Her grade school teacher writes letters home saying although this child is at the top of her class in Hindi, she lags far behind in mathematics. *This one is unlike her older sister studying physics overseas with fine scholarships. She does not even understand basic subtraction. Sincerely, Sister Helen.*

The child wiggles off her chair when her mother tries to help with homework.

"Read Didi's letter again!" She jumps up and down, two thick braids wagging behind her.

Her mother puts down her pencil. What good will these numbers do for her now? There are many years ahead to learn about subtracting. She slides the letter out of its crisp white envelope.

My classes are keeping me busy these days. Don't worry, I haven't stopped eating properly. There's a large indoor market down the street and I go there to shop on the way home from school. Nadu, you would love all the rows of pop drinks and huge glass cases of cake and sweets. The floor is kept so clean and shiny my shoes slip all over the place. There are apples piled as tall as the Pyramids! Thankfully, I'm not as lonely as I expected to be. Last week, a Bengali couple moved in across the hall.

The husband's in med school and they have three kids. The wife stays at home like you, Amma. I can't imagine what it feels like not to work. That is why you need to study hard, Nadu, so that you can look after yourself and be happy once you're all grown up. Good grades will help you come to America. I'll write again when exams are over.

The child beams as her mother stacks the letter into a sandalwood box.

"Now go play something quietly. But later you'll have to study."

She pushes the notebooks off to a side and weakly shakes out the tablecloth as the child darts away. For a moment she feels an empty throb in her belly and leans forward over a chair. The pain subsides quickly. Relieved, she takes a pen and sheet of stiff yellowed paper off the bookshelf. She dates the page and stops. Instead of a letter, she tallies the mangoes used for chutney, and lists chores to be done the next day.

Mr. Q.

He opens the door with his shaky hands, wearing his usual white skullcap. The house smells like paprika and moth balls, and the weather channel is glowing from his muted TV. I've gone out of my way to see him at the end of the day so that I'd be in a decent mood for the other patients.

"It's you." He gives me a tea-stained smile, one tooth missing.

"Where is the other one?" His strong South-Indian accent and wretched breath always punch me in the nose.

"She's absent today. How are you feeling?"

He lowers himself into the tattered brown armchair. His knees crack and the sound echoes.

"There is pain in my leg."

"I place a syringe on the tray. The faster we do this the faster I can get out of here. Troy left a message on my cell about tonight and I haven't called him back yet.

"I'll have a look at it in just a minute."

I'm ready to spike him with insulin. Luckily he's used to this and doesn't fight it like Mrs. Holloway, my one o'clock.

"I have made some chai. Don't you drink chai?"

"Not today, Mr. Q., but thanks."

"I told you to call me uncle."

I force a quick smile and crouch down on the floor. I have to watch how I move in front of him because I know he looks down my shirt. My uniform is anything but sexy, white golf shirt, navy blue pleated shorts, and clean boxy sneakers. Why men are turned on by this look is a mystery to me. Sometimes Troy grabs me when I'm getting dressed in the morning and says I look hot.

"Can you please lift up your pant leg?"

He complies. There's a small, new sore developing. It's pink and raw, I can tell he's been scratching it.

"I have some ointment in the van. I'll be right back."

I check my phone before re-entering the house. Troy has called again. I bet he's going to ditch our plans.

"Mr. Q.?" He's not in the living room. Does this always have to take so bloody long? I glance at the black and white poster of Marilyn Monroe oozing out of her dress and groan. This man prays so regularly that he has a permanent bruise between his eyebrows yet he decorates his living room with giant white tits.

I go into the kitchen and catch him emptying a wobbly teaspoon of sugar into a steaming cup.

"You know you can't have that." I'm using the scolding voice I've perfected by working with patients like him.

"Never mind. It's a small cup."

"It isn't good for you."

"Then you drink it." He slides it toward me. "Don't your parents feed you chai?"

He's always prying. He'd love to know what goes on in other Indian homes. He's aching to find out what went on in mine. He thinks we have a connection. Last time I was here he told me I should marry his nephew, a doctor who lives in Cincinnati.

"Why would I want to go to Cincinnati? My home is here." *Besides, I'm fucking a white boy and it's fantastic.*

"He can give you a lot of money. Don't you want to see his picture?"

"No thank you." I had to be curt.

Later, I told Troy about Mr. Q.'s nephew. He joked that I ought to accept his offer, marry the guy, then divorce him and get a good settlement. We didn't fuck that night.

My cell phone vibrates.

"Excuse me, Mr. Q." I don't usually answer it when I'm with patients but I don't know how much longer I'll be stuck in this house.

It's Troy. He can't make it because his boss wants him to go for sushi with a prospective client. Troy hates fish. He'll probably come over hungry and wiped out again. It never used to be like this. I put the phone back in my pocket. Mr. Q. lifts the cup, steadies it a bit with his other hand

and holds it out. If I don't drink this chai, he will. I don't want to have to deal with it.

"Alright, Mr. Q. But first let me look at your leg again." I take the cup and set it down on the kitchen table before leading him back into the living room.

"You must call me uncle." His knees crack again as he sits down.

"Do the other nurses call you that?"

"No. They say Mr. Q. this, Mr. Q. that. They cannot read my name."

"Well why can't I just call you Mr. Q.?"

"Because..." His eyes search the room and the weather channel flickers in his pupils. "It's you."

"All done here." I stand up.

He tries to push himself out of the chair and I can see his elbows quake. I grip his arm and help him. He walks me to the door.

I go down the front steps and wonder if I should order a pizza for when Troy comes over.

"See you tomorrow," Mr. Q. calls out to me.

I open the van door. "Maybe me, maybe someone else." I shrug.

Inside the van, I toss my phone onto the passenger's seat. Mr. Q. is still standing there. He watches as I pull out of the driveway. I give him a little wave and head toward home.

Well Spoken

She was missing four teeth. Balding. Her fingers were long, loose, and pokey. Sweaters in August. If you eat two apples everyday you will have pink cheeks and red lips. If you pat baby powder on your neck it will stay fair. Anis seed freshens breath. Alum cleans your teeth. Never wash your underwear and socks in the same basin. Listen to classical music. Cashews make you smarter. Grapes sharpen your eyesight. V-necks are revealing. If you want something done properly, do it yourself. Help your mother roll roti and you will make a good wife. It is rude to ask why.

She had shiny eyes. Enormous feet. Her ears stuck out. Too dark from the sun. Why does Gramma always wear white? When is she going back? Why does her tummy look like pizza dough? Did it hurt when she pierced her nose? What is her real name? Why does she wear flip-flops in the shower? Who is Nehru? Where is her wedding ring? Can I keep her bangles? Why does she put raisins on rice? Does she cry?

She's in a rush. Hums Dolly Parton. Her purse smells like vinyl and Trident gum. Sleeps with the fan on. I am not your maid. I don't speak to you that way. School is more important. I taught you manners for nothing. That boy shouldn't call here. You should have listened. Be patient. You have no respect. God can see you. Watch your tongue. TV rots your brain. Apologize now.

She's all dressed up. Can't find her watch. Her phone bill isn't paid.
Has fourteen pairs of sandals. I'm punctual. I don't want to get hurt. I
enjoy the opera. I just want you to be honest. I'm very adaptable. I
don't know how I feel. I work well with people. I wish things were different.
I look forward to hearing from you. I guess this is over. Here's my home
number. I want my stuff back.

The Moms

Until Dad finds work again, we have to eat potato barley soup for lunch on Saturdays. It isn't as good as Campbell's, but money doesn't grow on trees and Mom lets me scrub the potatoes myself. Dad got laid off the day before my birthday. I turned eight and had an ice-cream cake. We don't get Dairy Queen very often either because Mom can't afford to throw our money around.

"Flavourless." Dad pushes his bowl toward Mom and a bit of it spills over the sides. She rushes to the sink and gets a cloth. He goes back to bed with his jeans still on. This is a good time to ask if I can have a sleepover with Jinny Walden. Mom usually says yes when she doesn't have to check with Dad first.

She's in her blue housecoat, wiping the spill with a soft tea towel. "I'll have to ask her mom ok?" She picks up the phone and clears her throat, getting ready to use her Canadian accent.

"Hello Donna? It's Taj."

Donna is Mrs. Walden, a short round mom with a tight perm and pink cheeks. Her voice is always breathy and she smells like peppermint. She's called Mrs. Walden, even though there isn't any Mr. Walden. When I asked Mom why Jinny doesn't have a dad she said we don't know and shouldn't ask because questions like that are rude.

"No Donna, it's no trouble at all. We'd love to have her over," Mom hangs up the phone and tells me to clean up my room.

Mrs. Beyer's name is Donna too. She's the mom of Gordon. He lives in the giant green house next to Jinny's because his dad is a chiropractor. Mrs. Beyer wears high-heeled shoes and she has blonde hair down to her butt. She and Mr. Beyer kiss a lot, I even saw them neck on their driveway after the block party last month. When I told Gordon that, he turned red and gave me the finger. I think Mrs. Beyer's the prettiest mom on our street. Mom says it's because she doesn't show her age. I like it when she calls our house because she lets me pass messages on to Mom.

"Oh hi sweetheart, it's Donna Beyer." Even her voice is pretty. "I called to see if you and your mom want a ride to the pool tomorrow afternoon."

Gordon and I take swimming lessons together every Sunday. He's afraid to put his head underwater.

"I thought you might also like a doughnut afterwards. Ask your mom if she'd be up for a coffee ok dear?"

Mom doesn't know how to drive. Neither does Willa Ming's mom. Sometimes we walk to the grocery store with Mrs. Ming, Simon, and Willa. They live in the bright pink house that Dad says is nothing but poor taste.

"And look at the dandelions in their lawn. They're giving Asians a bad name."

On the way to the grocery store, Simon reads big fat mystery novels. He wears thick glasses and never talks to anyone. Willa and I collect stickers and trade them. She talks normal, but her mom still has an accent.

"Some stupid kids kill my apple tree. They throws apple all over everywhere. I get so angry I phone Eva Dulaney. But she no can catch them. Stupid kids."

Mrs. Ming's first name is Joy but I don't know why. She's always upset about something, usually it's how lazy Simon and Willa are.

"I say to Willa, you must practice harder piano. She make many many mistake. This no music! These kids so lazy. Simon never study, always read a book every time. So lazy."

Mr. Ming died four years ago. A block of iron fell on his head at work and broke his skull. Every winter since then, Shane Dulaney's mom shovels the Ming's driveway for them.

"No no no no please stop! I tell Simon many time to clean this snow but he so lazy. You very kind lady Eva but no please! It make you work so hard. Next day, I bring you apple jam ok?"

Mrs. Ming gives all the neighbours her homemade jam. Dad told Mr. Beyer she should start a business called Jam-Ming and they both laughed a lot. Mom said that wasn't very funny. I want to eat spoonfuls of it straight out of the jar but Mom never lets me. She says I'll get a

tapeworm like my cousin Chotu in India. That's why he's so skinny in all the pictures. But the jam is so good that even Mom licks her knife after she spreads it on toast.

Shane Dulaney is allergic to Mrs. Ming's jam. He's also allergic to beef, chocolate, yeast, and ice-cream.

"He's so used to needles now he could probably inject himself. He's going to put the doctor out of business." Mrs. Dulaney has a British accent that Mom tries to imitate around our house.

Shane calls her *mum* because that's what moms are called in Europe. He's got four older brothers.

"...which is why the woman never worries about the little one's allergies. She's been through it all four times before," Mom says. "Her main concern is Alice Bennett's drinking problem. It's all she talks about these days."

Alice Bennett is Krissy's mom. We're all allowed to call her Alice, even Krissy, because she says Mrs. makes her sound like an old hag. When I go over to play Uno, Alice smokes cigarettes, watches *Another World*, and drinks gin all afternoon. She gets Krissy to pour her drinks sometimes. Once, we both took little sips when Alice wasn't looking. It tasted like shampoo. Dad says gin is against our religion but Mom keeps a mini-sized bottle behind the washing machine. Sometimes she puts it in her iced tea. Two months ago, Alice caught Krissy and me looking at a magazine

we found under the laundry hamper. It had pictures of bare naked men. I got sent home and Krissy was grounded for sniffing around where her nose doesn't belong.

"Alice is a nice lady. She just has problems, that's all." When Mom fights with Dad, she stands in the bedroom doorway with her crinkly red apron still on. She puts her hands on her hips.

"What problems? Her husband, poor fellow, works so hard. He runs those downtown restaurants you know, it's a busy job." Dad waves his dark, thin hand in front of his face. His beard is starting to grow in black and grey.

"But she runs their crazy household. Her daughter is a handful, they think it's a learning disability."

"You know what she does? I'll tell you, she spends all her time making eyes at Eva's new husband over the fence. That's what she does."

After they fight, I help Mom do the dishes. She sighs and says the world would be a better place if more women were given a break.

"A break from what?" I ask.

"Exactly." She kisses the top of my head.

Before Jinny comes over, Mom vacuums and changes the bed sheets, then we head out to the grocery store to get potato chips and pop. It's President's Choice, but Mom says it tastes just the same.

"Is Mrs. Beyer a lesbian?" I ask as we pass Gordon's house.

Mr. Beyer's red sports car hasn't been parked on their driveway for two weeks. Dad doesn't go over there to watch football anymore. Instead he just takes naps. Mom stops walking and looks down at me. There are purple circles under her eyes. Usually she wears makeup to cover them but not if we're just going to the grocery store.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Krissy. She said Mrs. Warden and Mrs. Beyer are lesbians and everyone knows it."

"I see."

We start walking again and pass the Mings' pink house.

"And if they move in together, Jinny and Gordon will be related."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't listen to everything Krissy says."

I don't ask why because too many questions tucker Mom out. She waves at Mrs. Dulaney and her new husband who are watering their flowers. Before they got married, the Moms gave her a wedding shower. He's the third dad Shane has had, and Mom says he's the handsomest. The shower was in our basement, and I got to stay up and have some little sandwiches and soda. Dad went over to Gordon's house and had a

barbeque with Mr. Beyer. I had to go to bed before Mrs. Dulaney opened the presents. I wanted to watch but Mom said all the other kids were at home in bed so it wouldn't be fair. I couldn't fall asleep for a long time that night because the Moms were whistling and laughing so loud. The next day, Mom had a throbbing headache.

We come to the end of our street and turn the corner. I look up at Mom. Her hair is pinned up in a twist today. She's wearing the long yellow jacket that I'm allowed to borrow when I get taller.

"Let's cut across the parking lot," she says.

She puts her warm hand on the back of my neck and guides me into the grocery store.

good

we were supposed to be a good family with two good girls
people are looking be good bright round faces parented between g
and d on one side of us Ammi seated in a deep wicker chair on the
other Abba standing serious and tall good now say cheese at first just
the three of us Ammi and Abba prayed on either side of me before
they put me to bed each night my worried open mouth policed
between His G and d, oh Allah please make me a good girl send a
baby sister to play house with me and make Ammi cook aloo cutlets for
lunch I wore mauve ribboned pigtails on the first day of grade one oh
give me a pretty teacher and help me get good report cards Ammi
taught me how to make sandwiches for myself her stomach ballooning
under the sari and bumping the back of my neck we patted round
bologna onto bread I offered to help Mrs. Brennan wash the blackboard
and came home with crystal ball tears on my cheeks goody two shoes
stand alone at recess, they said Ammi pressed my face against her
musky blouse, good girls don't cry and they don't ask questions but
how will the baby get out how through her bellybutton, Tasha
Sonnenburger told me during gym it opens up as big as a bowl and the
doctor plucks the baby out and there she was next to all the pale ones
two shiny cinnamon eyes stared right through the window into mine I'll
be a good big sister and let you play with my paper dolls I puffed

promises onto the glass between us I taught her how to fog up our
bedroom window and draw hearts when we were supposed to be fast
asleep then Abba let her have a gleaming white baseball and she
began to break the windows instead why weren't you watching her,
they shook raging fingers it's not good to leave her alone and she can't
sit quietly don't you know that by now we conspired to run away from
home rode our bikes down the river pathway, forbidden two shadows
of pigtail heads zooming behind us in the trees oh don't be such a
wimpy chicken, she laughed over her shoulder but it's my job to look
after you and it's going to get dark well I don't need a babysitter, her
popsicle orange tongue darted out at me she pedaled harder until her
tire went flat we decided to go home after all I let her ride my bike
while I pushed hers all the way back the pedal cut into my shin she
undressed my old paper dolls and pretended they were kissing like on TV
and asked Ammi when she'd get to wear a bra too let me use your
blush, she blinked at me before leaving for school pretty please, I'll wipe
it off good before we get home and Ammi sees it oh c'mon don't be a
square I squeezed my eyes tight, Allah please make their shouting stop
so I can finish studying for my Physics exam oh make her promise not to
skip prayers and lie ever again plump tears splashed round spots onto
her shirt, why didn't you stick up for me she smelled like cigarettes and
lavender Glade oh please don't punish me for guarding her secrets

for letting her climb out the window after curfew Ammi smashed her fist
down on the kitchen table, how dare you lie for her don't you know the
difference between good and bad I led Ammi to the octagon
sandalwood box his photographs, letters, the brass ring he gave her
how could you tell them, she threw the shredded picture of him in my
direction pieces fluttered slowly around my face your promise is no
good she draped silence between us without a goodnight roofed by
our quilt, two arched bodies squirmed angrily through sleep framed by
the head and foot of our bed

Foreigners Are Smelly

It's their food and cultural hygiene norms. A general obliviousness to the existence of deodorant.

She knows this is what they think of us and screams whenever I forget to shut the bedroom door while she's cooking.

"How many times do I have to tell you it will stink up your clothes in the closet."

It's worse when she's preparing fish. There she is weaving herself around the pots and pans and cutting boards like a ballroom dancer on a crowded floor. Steam rises all over and trickles down the bit of belly peeking between out of her sari. She has to hold her *pallo* from falling in food or God forbid, catching fire. The gold bangles on her wrists clank and jingle. Our company will be here at six.

Her eyes steal a sideways glance at me then scurry back to her Teflon canvas.

"Did you close the door behind you? It's fish," she warns.

How does she know I'm standing there when she's got a spatula in one hand, a rolling pin in the other, and onion vapours in her nose (not to mention the fourteen hungry guests on their way)? She has more than a sixth sense. It's an eighth or ninth sense.

I nod.

"Good. Now set the table."

At a quarter to six, she switches the burners to low, takes a quick shower, then begins to pleat a clean sari. The Mysore silk winding in swift folds between her fingers is tucked into her petticoat before I've blinked twice. (She has more than ten fingers too.)

When the guests arrive, she hugs the ladies and piles the men's coats on top of me. I stand there drowning in damp wool while noisy women press me to their spongy perfumed boobs. They kiss saliva and cosmetics onto my face.

"Hurry up and take the coats into the bedroom before they start to smell."

More than they already do? I struggle to open the door with my arms loaded down.

We are seated promptly at the dinner table. She stacks a crooked tower of triangle-shaped *nan* onto my plate. As she reaches over to get the fish tail for me (the tail is usually boneless), I can smell Lady Speed Stick under her arms.

There are steam-led smells creeping past the lids and whirling around the room. Nothing here is foreign. It couldn't be more familiar.

Charms and Delights

We drove from Moose Jaw to Regina once a month, twice in January when the prairie wind crept up Mom's pant legs. Winter was her dreaded foe and only the steamy warmth of cooking armoured her against the austere cold. She often stared out the kitchen window at the heaps of snow, humming high-pitched Indian pop songs.

My parents needed black-eye peas, whole cardamoms, mango pickle, basmati rice, the latest copy of *India Today*, and whatever imported fruit was in season (if reasonably priced). These items were not available at any grocery stores so we had to go to the only Indian shop around. It was called *Asian Delights*, a tiny place crammed with red and yellow jars, towers of cans, and stinky bags made of jute.

"It smells just like Madras in this shop," Dad commented more than once, chuckling through his spacey teeth.

The shopkeeper, Mr. Sinha, was a polite man with thick blue-framed glasses and a fat shiny moustache. He stood behind the counter, next to crooked shelves stacked with Indian movies. In the corner was a small dusty section of Hindi romance novels. Mom had borrowed and read all of them at least twice. Sometimes the endings made her cry.

Mr. Sinha always tried to send us home with a box of fresh jalebi. My mouth watered at the sight of those bright, orange, pretzel-shaped tubes filled with syrup, but Mom refused them every time.

"My husband has a bad heart, Mr. Sinha. I have to watch his diet."

She smoothed her tight black ponytail with the palm of her hand and smiled wearily.

Mr. Sinha bobbed his head from side to side, disappointed but understanding.

One particularly cold winter, Mom decided to thaw her freezing blood by shopping at *Asian Delights* once a week. She didn't have a driver's license yet and convinced Dad to take us on the long drive. He grumbled a bit along the way, but brightened up every time he stepped into the store. Mr. Sinha had set up a small TV above the till, blaring the latest Bollywood movies.

While Mom manoeuvred herself through the narrow aisles, Dad and I stared at the TV. Girls with flowing hair in colourful saris and heavy gold jewellery danced past their boyfriends. The bells on their anklets jingled with each step. Sometimes the men chased them and the girls would duck swiftly behind shrubs, or huge stone water fountains.

"I want to wear a sari. I want to grow my hair. I'm going to dance."

Dad belly laughed. "You will. When you are older and you have someone to charm."

In the first week of February, Mr. Sinha greeted us at the doorway of his shop.

"Come in. So glad you came today, all goods are half-price."

"Oh?" Mom pulled loose strands of hair off her face and tucked them behind her ears. "What's the occasion?"

Mr. Sinha, still smiling, looked down while he spoke. "I will be moving to Edmonton at the end of March," he said shyly. "I am opening a restaurant with my brother."

Mom's eyes widened and wrinkles rippled across her forehead. "You will close your shop here?"

Dad kept glancing between Mom and Mr. Sinha. "Well, maybe we will see you in Edmonton. We always talk about driving west. We can stop at your restaurant for masala dosai."

"Oh no." Mr. Sinha scratched his chin. "Our restaurant will serve only American dishes."

Mom's oak eyes clouded over. She placed a freezing hand on the top of my head.

Dad unzipped his parka. "I hear Edmonton is a nice—"

"We will miss your shop, Mr. Sinha," Mom blurted. She grabbed a basket and disappeared between the aisles. She spent more time than usual studying the shelves that day.

Mr. Sinha resumed his paperwork behind the counter and Dad and I shifted our attention to the beautiful girl on TV. She was wearing a bright pink sari, crying. Then a handsome young man burst into the room and they both began singing. He took her hand and they danced their way

down a grand staircase and out into the crowded streets, charming strangers as they went along.

On the way home, Mom rested her head against the window and closed her eyes while Dad whistled tunes from the movie. I ate four of the jalebi Mr. Sinha insisted we take home with us, and slouched in the back seat with a belly ache.

Over the next couple weeks, Mom sat huddled under a red velour blanket at the kitchen table with a vacant look on her face. She spent hours peeling steamed almonds, plucking cilantro leaves, and sorting dry lentils into empty ice-cream pails. Dad suggested we drive to Regina and have dinner at an Italian restaurant. Mom said she wasn't in the mood to go out. One day, I found her labouring over aluminium pots on the stove, crying.

"It isn't right," she sniffled, holding a bag of dried dill weed.

"Nothing will taste like it should."

That evening, Mom put a short-grain version of vegetable biriyani on the table and went to bed early. Dad and I listened to an AM radio show about solar systems while we ate. After we finished, I went to the linen closet and pulled a sheet from its neat stack. It was patterned with pink tulips. I wrapped it around my body several times and draped the end over my left shoulder.

Dad was still in the kitchen, flipping through a back issue of *India Today* which he had read before. I tiptoed into their bedroom where Mom was sleeping.

"Mom," I placed my hands on her leg and shook her. "Mom, wake up."

Her eyes opened halfway. When she registered what I was wearing over my bulky sweater and jogging pants, she sat up.

"What are you doing?" She asked in a groggy voice.

"I'm going to charm you."

"Oh?" Mom loosened her ponytail and smiled.

"I'm going to dance."

Spring came early that year and was followed by a balmy summer. We never saw Mr. Sinha again. But when we did drive west, we stopped in Edmonton and had lunch at an Indian restaurant. Mom wore her hair down that day and let Dad have half of her almond halva.

Statement of Poetics

or whichever category micro fiction falls under... read this and decide:

By Shereen Inayatulla

You will read somewhere that all writing has to do with one's genitals.
Don't dwell on this. It will make you nervous.

—Lorrie Moore
Self-Help

If micro fiction does in fact have anything to do with my genitals, gynecologists must be very confused about my size. They probably scratch their heads and wonder what to call the bits in question. But for the most part, they don't think any of this confusion is even worth mentioning to me. So, they just continue on with their standard pap chat – “so how 'bout that Vassanji?” – and get ready for the next novel or patient to divert their attention.

There isn't any consensus on how many words micro should be. Some folks say twenty-five to three hundred words, others say four to five hundred, and I've even come across statements by editors who consider short short fiction to be anything less than twenty-five hundred words. Then, there's the problem of what it's actually called; the words micro, short short, postcard, flash, sudden, lightening, minute, furious, fast, quick, and skinny are all used to describe this form. I suppose writers are meant to choose whichever title they like the best. Micro fiction is the one I've stuck with (only because it was the first one I'd ever heard), and I use it to

label all of my stories that are approximately 1,500 words or less. All but two stories in *Wixens and Wirgins* meet this length. The exceptions are *Dhobi Walla* (approx. 1,600 words) and *Regular. And You?* (approx. 1,800 words).

we didn't start the fire

As far as the late Dr. Jerome Stern (editor of *Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories*) is concerned, micro has been around for ages. He states: "[e]arlier than the written language, there was the anecdote, the brief telling of an adventure on the hunt, a narrow escape, or a piece of good fortune" (16). Stern also enlists jokes, fables, and parables as oral roots of short short stories. I find Stern's claim here quite compelling; isn't it entirely possible that people have long used micro (be it oral or written) as a way to communicate/interact/entertain/engage with one another?

Where micro first took flight in the written form is difficult to determine. Contemporary writers may certainly access works of micro in English and as well as several other languages. I've heard in China micro is called 'cigarette-length fiction.' In the book entitled *Short Shorts: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories*, co-editors Irving Howe and Ilana Wiener Howe have assembled a collection of micro written by internationally recognized (and canonized) authors. Included in their book are: James

Joyce, Anaïs Nin, Leo Tolstoy, Stephen Crane, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, William Carlos Williams, Yukio Mishima, Doris Lessing, Grace Paley, and Gabriel García Márquez to name just a few. Flipping through this particular anthology is at once exciting and comforting, as many of these well-known writers have laid groundwork as predecessors within this form.

five foot three and five hundred words

I first became interested in writing micro fiction around 1997 during a creative writing workshop at the University of Manitoba. Producing micro enabled me to pursue chapbook publishing opportunities (which might have been more labour intensive and costly had my stories been longer). In 2000, I was introduced to *100 NZ short short stories* (and its subsequent anthologies) published in New Zealand and edited by Graeme Lay.

I continue to read micro avidly and I take great pleasure in being able to dive in and out of a story within a matter of minutes. In his first anthology, Lay quotes Edgar Allen Poe stating that "the short story should be capable of being read at one sitting, a definition clearly connected to the amount of time at the reader's disposal" (9). If it is in fact true that the human attention span is getting shorter as time ticks on, then what could be more appealing than having a shot of literature in the middle of the

day, on a subway, before bed, or while waiting for a bag of microwave popcorn to swell up? Stern writes: "[b]efore the days of television, popular magazines regularly used to publish fiction, and the short short existed as a sort of trick form, a quick little story with an unexpected twist – something to read while you waited for your turn at the barbershop" (18). I will add that although micro is quick to read from beginning to end, there are often astonishing complexities that lie beneath the surface of its form.

micro minifesto

I often promote writing micro as a fantastic way to refine and/or sharpen the craft of prose. Lay quotes Poe again when he writes, "a short story should create a single impression, and that every word should contribute to the planned effect" (9). I agree with both Lay and Stern that the difficulty of creating a "single impression" is compounded when writing micro simply because there is less space in which to execute this task.

As with other forms of fiction, micro strives to maintain the skeletal structure of storytelling. According to Lay, "[c]haracters, setting, exposition, complication and resolution – all ha[ve] to be established and resolved in about a page and a half" (9). In my story entitled *The Aunties and Uncles*, the reader becomes the character through second person narration. A sense of what is important to 'you' comes through in what

'you' observes about the aunts, uncles and 'you's' interaction with them. The setting is described through the appearances and actions of the aunts and uncles. "Exposition" and "complication" develop as 'you' is asked questions by the guests as well as during the telephone conversation with "a love interest you're not supposed to have."

Although the complicated situation isn't resolved neatly, 'you' stays for chai but knows that the lover will soon be met for drinks, "one with alcohol, perhaps even a double."

When I write micro, my goal is to accomplish the following: 1) set up conflict; 2) develop character(s); 3) bring the conflict into action; 4) move toward resolution of some kind. When I am able to hit these four targets, I feel as though I've created a kind of (as Lay puts it) "literary bonsai." So, when I say that micro helps refine the craft of writing prose, I'm in no way claiming that this is its only benefit. Though micro may at times serve as scaffolding for revisions being made to longer work, I believe that successful micro holds its own as a literary form. As Stern argues, "the short short story is not exactly a novelty, or a form that is entirely experimental. Nor is it an artificially constricted orifice through which the writer is asked to squeeze" (18).

the bread is what makes a sandwich

I will attest: micro beginnings and endings are tough. First thing first, in a very short piece of writing the title ought to dazzle the reader. In my own work, I often consider my title to be the first line of the story. I see the first line as an opportunity to hook the reader's attention: *Foreigners Are Smelly* (and if you'd like to know why, keep reading!). "For fiction of such brevity, the intended effect ha[s] to be created in the first sentence. The opening ha[s] to be arresting and lead directly into the narrative" (Lay 11, second anthology). Let's face it, in micro we don't have much time to woo our readers. So, starting with pizzazz is a good thing!

As far as endings go, Lay warns against the use of surprise, saying that "too often this [is] done at the cost of credibility. Too many twists in the tale and it [falls] right off" (11). With a total of eighteen stories in my thesis, some patterns emerge in the way many of them end. The pieces *Regular*, *And You?* and *How to be a Wixen* suggest the potential for some kind of celebratory closure, but maintain a tenuous dynamic. *Whitener*, *good*, and *Dhobi Walla* leave the reader with a stark ending. However, *Charms and Delights*, *Smelly*, and *The Moms* wrap up neatly with only a few loose strands left to tickle the reader's curiosity. As Lay suggests about micro endings, "[m]any are based on a fleeting but revelatory incident; others leave the reader to supply their own coda" (10).

where's the candy?

So, I want my micro (both what I write and what I read) to achieve the four goals I listed previously AND hit me with a fantastic beginning AND leave me with an ending that lasts (and I don't really think I'm asking for too much). In addition to all of this, I believe there are a number of other intricate elements that enable successful stories. In Lay's fourth anthology, there were nine hundred and twenty submissions from which he selected one hundred stories. In each of his books he identifies key aspects that make for successful micro: seductive titles, "motivating ideas" that are "unusual," fresh language, and unexpected images. To me, these aspects are the chakras micro, the treats that lure in readers.

Robert Shapard and James Thomas, the co-editors of *Sudden Fiction (Continued...)* chose stories for their collection that "prove[d] a tale told quickly offers pleasure long past its telling" (12). My goal in writing these pieces is to create a kind of snapshot, one that imprints the reader's memory in and of itself. The pieces included in my thesis fall under an umbrella theme (which I will discuss in detail further on), and I believe this contributes to sustaining an impact after each story is read. "To write a good one... requires a poet's concentration of thought, image and language" (Lay 10, fourth anthology).

you say potato, i say prose

My story entitled *Well Spoken* serves as an example of where my focus was directed toward poetic "thought, image and language," perhaps to the point of overriding attention to the storytelling skeleton. According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, a prose poem "aims at knowing or finding out something not accessible under the more restrictive conventions of verse" (978). I believe that prose poetry is a hybrid; a form that employs "a poet's concentration of thought, image and language" while lacing elements of narrative throughout. Ultimately, I'd say some micro might very well be considered prose poetry and vice versa. These categories truly bleed into one another.

With the exception of *Well Spoken*, my extra short stories (*You are a Dragon and I am a Rat and good*) endeavor to place equal attention on language, image, and narrative. I revised them the way I would attack a poem, whittling away at excess, striving for the sharpest word to sketch the image. I remain perplexed by *Well Spoken*, and I'm unsure of whether or not this piece successfully fits under the category of either micro fiction or prose poetry. Perhaps this stands as a vignette, and requires more narrative stuffing. My questions surrounding the successfulness of this piece enable me to see that micro fiction and prose poetry encounter murky territory from time to time.

defense zone

One of the accusations I have encountered as an individual enamoured with micro is that my stories deprive the reader of a long lingering narrative, that I don't permit enough time for my audience to grow attached to my characters. My response to this is the micro I write does often work as a hybrid form of poetry and prose. "As a literary form, the short story's demand for compressed expression is surpassed only by the poem's" (Lay 9, first anthology). To this quotation I add that there is a slice of the poetry-prose continuum where writers can pivot between the two forms successfully. I admit that if I read too many anthologized micro pieces in a row, I end up digesting some of them too lightly. However, there are plenty of stories in these collections that have lingered in my memory because they paint a startlingly vivid picture. Furthermore, my hope is that the stories in my thesis work collaboratively because they are connected by an overarching theme. Although the characters vary from story to story, they overlap in terms of their central concerns. This overlap enables a cohesion between otherwise separate pieces.

the project

My writing and research is rooted in my own experience as a second-generation Indo-Canadian woman, in combination with a critical analysis of multiculturalism in Canada through both historical and present-

day contexts. The major themes addressed in my fiction are: hybridized identities of nationality and assimilation; experiences of otherness determined by race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion; the threat of isolation in terms of geography and community; and lastly, issues of resistance and erasure in dealings with home culture. My thesis is an album containing snapshots of characters who navigate various aspects of hybridized identity, be it ethno-cultural, religious, racial, sexual, or regional. But each of these snapshots can be peeled from their page, and stuck to the fridge, telling their very own story. The thesis as whole enables me to present a myriad of voices, emphasizing multiplicity of experience.

Hybridization and multiplicity then, are crucial to understanding why micro serves my project better than longer prose would. In her book *Of Silk Saris and Mini-Skirts*, Amita Handa writes: "Second-generation South Asians are always in a state of just visiting, neither here nor there, neither quite in Canada nor back home. As a transplanted community they often occupy the space in-between nations" (14). To me, micro fiction mirrors this statement in terms of its mechanical conventions. It straddles prose and poetry, invokes complexity in a few brief minutes, constantly compelling the reader to see that there's much more depth beyond the few pages of words. In addition, my collection of micro enables multiplicity. I want to tell the stories of wixens (the girls and women

bending/breaking the rules and traditions to which they are expected to adhere); *wirgins* (those who remain on path of conventional or prescribed behaviour and lifestyles); and *in-betweeners* (the girls and women who feel torn between their home culture and the possibility of what else there might be). In order to establish different entry points into the experiences of Indo-Canadian women, compiling this collection of micro seemed like an ideal fit.

and then some

In his first anthology, Lay comments on the submissions saying, "[a] few accomplished what other writers would require an entire novel to achieve; the beginning, middle and demise of a relationship" (10). In my story entitled *Two Shades of Grief*, I begin at the pinnacle of a relationship, shifting to the news of a death, a funeral, and finally a break up. The protagonist begins to identify her difference/otherness through memory as well as bereavement in the present moment, while her relationship unravels around her.

In the various collections of micro I read and use as models for my own writing, it's clear that writers successfully address a plethora of themes and issues. Lay comments on the diversity of the subject matter addressed in his anthologies: "Although the stories are small, their themes are large. They encompass almost every imaginable aspect of the

human condition: birth, death, sex, love, comedy, senility, infidelity, vengeance, grief, insanity, duplicity, prejudice, cruelty, fear, pretence, arrogance and fantasy, to mention just a few" (10). I'm delighted by the possibility of dipping my imagination into any of these themes within the span of a micro story. I await a day when more readers and writers seek micro fiction as a literary mini-break amid the ongoing daily grind.

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