

Shape of an Apostrophe

UTTAMA KIRIT PATEL



For Kirit and Manju,
who grace my inner voice.

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of PROFILE BOOKS LTD
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Freight Text by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YV

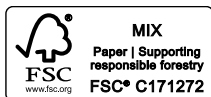
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A CIP record for this book can be obtained from the
British Library

ISBN: 978 1 80081 990 0

eISBN: 978 1 80081 991 7



A Note

There are two ways to read a story, just as there are two ways to swim.

At the surface, easy, clear, air accessible, known terrains. Or beneath, within, darker but deeper, breath held, unseen spaces wound tight in the chest. As this is a story about volition, the choice is yours. What transpires remains the same. What you take with you may be drastically altered.

Much awaits.

Lina

CHAPTER ONE

LINA REFUSED TO WIPE the mess; it belonged to someone else. Her husband had dropped the piece of condiment on his mother's tablecloth, glanced at the blotch in false surprise, and then ignored it.

'What do you mean, "never"?' Auntie M said. 'What is your life if not family, my dear?'

Lina looked to Ishaan for help as he mixed mint yoghurt into his biryani in vigorous avoidance.

'I never really gave having children much thought,' she said. 'So it's no big deal.'

'Don't be foolish, darling,' Auntie M said. 'You will curse your womb.'

Auntie M used refined language to convey primitive thoughts, which only made her notions sound more ridiculous. When Ishaan had first introduced Lina to his mother, Auntie M had said, 'Lovely to meet you, my dear. I am Meenakshi. I trust only certain people to utter my name, so

until we can be sure no black magic is at play, you must call me Aunt M.’ Lina had laughed, unaware that Meenakshi Hirani, founder of the Fabulous Fifteen, an elite group of Dubai’s wealthiest Indian housewives, did not lower herself to humour.

Having attended a prestigious Catholic school in post-colonial Bombay, Meenakshi had been taught to keep ankles crossed and elbows moisturised at all times, behaviour expected of young ladies of the highest order. Her fine brown hair stood at attention at her shoulders, not a strand out of line. Yet despite Aunt M’s compact-mirror composure, she was a woman filled with dread. She feared the stars in the sky, horoscopic disasters; the planets, how their alignment might derail her husband’s diamond business. She feared mismatched things; teacups without saucers, pepper in the salt shaker, Lina’s unkempt curls against Ishaan’s gelled high-and-tight. Aunt M’s superstitions were set in her bones. She paraded them around as Hindu beliefs with no scriptural evidence to show for them.

‘There are ways to ensure better results next time,’ Aunt M said, raising her eyebrow. ‘For starters, avoid that green chilli you’ve just put on your plate. Had I known you were trying—’

‘We were not—’ Lina said.

‘—letting on,’ Ishaan said. He leant over and kissed Lina on the forehead, a kind stamp of his disapproval, and she allowed the lie because he’d learned about the pregnancy test from his mother’s snooping, not his wife.

The tamarind chutney had now seeped into the white threads of the linen tablecloth, but this was not Lina’s dining table, nor her careless mistake. She placed her wine

glass over it. Aunt M could find the stain later, the discovery of which would remind her of a panty liner soaked with discarded blood.

‘We are all under one roof, isn’t it?’ Aunt M said. ‘There is no need for secrets.’

‘It’s not a secret,’ Lina replied, ‘just private.’

‘Same thing. And it’s not as if I went sticking my nostrils into it, of course. My stomach troubled, I badly needed the bathroom and when I reached for the toilet paper, I saw the rubbish bin underneath, no lid might I add, and there your results on display.’

As if the instrument rested in wait, hopes pinned on the next person due in for a shit. Six people would have had to be present at Hirani Palm Paradise, occupying every other one of the bathrooms in the villa – two on the third floor, four on the second in each of the bedrooms, and one on the ground floor – in order for Aunt M to have needed Lina and Ishaan’s for the sole purpose of using the commode.

A technicality impeded Lina from asking what the hell her mother-in-law was doing in there. The bathroom, neither hers nor Ishaan’s, functioned as space they occupied in a house owned by his parents, gentle reminders of which resulted in rent paid in guilt. Even if no logical reason existed for Aunt M to have been in there, she would have crafted one precisely to thwart the question. Mother-in-laws were the killer whales of the Indian ocean, intelligent enough to devour their prey in one stealthy opening of the mouth.

‘Of course,’ Lina said. ‘Could you pass the green chilli, please?’

Aunt M hesitated before handing over the plate. ‘It’s pickled poison,’ she said.

Lina gobbled up the green spice, crunching her teeth into each of its stubborn little seeds.

Skipped a period, took a test, simple as that. Lina's attempts at whispering Ishaan an explanation failed on account of a game of backgammon his mother had scheduled following lunch.

'Shall we?' Auntie M said, propping herself on the wrought-iron chair. Ishaan took his place opposite, and the lack of a third seat at the poolside deck table ensured Lina's exclusion.

She waited a moment, making a point of the discourtesy, pretending to admire the portrait of Auntie M suspended between two floating glass panes on the false wall behind Ishaan's head. The *Meena Lisa* had been commissioned by his father in an uncharacteristic gesture of romance, and the artist, unnamed, was rumoured to be a mobster in Dawood's circle. The enormous rendition, weather-proof and party-ready, hung outdoors where social gatherings of scale were hosted.

'Why are your eyes closed?' Lina said. An odd depiction of a state she'd not witnessed Auntie M in, as she slept only in the company of her husband and declared common areas of the villa no-nap zones.

'Wasn't that his signature or something,' Ishaan said, 'like Steffi's bows?'

'Please,' Auntie M said, 'must you compare great skill to that madwoman vandalising property?'

'The street artist?' Lina said. 'She stencils in memory of her grandmother who wore bows.'

‘Graffiti garbage,’ Aunty M retorted. ‘True artists stay off the streets.’

‘Shall we play?’ Ishaan said.

Sticky humidity, a titan equally vicious within the Hirani villa as outside, frizzed Lina’s ringlets and beckoned her towards the beach. Shortbread-coloured sand clung to the sweaty gaps between her toes.

None of the Hiranis tolerated sand on their skin: too granular, a terror to tidy up, troublesome. Why they lived in a beachfront mansion on an artificial archipelago shaped as a palm tree, Aunty M justified by a fact indisputable amongst the socialites surrounding her: Palm Jumeirah was a hot spot for hotshots. They extolled the order of the design, villas lined up at angles to fit the curve of the frond shapes on which they stood, a community built on an imitation island using three trillion cubic feet of sand dredged up from the Persian Gulf. ‘We live on *the* Palm,’ Aunty M flaunted frequently, failing to mention that the reclaimed land sank five millimetres a year and the seawater sent a stench through its drains.

Ishaan had stepped away from his game and called out from the top of the stone steps.

‘Mom made her doctor’s appointment for tomorrow morning.’ Throat taut, he took deliberate breaths, fogging up his spectacles. ‘Any chance we pack up your apartment another day?’

Should have been emptied out three months ago, the very night the place became vacant of her father. To delay now, two days before new tenants took over his lease, relayed a lazy disrespect for the dead.

‘If you’re not coming with me, I’ll drive to Abu Dhabi tonight,’ Lina said, ‘sleep at home one last time.’

Ishaan retreated in disappointment. If he could locate a belonging of Lina's anywhere in the Hirani villa outside of their bedroom, now a year and four months since she'd married him and moved in, she'd allow his sensitivity over the word 'home'. Knowing he couldn't, she ran into the sea until submerged.

Water flooded the tunnels of her nose, a pain fast and sharp. Drenched ear canals, dehydrated throat. In the crease of her neck, the basin between her blades, the side panels of her waist, fluid filled the gaps, an easy pour. In that suction cup of seawater, blue noise deafened the expectations waiting at the surface. At once weightless and brimming with freedom, she yielded to the element which carried her safely through its currents, neither obliged to do so nor inclined to ask her for the favour returned. The sea's promise felt more permanent than any contract, verbal or written, that Lina had sealed on land.

Ishaan had agreed they'd move out after a year. Into a space she carved now with each stroke, swimming through imaginary rooms, a studio where charcoal could spill onto the floor and be left there; an open kitchen, God forbid, where Lina might sit in mismatched pyjamas, or no clothes at all. Her legs dragged long hallways behind her; is that Ishaan she'd bumped into without a spectating parent in sight? Dare they indulge in foreplay, or choose their own bed sheets? Her nostrils flared from aromas of oven-baked meals, bubbling with rosemary, not mustard seeds popping about in canola. No cling film carbon footprint, no lipsticks in the fridge, no baby's room.

Lina stayed underwater, fought the need for air. Like a sperm whale, her father would have said, the ancient

mammal which spent more and more time in the ocean until it stopped traversing land altogether. When her lungs begged her to break the surface, breath entered her body by force, taking more out than it put in.

‘Papa,’ she said, for the first time since he’d died. ‘Papa, Papa,’ she called out, softer and softer until the waves forced her lips shut and the teardrops became indistinguishable from the salt of the sea.

Ishaan waited barefoot on the sand. Within his hold, her shivers settled, his dry clothes soaking up her damp. When she made to pull away, his grip tightened.

‘I’m here,’ he whispered.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she lied. ‘Go with your mom tomorrow. Needles scare her.’

He turned. They faced the sea together, shoulders touching. The Atlantis hotel towered beyond the identical Palm fronds, lanes of still water between them.

‘I took the test because I was late,’ Lina said. Menstruation was considered non-essential for an Indian boy’s education, so Ishaan didn’t catch on that Lina would not have swum near Hirani property if on her period, having been briefed by his mother that menstruating women were unclean and not to enter bodies of water, temples or kitchens. ‘And you shouldn’t give her hope. She may end up a regular visitor in our bathroom.’

‘Leave Mom to me,’ he said.

Aunty M had grown a tumour after Ishaan proposed. The cells reproduced so quickly, they sped Lina into agreeing to live with her in-laws until the scare passed. After the independence she’d enjoyed in her father’s home, she could tolerate traditional joint family life so long as it was

temporary. Doctors removed the premalignant mass, cancer never appeared; nor, however, did any mention of moving out.

‘We’re late on another date, too, Ishaan.’

A nod, a solemn acknowledgement. His manner betrayed hope that she’d want to stay, the same way he’d imagined Lina would come around about a child, fall pregnant by error if not, and then develop maternal faculties.

‘One loss at a time, sweetheart,’ he said. ‘Let me come with you tomorrow.’

She shook her head, landing a drop of water on his bottom lip. He licked it. What a sight if she straddled him right there and then, vacuumed out his hesitation with a proper French kiss. Lina was tired of hunger, propriety trumping desire. They walked back towards the pool, holding hands. When they finally escaped this surreal luxury imprisonment, there’d be no *Meena Lisa* waiting at the summit of the deck stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

‘WAIT 3 MINUTES TO CONFIRM a “Not Pregnant” result,’ the leaflet read.

The day’s last prayer call ended in her first minute there, sung from the neighbourhood mosque between sunset and midnight. In the second, Lina started on Papa’s study. Mourning had come with an instruction manual. Daughters must not light the funeral pyre. Colour, absolutely not; only white garments in grief. Cremation fumes should be washed out of the hair. Twice, with shampoo.

Typical, Lina complained to her father, to have such decorum in death and ignore its aftermath. For that, she’d been left alone to clear out the anarchy of Papa’s belongings. *Would it kill you to get a bit organised?*

‘Sorry,’ she said to the urn in front of where she sat on the floor.

On her right, a Yes pile held Papa’s treasures: a miniature barquentine carved in real gold, his Visconti fountain pen, a bottle of midnight-blue ink. In the No pile lay yesterday’s First Response box, Barbie pink in colour, a woman’s

silhouette lurking inside an oversized numeric digit. Was she pregnant or just standing there naked? The branding shouted in caps lock: 'CAN TELL YOU 6 DAYS SOONER. No brand is MORE accurate.'

For today's test, Lina had chosen Clearblue, a landscape and logo colour she trusted.

In the third minute, she placed the stick between the Yes and No piles, and waited for blue lines to appear in the tiny windows labelled 'Control' and 'Result', the irony of which had evaded a whole corporation. When the lines came into view, they were two this time, at a crossroads – a presumption of pregnancy as a plus.

Lina tried jamming the test into the First Response box with the other 'Not Pregnant', wishing it were so. How careless of that mother, Nature herself, to allow such an invasion without warning. No baby should begin as a battle.

Through the open balcony door overlooking the nighttime Gulf, a Lebanese pop song blared from a passing dinner dhow piped with tacky lights, merry to the point of maddening.

Right, where are you? Lina looked around the study, up at the nondescript ceiling, over her shoulder. Inside of her seemed the most unlikely spot. She'd order the presence, who'd been non-existent until moments ago, to please exit before growing too comfortable. The interior walls of her flat stomach would be red, of course. The air, suffocating. Scars hung crooked like paintings. No windows. And the smell, yuck, pungent as the pickled carrots Auntie M served at every meal. 'Good for low-light vision,' her mother-in-law prided in saying. The occupant of Lina's dark womb would need that.

Compounding her shortage of desire for reproduction was her lack of life-altering reasons why. ‘Just not for me,’ she repeated when condemners angled their upper bodies forward to listen disingenuously, leaning in, awaiting adequate justification.

‘Rubbish,’ Raja said, sauntering into the room. No knock, no announcement, his chubby hand outstretched for the empty box Lina clutched in hers. ‘Give.’

A servant by occupation only, Raja’s natural talent was giving orders. He first prevailed against plastic, convincing Papa that cloth nappies should be used on Lina, then pestered his way to oiled braids for school, soaked almonds for breakfast, no boys in her bedroom.

Raja frowned when the pink cardboard box Lina handed him didn’t buckle.

‘What are you searching?’ he said in broken English, taking in the mess on the floor around her. Disorder rarely came over the penthouse the three of them had shared, outnumbered by empty bedrooms. Papa’s degree in marine biology out of its case, an unused Air India ticket, diagrams unhinged from Bindertek binders. In stark contrast was the folded *Gulf News*, Papa’s name still on the subscription label: *Aman Solanki*, very much alive in the newspaper’s database. Envelopes lay ripped open on the floor, crisp white sleeves that had failed to produce a single medical document bearing Lina’s mother’s name. Payal, pretty when pronounced, which was never, and in keeping with the word’s meaning: an ornament worn around the ankle, mostly hidden.

‘Look at this,’ Lina said, holding up the unsent thank-you card Papa had written for her mother’s sister. Too proud to admit he couldn’t read, Raja would peer over Lina when

she did her homework, ensuring enough lead filled the page. ‘Mind over moustache,’ he’d say at exam time, patting each end of his untamed growth and clearing her bedroom of romantic distractions: Peter Andre poster, *Now That’s What I Call Music* CDs, naked one-legged Ken.

Lina read to him: “After decades of silence, I find comfort in knowing you are not short of the generosity you have shown Lina and myself in the past. Raja is family. We are indebted to you for any act of kindness towards his daughter. You and I are young no more, Pari. Now this terrible quiet has been undone, perhaps we can find a way, begin again.”

Raja sighed. Spoken aloud, Papa’s use of her aunt’s first name sounded intimate. Rare was any mention of Pari in their household, the most recent on account of her employing Raja’s runaway daughter. The note betrayed an unprecedented intention to renew a friendship Papa had ended decades ago. Lina put the card in the No pile.

‘Sleep,’ Raja said. ‘I finish here.’

Lina decided against her bedroom and flopped on to Papa’s king-size bed. *The Black Swan* lay on her father’s nightstand, open and turned upside down with the intention of picking up where he left off. The book cover featured a tagline: ‘The impact of the Highly Improbable’.

I’m not made for mothering, Papa. I can’t possibly keep it.

Lina rested on Papa’s pillow and inhaled traces of his scent, pressing her cheek and nose into the softness. The gravity of her father’s absence pulled her into deep sleep. She spotted Papa in a crowd at Grand Central, in line at Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank, and right there, sitting beside her on the bed. Even in her dreams, she knew he was not alive; still, half-awake, she followed him around the house,

chased him through airport security, sat across from him at the table.

On Lina's last birthday with her father, she'd passed him the blue cheese and watched. He pretended he minded the bitterness, just as Lina knew he pretended not to be thinking about his wife's death.

'I don't know how you stand the foul smell,' Lina said.

'It's not for everyone,' Papa said, a line he used for subjects his only child had impetuous opinions on: durian, Ali G, parenting.

'Cheese,' Lina said, 'and you owe me a classic given how long you've been saying that.'

He grinned, showing all his teeth, a crooked incisor overlapping its neighbour. They'd invented the game on her eighth birthday when the waiter in Montpellier had brought out a wedge of brie instead of cake. A piece granted for each cheesy pun the other said. The cheesier the sentiment, the more favoured cheese you ceded.

'All righty,' Papa said. 'I give you gouda.'

'Well played,' Lina said. 'My turn.'

She wanted to bring up the fact that her mother had died on this day thirty-two years ago, but looking around, Lina found no space for the woman who'd only ever hung like a forgotten clothes hook in their home, the apartment overloaded with objects of Papa's affection: the bar they were seated at, a long slab of wood Papa had picked from the bark of a birch tree in Finland for her twenty-first; a stingray painted in oil, bought from an elderly man in Laos who had never seen the ocean; even the wine glass in Lina's hand, double-stemmed, was the last surviving member of a set of twelve, clumsiness a shared Solanki trait.

‘You’re taking too long,’ Papa said. ‘What’s on your mind?’

‘If I told you, I’d have to kill you,’ Lina said, indicating that she’d made her move in the game. Another mark added to her mental tally of birthdays Papa let pass without mention of the wife he’d lost as a result.

‘Sharp,’ Papa said.

Lina leant across the bar and kissed her father on the cheek, the last time she would.

‘I give you a pecorino,’ she said.

When daylight broke, Lina wished for night. She ached for his apparitions and shut her lids tight, begging sleep to take her back. Failing, she lay still, recreating each vision in detail, afraid she’d forget. She did not want to rise to a morning without her father, put feet to the floor in his empty apartment; she did not want to pick up the phone and call her husband with news assumed good, or drive back to a mansion full of another family’s memories. Now an adult orphan, she would much rather weave in and out of this soul-parched slumber, and ignore the new form rounding in her. The real world was no contest. Lina chose Papa every time.

That a man one minute hunched over his desk diagramming octopus anatomy could become a powder the week following seemed cruel. Lina placed Papa’s urn on the balcony railing. Fiddling with the rope around its jute shroud, she almost sent the fragile clay toppling over.

‘What the hell was Michael Jackson thinking,’ Lina said on the phone to Nour, ‘dangling his son out the window like that?’

‘He named the boy Blanket, habibti,’ Nour said. ‘The white Black man had problems.’

Her I’d-rather-die-than-lie friend, Nour had waxed off Lina’s unibrow in sixth grade. Boys don’t want to kiss a gorilla, she’d proclaimed. Blisters stung Lina’s forehead for a week until a handwritten note arrived from Blake, second in line to her crush, asking her to the ECA. Extra-Curricular Activity, code word for school dance, which the Ministry of Education forbade. An unusual dynamic, teachers and students in on a lie, keeping from the government what both considered an essential part of being young. Slow dances with arms around boys’ clammy necks, shy girls crying in the corner because of mean girls, class clowns placating both bullies and bullied by insisting everyone take a chill pill. Somehow, they managed to recreate a typically American middle-school experience within a strict Muslim country, expatriates from Kenya, Belgium, Syria and Korea dancing to ‘Barbie Girl’ and ‘I Swear’ as though their personhood depended on gettin’ jiggy with those tunes. Underlying that carefree frolicking in the cafeteria-turned-dance-floor was an understanding of what need be concealed for fear not of expulsion from school, but deportation from the country: 1) underage drinking, which was widespread nonetheless; 2) following sexual urges, which no student could resist; and 3) teenage pregnancy, which remarkably never happened despite the majority ignoring both first and second rules.

‘I’m pregnant,’ Lina said.

‘Fuck,’ Nour said.

‘I do believe that’s the cause.’

‘Wallah, now what?’

That Lina did not ache to procreate, had no longing for

that place within herself others seemed to have colonised with expectant enthusiasm, was a fact Nour helped her to carry.

‘Do I really have a choice?’ Lina said.

‘Not in this country you don’t,’ Nour said. Single women weren’t allowed Pap smears lest a hymen be broken, unwed couples couldn’t kiss in public, and if a woman was pregnant, she’d better be married or get married. Any alternative was a crime.

‘The real crime is a body reduced to a clay pot,’ Lina said, arms securely around the urn.

Police arrived at the hospital no more than ten minutes after Papa had been declared dead, asking Lina who else witnessed his heart attack, when did she call the ambulance, how long did the medics take, as if a person faced with the sudden death of their father would count the exact minutes between a phone call and the paramedics’ arrival. Nour’s cousin Sami stepped in as Lina’s lawyer just as her eyelids fluttered on the verge of fainting. She heard the instructions he gave Ishaan: pull out cash from the ATM tonight if Lina remembers her father’s PIN; Mr Solanki’s accounts will be frozen by the morning. Later she understood Sami was safeguarding her interests in a country where inheritance law disfavoured women, but at the time she thought his directives downright callous. Locate his will as soon as possible, Sami repeated. Lina had fixated on the many meanings of the word ‘will’, and standing by the ward curtain, willed her legs into paralysis so she’d be incapable of moving one foot in front of the other, away from her father.

‘Wallah, let Baba out.’ Nour called Papa what she would have her own father had he not abandoned Nour’s mother

for another wife pregnant with a prized son. She had her own reasons for leaving pregnancy off a pedestal.

‘Pari knows where my mother’s ashes were scattered,’ Lina said.

The Solanki fathers, grand, great, and otherwise, had been put to rest in pristine Fijian waters. Papa hadn’t indicated he wanted the same. ‘With my wife, probably,’ her father had said, only once, absent-mindedly, when Lina asked the question of where while rambling on about the unfairness of cremations, what with there being no gravestone and all, no physical place for mourners to mourn. Unaware then that Abu Dhabi lacked a cremation ground, that they’d follow Sami’s car out to the desert and pack a wood fire for her father like the one in the opening scene of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.

‘Go and see Houdini Aunty, habibti,’ Nour said. ‘Wasn’t she nice, calling after Baba passed? She’ll help you find a doctor in Bombay.’

Had Ishaan been with Lina, she might not have considered going. At this distance – he slurping a java chip Frappuccino while waiting for Aunty M at the hospital, and she remembering the agarbathi smell of Pari’s sofa cushions where she pretended to sleep while Papa and her aunt chatted about work, the monsoon season, and Payal – Ishaan’s presence felt new, her history, old. Where she’d grown up searching for mysteries in adult whispers, Ishaan trusted what his parents told him. He’d been shocked the time Lina suggested Papa might have had relationships without her knowing.

‘Truck is come,’ Raja said, sticking his head through the gap in the open balcony door and gesturing that she end the phone call.

‘I’m not leaving,’ Lina said.

‘Follow,’ Raja ordered. When Papa had collapsed on the balcony minutes after his afternoon tea, Raja carried her father’s limp body indoors, trying to resuscitate him while Lina panic-dialled three wrong numbers before reaching 999.

‘Bye,’ she said. The Persian Gulf spread before her stayed silent: no crashing waves, no sudden fury, a patient sway of turquoise unaffected by the fact that Lina’s family home of three decades would be written off to someone else, the impermanence nothing but new sediments in old waters.

‘No speak with sea,’ Raja said. He blamed the Gulf for letting Papa pass under its watch.

Empty of contents, the apartment looked forlorn and smelt of damp rags. Lina found a Fijian penny by a garbage bag, a round silver coin featuring a gaping hole in the middle. Holding the incomplete currency, she felt a punishment had been handed down. She refused to deliver children and so the world robbed her of both parents. Lina threw the penny in the garbage and left her home for good.

In the parking lot, movers in brown uniforms loaded the truck, circles of perspiration soaking their backs. The furniture headed for Raja’s house in Nagapattinam, encased in bubble wrap and taped at awkward angles, looked down on them like disfigured robots. Gifting him Papa’s ornate desk, her four-poster bed, or the white leather bar stools didn’t make up for what she couldn’t give: a guarantee of his ability to stay.

‘I will ship home,’ he’d said, a way of saying thank you. Home would never be this country for Raja, his visa tied to his employer, both now expired.

‘Where the hell will I put these?’ Lina said, scanning the dozen boxes on the sidewalk. ‘Apparently there’s only room for six in the precious Hirani garage.’

Raja made a sound of disapproval as he walked away, pushing his tongue against his front teeth. Across the street, children screeched on swings in the park. Forty degrees Celsius didn’t dry up their cheerful tempers. Cotton-mouthed, Lina looked up at a neighbouring skyscraper under construction, cranes sticking out of the building’s frame like branches of a futuristic tree. This coastal promenade formed a sweeping curve along the western edge of Abu Dhabi, outlining a skyline recently secured on a Starbucks mug. As a childhood address, the Corniche sparkled with city lights, blinding her to the ledge that it was, ground rising on one side and falling away on the other.

Raja returned, wiping condensation off a cold bottle of Masafi water.

‘No worry for the box,’ he said.

‘I’ll find space,’ Lina said, though she suspected he meant the pink one in her No pile.

‘Inshallah,’ he said. If Allah wills it.

He accompanied the movers in the truck and rode off.

Driving back to Dubai, Lina rolled the windows down, turned up the radio, pumped the air freshener. She couldn’t shake the feeling of being in company so she thought of Papa’s, how endless desert spanned the highway on their road trips, an occasional train of camels wandering past. He kept watch for ghada shrubs and ghaf trees, she doodled belly down on the back seat, seat belt laws not yet enforced. Powdering charcoal over the car leather, she drew the animals’ humps, noting how they chewed aggressively, spat

at ease. What might have been considered a vulgar creature, Lina idolised as a survivor who had made peace with an unfriendly habitat.

Habitats, too, could be forced into change. Now, red-roofed Ferrari World, a circular Aldar Headquarters and Yas Marina Circuit lined the same roads, no camels in sight. The one benefit of construction: fewer mirages on the sandy horizon, those watery illusions that tricked travellers into believing what lay ahead would quench their thirst.

CHAPTER THREE

TWO DAYS LINA KEPT THE PREGNANCY quiet. A jackhammer pounded within – *I'm here, I'm here, I'm here* – until a crow perched at the kitchen window took the hit for both.

‘Shut up!’ she’d yelled.

The crow flapped away, and silence.

On the third day, Lina followed a few yards behind Ishaan without his knowing. Gold for sale in Deira souk was displayed like meat at a butcher’s, thick, chunky necklaces dangling in storefronts, long rows of bangles as though limbs of a glorious animal. Ishaan stopped in front of an armour necklace. She stopped, too, dawdling between approaching and watching the innocence she was on the verge of slaughtering.

Years ago, when they’d left the Emirates to attend different universities in London, Nour had nudged Lina towards Ishaan and whispered, ‘I dare you to tell him.’

‘Cool rims,’ Lina had said, nervously approaching the stranger in her flat. Those were her first words to her now husband, a man who’d arrived uninvited and with magnetic

ease at their house party. A friend of a friend of a fling, the easy way of relationships back then, pleasantries unnecessary.

‘You’ve seen my car?’ Ishaan said, looking out the window on to Pond Place. She didn’t care a button about tyres, but his delight fascinated her.

‘Your glasses,’ Lina said. ‘Not everyone can pull off white frames.’

He touched his face self-consciously, then bowed his head in deference. Happiness was uninteresting, particularly to postgraduates of the Royal College of Art like her who emulated craft fuelled by pain. But how was Lina to ignore happy when there he stood smelling of laundry detergent, earnestly relishing in the joy of a compliment?

‘I take no credit,’ Ishaan said. ‘Would you believe my mom bought them?’

How old is he? she thought. ‘Couldn’t tell ya,’ is what she said. ‘I don’t have a mom.’

Watching his glee crash, she hoped then that he wouldn’t say a flimsy ‘I’m sorry’.

‘Biologically, you must have one,’ he’d said. ‘Though I’d have no trouble believing you were divinity.’

Bold, bloody move, flirting within question of a dead mother. She was hooked.

Today, she would tell Ishaan her dire truth just as easily as she’d done back then. Courage would come; hers to say and his to hear. He entered Sultan Jeweller’s ahead of her, adjusting his thick tortoiseshell eyeglasses, unaware he’d agreed on a trip to Bombay for laying to rest more than just Papa’s ashes.

Ali, the store manager, offered them stools and brought out a necklace Lina had ordered for Raja's daughter, resembling the one she wore around her neck.

'Shobha,' Ishaan said, reading the pendant spelt in Arabic letters. 'Sweet.'

'I chose her name,' Lina said, 'convinced Raja against Gnanavalli. Even at thirteen I knew silent letters asked to be butchered.'

Papa had begun the unspoken tradition, every gift for Lina replicated in a package shipped to Nagapattinam: Polly Pocket, Sindy dolls, Tamagotchi, Connect 4. Only when Shobha turned fifteen did Raja announce in his brutal, in-offensive way that the presents Lina wanted were useless for his own daughter.

'Are you nervous to meet her?' Ishaan said.

'Not if she's anything like Raja.'

Lina tried the necklace on and checked the clasps at different lengths. Surrounding customers carried in wafts of seasoning: a sari-clad woman left a trail of sambhar masala, another in a burqa peering over the display case had a strong saffron on her, and the two boys Ishaan stared at as if they might invite him to play their Arabic version of Marco Polo had spilt some quantity of chocolate milk on their matching Spider-Man T-shirts.

'I meant your mother's sister, sweetheart.'

The necklace felt tight around Lina's neck. She suggested Ali add in more links.

'Well, I did take her only sibling away from her,' Lina said, 'so there's that.' Pari, of all people, knew what thieves babies could be.

When Lina fired harsh words, Ishaan paused for thought,

unwilling to be led to war. Early in their relationship, it was his natural tendency for peace that drew Lina in. He withstood her wilfulness, and she needed the calm he offered.

On their first date, Ishaan had initiated conversation about her mother.

‘I killed her,’ Lina had said, surprised by her admission, having known the man a mere week.

He let the moment be awkward, let the seconds pass though they begged for interruption. Ishaan smiled at Lina – *smiled* of all things – and eventually she explained the circumstances of Payal’s death.

‘Well,’ he said, leaning back on a wobbly chair and sipping a cold beer as if they’d been discussing holidaying in Bora Bora, ‘what I do know about mothers is that, eventually, they forgive their kids for everything.’

‘They shouldn’t,’ Lina said.

‘To that opinion, you are entitled, sweetheart,’ he said, ‘but that doesn’t change the fact.’

She hadn’t smiled exactly, but she too leant back against her chair. Unlike most others who avoided the topic of Lina’s mother, Ishaan carried on. A silly story ensued, a retelling of his mother’s reaction when he got arrested for trespassing a sheikh’s property. Can you believe it, he’d said warmly, after a good fifteen minutes of scolding she came back and asked what I thought of the royal window trimmings! He relaxed when he spoke of his family, an effortlessness as unfamiliar to Lina as indoor plumbing, and she welcomed the change. Nothing of his past seemed hidden or ridden with guilt. Even Lina’s intense love for Papa was fraught at times, a fierce attachment she dared not pierce with trivial emotions. If she was mad at her father, she suppressed her

anger; when she wanted to know more of her mother, she didn't press for details. She could not let Papa feel inadequate and so ended up swallowing the feeling herself.

Ishaan unburdened Lina, shrugging off her heavy history – not without care, but without blame. The night she'd told him about not wanting children, they'd kissed in front of a sixty-foot bronze sculpture in Hay's Wharf, a fantasy sea-creature-cum-iron-ship adding Victorian romance to the cloudy night. Wandering around the city in search of maritime monuments and old seafaring vessels, they held hands for so long that sweat gathered in their palms despite the London chills. Foreplay stretched like taffy. Conversations, in contrast, cut straight in. *Papa is my sixth sense. Cooking, only when necessary. Charcoal keeps me alive. Children, not for me.*

'Why not?' he'd asked.

'Why?' she'd defended. As if she should want them by default. And if not, a general lack of interest in the enterprise wasn't a good enough reason. Lina had to be either 1) a child hater, which was inapplicable since she found infants better company than adults; 2) career-obsessed, an assumption made most often by those who'd never earned their keep; 3) physically weak, suggested frequently by men to whom Lina liked to describe pregnancy as a wee prick, a bit like getting circumcised every twenty-eight to thirty days for decades until one fine day a Teletubby was shoved into the penis for nine months; and Lina's favourite 4) selfish, as if all childbearing women went around in their thousand-dollar maternity clothes doing so in service of the human race.

'That's quite a list for a disinterested person,' he'd said.

In his intonation she recalled a dangerous hope, temporary acceptance overlaying the expectation that she'd eventually change her mind.

Lina had not changed her mind. Only now, ten years since that first conversation, her lack of desire applied to a child already in existence. A child doing what children did, pegging one parent against the other while shopping for gold.

Ali brought out Shobha's resized necklace and Lina paid for it without trying it on. She hurried Ishaan to the car, planning on delivering a cool-headed *I'm pregnant, but I've got a plan*. Ishaan stopped midway to wipe his glasses.

'So,' she said, starting the engine, 'the pregnancy test—'

'I wish it had been positive.'

'It's hot,' Lina said, turning the AC dial to max.

'Give it a minute,' he said.

She looked at him. *How could you?*

'Sweetheart, I know we never planned to,' Ishaan said, 'but if it happened by mistake, it's not as if we would—'

'Wouldn't we?' Lina said.

'Come on, Lina.'

She flipped the air vents up. *I'm here, I'm here, I'm here*, the voice resounded in the invaded space her body had now become, a terrain turned over to a wily stranger.

'I know what happened to your mom is scary,' Ishaan said.

'I'm not scared.'

'You're grieving.'

'You're assuming,' Lina said. Take those stupid glasses off, she wanted to add. They're ridiculous.

Rape, teen pregnancy, compounding debts – those

horrors were better understood grounds for termination. Pro-circumstance, the movement should have been called, since the choice was condemned when employed by the privileged. Lina had no right making a decision other women made from a place of acceptable distress. Her reasons, being of the presumed self-indulgent variety, required explanation, elaboration, psychological assessment of parental failures.

‘All I’m saying,’ Ishaan said, ‘is for a moment there, I was disappointed.’

He wore glasses for protection – from the sun, from the glare of a computer screen, from dust storms on Emirates Road. The lenses were hexagon-shaped, oval, rectangular; the frames clear, burgundy, at times, neon. Diamond temple tips, personalised nose pads. What he lacked was a prescription. Worn not for clarity of sight, but as an accessory, a spectacle.

‘Sorry to disappoint,’ Lina said.

Foot on the pedal, she adjusted the rear-view mirror and reversed out of the parking spot.

‘Mom’s being extra because she desperately wants a grandchild,’ Ishaan said. ‘Not because she thinks you—’

Lina did not follow his pause with reassurance nor contest the assumption that she’d inherited her mother’s fragility on that front.

To whom she belonged, and when the transfer of autonomy took place, was no novel deliberation. Gawking construction workers broke her childhood one whistle at a time, ruining Snow White’s tune. From their fenced-off, elevated view, they ripped her apart by sight, devoured her with vulgar kissing sounds, spat out what she was supposed

to swallow: that the woman inside her body was insignificant. And instead of protecting that vulnerable inner person those collective thieves pickpocketed, she defended the tangible, which was easier to see but harder to steal: her physical body. *Stare all you want, shitheads; you'll never touch this.*

Hands firm on the steering wheel, the distant view of building sites unhinged her still. Less familiar was feeling that same visceral reaction towards Ishaan, shamefully equating a construction worker's leer with her husband's desire to procreate. What a cruel result, from years of subtle, socially acceptable violations, that the two requests of her body could unionise in this harsh way, could produce the same fierce guard over herself. *Back off, it's mine.*

'Anyways, whether or not you can,' Ishaan continued, 'is out of your control. Mom knows that.'

Lina should have said she'd consider Ishaan's view, that Auntie M's fears were not unfounded. After all, Lina was the Solanki who'd left Jaslok Hospital, not Payal. She should have told Ishaan she could, she had, that he'd made his way inside her and produced an ally, another being staking claim. Only there was no unselfish way to say so. It was easier for all parties concerned to believe Lina couldn't conceive than to know she didn't want to.