Hi, Ketu

Brother and Uncle climbed up the porch to a suburban house outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Brother knocked on the door, and Uncle said: “Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

“Which one was Ketu?”

“The body without the head.” . . . “The spiritual one.”

This time Uncle knocked, and Brother spoke.

“Does that make sense to you?”

“It makes sense—in a reversal-of-ideological-primacy kind of way: substituting the body for the mind. Wiser than the western paradigm, which as it moves from the Greek to the Roman, in my opinion, becomes corrupted by so-called “reason”—in actual fact simply superior military strategy—over the beautiful complex impulses the Greeks loved to talk about. Whoever has more military power can say they are the more reasonable ones, as well as make the wily laws concerning how we think. Though I don’t despise the Romans on all fronts. I think Hadrian was ok. And I say this as an Indian boy!”

“And one hell of a smart 17-yr-old! Can you say you are happier than Sappho?”

“I dunno, there are times when she does appear sad, but then I think she must simply be tired.”

The door opened. A middle-aged man with a bald spot and a beer belly popped out. He was wearing loose, gold-colored sweatpants he held up with his fists, probably because his hands were greasy. “It’s you. Hold on a minute.” He closed the door.

“But Sappho has a head. All dogs do.”

"I know. Would you agree however that it's quite different in their case? That mainly their bodies drag them along a loving and centrifugal course? Though of course the mind takes over sometimes."

"When she's done eating or running around, and she lies there looking at me, I think she's definitely happier than me, simpler and softer, and consequently better. If that's what you're getting at." He winked at Uncle.

"Far from it."

"I'm thinking all these stupid things, sometimes things I shouldn't be thinking, and I bet she's never in that situation."

"I wouldn't be so sure, at least not on the subject of happiness. Sappho seems to me sometime to ask, beyond looking up with her usual canine expectance, particularly when she's tired or done with everything else like you said—according to me—for something more than I can give her. Of course, I don't know what that thing is, I don't think any human can, much less give it. It's not just love. It's a surplus created by millennia of breeding an affection between human and beast that one in that equation (i.e. the dog) must indeed struggle to understand, since it was not responsible for it, and will always feel left out by the creature that is, and the language it speaks. What shouldn't you be thinking?"

"You know what I mean. The temporary violences. Like throwing myself out the window when I happen to be too close to it, or thinking I'm worthless, or beating someone up who has disrespected me or said something ludicrous at one point—in my thoughts—and lying there in my thoughts as though the deed had actually been done, asking myself if it was worth it."

The door reopened. This time the man put one foot forward. He handed Uncle some rolled up bills from his left fist, which Uncle took with a kind of flinch he didn't seem proud of. The man looked down disapprovingly at Brother. Brother handed him a plastic

bag with some glittering liquid inside. “You really don’t have a better scheme for this?” the man asked. “Sooner or later they’re going to realize something’s up.” He grumbled. “How many times can Jehovah’s Witnesses visit a man’s door and talk—” he seemed to rack his imagination, “about the weather!”

A few words about what Uncle and Brother were selling: this was a healing substance that only they could produce by touching a certain amount of water—about one cup—at the same time.

“People dislike reading between the lines, Mr. X.,” said Uncle, “or they quickly decide it’s none of their business. At any rate, you must realize that this neighborhood is predominantly white, and I—the adult in this situation, as well as the person in charge—am white, and white people don’t care about the freedom of other white people going up to strangers’ lawns every once in a while. That’s the ugly truth.”

The man looked down at Brother. “You make an odd pair. Where’s he from?”

“Jackson Heights, New York.”

He grunted. “I mean, you know what I mean.”

“I don’t. He was born there.”

“His parents?”

“You are playing a useless game.”

Silence.

“His parents emigrated from India.”

“Ah.”

“He’s only a boy, as you can see.”

“That’s true and all I guess,” he grunted, and sniffed, changing his qualm: “But he’s too young, makes me uncomfortable.” He wanted to be “decent” enough to let the prior point go, more so realizing that it would lead nowhere with present company. He affected a different tone: “I feel somewhat responsible, being on one end of the

operation, however benign it is. I mean what if people were to look, what if someone was curious, wanted a bit of adventure outside of what goes on around here these days? I mean, there's plenty of adventure outside here"—Uncle was disgusted by his choice of words—"but here, you must admit it's pretty quiet."

"This is the eye of the storm," he replied.

"What?"

"Absolutely nothing. You will call us if you need us again." The man grunted one last time and closed the door. Uncle and Brother turned around and began walking.

Uncle apologized to Brother, and looked down as if he were about to embark on a dissertation, and he did: "We ask why we have consciousness. It's simple. It evolved because it was useful, because adding 2 and 2 was useful, and figuring out penicillin and the laws of combustion and gravitation benefited our survival and enrichment. We draw a line—a theological line, not a scientific one—between the octopus that defeats its prey with a weapon and the human, when really that line is just millions of years down a different evolutionary road. But consciousness also created the sad mind, the angry mind, the conflicted mind that makes conflict outside itself. Like nuclear power, the evolving novelty created tons of bad stuff—deadly waste—and a little bit of genius and peace and ecstasy. In the midst of war and famine and oppression: love and science and the arts. We get a similar story with the immortal nectar at the bottom of the milky ocean in the Hindu myth. The ocean needed to be stirred to create the nectar, which was incredibly difficult to do and required a ton of cosmic forces. It produced dangerous amounts of poison, and a tiny drop of the elixir every time. There was so much of the poison that it almost destroyed the entire universe. Shiva drank it, and Vishnu oversaw the nectar's protection and rationing. Its use was limited by the gods so that it didn't get into the wrong hands. But Svarbhānu, a power-seeking asura—as opposed to a demigod—tried to imbibe it. He was killed at the last second with a throw of Vishnu's

disk, before the elixir descended his throat, and became transformed into head and body: Rahu and Ketu."

"Wow."

They walked down the street towards their next appointment, which was some ways off, and during which there was some silence.

"What are you thinking?" asked Uncle.

"I may be thirteen, Uncle, but that's still a private matter." He smiled.

"Do you want me to guess?"

"Go for it."

"You're thinking about your mother."

Brother frowned. Then he thought a little. "How did you know?"

"Jackson Heights. And through the whole story about the mind and the ocean and the nectar of immortality, you were thinking about her. I could tell by the expression on your face."

Brother looked like he had been made naked. "Tell me, do you ever think about your mother?"

"We've been over this, little guy, I don't have a mother." It was true. Uncle had been an orphan, and had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps for as long as he could remember.

"But surely, at some point you did."

"Yes, but I never knew her, so does it matter really?"

"Is it strange, my asking?"

"I know how you mean it, so no, not exactly." He thought. "To be honest, yes, I do think about her every once in a while, especially when I see a family. Some look happy; they have all the little props and glances, all the issues that bespeak healthy living, or they have each other, which is more important. Even if they are poor and sometimes look

like life has cheated them of many comforts, many times they appear happy, many times the way a mother looks at her child is wistful and full of a care no one could touch, sully, or destroy."

"That *is* something, I suppose. And what is she like, this mother you imagine?"

"Radiant, tomboyish, incredibly sensitive—almost too much, so that the adult in me has to tell her, as a child of course, not to worry so much. I tell her I'll be fine, I've turned out just fine. Whatever it is we need is in our bones, I say—though they may break sometimes, the marrow holds, and carries the secrets we need."

"You mother your own mother."

He smiled at him. They'd climbed up another porch and approached a similar white door, though this one had a frosted-glass window in the middle. Brother knocked, and Uncle spoke.

They waited. Brother seemed to remember something. And after a short pause, he said: "Say, then, does Ketu worry about nothing, like Sappho?"

"She does," Uncle thought, "worry, in the same way our bodies worry and yearn, knowing exactly what they need."

The door opened. A girl of about ten looked out. "Yes?"

"Hey darling, could you get your mother, please?"

She looked quizzical. "Why?"

"She'll know."

She looked at Brother, who was just a few years older than he, and closed the door.

"And the names, what do you think they mean?"

"Ketu is often depicted simply as a body, but I believe they represent the 'feminine' side of the equation, because—unfortunately—many of the 'difficult' gods are given female or feminine physical attributes. And Ketu contains those sounds which we somehow connect to those attributes. Ketu represents spiritual obstacles and

overcoming. 'Rahu' is the sound of a hungry demon beside themselves, someone constantly ready to feast, and that is what they represent. 'Ketu,' once its injunctions are achieved, is never hungry, or only hungers for the spirit, from which they are detached—as we tend to think of the spirit as residing in the mind—and which they therefore already are. The mind is more or less always confused; so much so that it creates the illusion that the body is confused. Because it has the power to multiply, it always wants more of what it has. Whereas the body doesn't want a gram more than what it needs."

The door reopened. A woman looked out. She had dark curly hair, and was wearing a pendant necklace with a copper crab hanging from it. She smiled at Uncle and Brother, a confident and generous smile. "I knew it was you." She handed Uncle some banknotes.

"Thank you." Uncle in turn smiled a damaged smile; the kind you'd imagine on a kind monster, were it suddenly shocked by a ray of light. Brother handed her the plastic bag.

"Tinsel peril," she said, with a beautiful smile.

"Tinsel peril," Uncle repeated.

The door closed.

"I saw that."

"You saw what?"

"You like her."

Uncle smiled again, this time more subdued. "I don't, she just . . . reminds me of someone."

They had come away from the porch, and were walking along the road again. Brother gave him a minute, then said: "From what you've said about Rahu and Ketu, we must first get off with our heads, then become feminine!"

Uncle laughed.

"I should count on you for taking Scripture so literally." He thought. "Though it seems to me your impulse is right. Death is only one part of spirituality, however, and, well,

what we've been talking about as 'feminine' another. It's a stereotype, and the feminine can be as wrathful as it is tender—the ancients knew this better than us. But in the experience of it within ourselves, alongside the experience of Rahu, lies something. This is why Yin and Yang is masculine and feminine together. Why Tiresias, the blind seer who spoke with unparalleled lucidity and predicted the future, possessed both sexes as well as the expressions of both genders. This is also why certain Native American tribes look up to those who are Two-Spirit. The experience of honed multiplicity inevitably breeds tenderness, though in the land of tenderness lies pain. The truth is that obviously none of us are precisely 'masculine' or 'feminine.' Thankfully, we possess both to varying degrees, with each of their culturally determined qualities and experiences. And the duty of each of us is to cultivate this." He thought.

"You said Svarbhānu was beheaded. But before he got to swallow the nectar of immortality. So, well, how did Ketu survive?"

"Excellent question. I think Ketu survived by the grace of the Gods. See, this is what it really comes down to. The gods saw that the head was cursed with the calculus of greed, and the want for power, which begins with power over the body, then power over nature, and power over others. So they needed the other half to survive as well, so that the universe would not be thrown off balance by a hungry immortal being."

Brother nodded.

"Well, don't be afraid, since those days are over, but I think about the amount of times your Uncle could have done himself in, and didn't. That was my head trying to make off; my head discontented with the world—for lack of reasons, for reasons it had made up, since I always had the luxury of being able to ground myself in this world. That is the miracle the gods give us: a head attached by such slender means, that we choose to keep where it is. In short, a form of radical satiety with our circumstances.

"Well, Uncle, that sounds a bit morbid!"

"I don't think so. There is scarce morbidity to grit, is there?" He winks. "All of this brings us back, I think, to the animal. Animals, after being heavily injured, will sometimes go into an epileptic trance—if their injury is traumatic enough—shake it off, then hide for the slow and solitary process of healing. Of course, consequent to their initial bodily rebellion, they will do this with minimal impatience or anger."

Brother and Uncle approached another stoop. Uncle knocked on the door. He continued: "Have I told you the parable of the expedition?"

"I don't think so. No."

"Ok, do you want to hear it?"

"Yes.

He laughed. "But why am I exposing you to these dark things today? There must be something in the air, or the planets."

"I'm thinking—" Brother looked down, "but this is unrelated—about our encounter with the little girl and the woman."

"Yes."

"Just the way she smiled. The way she smiled at *you*, actually." Brother seemed satisfied with this remark, and immediately knocked on the door again, to distract from any notion he might be flattering Uncle.

Still, Uncle replied: "You flatter me. Mrs. Carmichael and I know each other well. In my early days here, you see, she helped me out a lot."

"Her necklace, what does it mean?"

"Oh, it's her Sun Sigh: Cancer."

"What is my Sun Sign?"

"Virgo."

"How do you know that?"

Uncle paused. "Your birth date was in your records."

"I see."

"Well, it looks like no one is here today.

"It does."

"What do you say we buy some ice cream with that handy money?"

"Sounds good to me. I've been thinking about chocolate-chip and mint, in fact I've been dreaming about it."

They stepped off the stairs and headed onto the sidewalk, towards town. The light in the trees was somewhat heavier than before, and dimmer, which meant that the sun had to be setting over the houses behind them.

"Should I go ahead with the parable then?" Uncle asked.

"Aye, Captain!"

"It's a bit heavy."

"I think today I can take heavy."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." He smiled up beamingly.

"Alright then: A group of western explorers were on an expedition to the North Pole. After they had reached their destination, and started the journey back, they realized that their rationer (who was not among them) had grossly miscalculated the amount of supplies they needed. The moment of realization, as they looked upon the supplies, had occurred in near-silence. Each was tortured after this by the question of how they would survive. After days of the most horrible suffering, the question became inevitable: Would some fall before others, and if they did, would the others make use of this? The men and women of science experienced the question in fits of agony, since all reasoning fell, once the act came alive in their heads, to a moral terminus; a death of thinking as before. Into the third day, hunger and sleeplessness had erased, for most, all semblance of sanity. This except for one, who had meditated every morning since the expedition set out."

"Of course, he alone survived!"

"Yes, but how? Or why, rather?"

Brother thought. He twisted his face. "I don't know."

"This man alone was not perturbed by the possibility that he might cannibalize or hunt one of his fellows. What destroyed the others was the slippery chance that they would either eat or be eaten: each impelled by brute necessity—of which they had known nothing, really, until then—into an act before inconceivable to them. But this man alone had resolved the question in his mind: that he could never live with the kind of memory he was being given, but that perhaps he would nevertheless have to. And therefore everything had not only already transpired in his mind and become digested, so to speak—pardon the metaphor—but he preserved his energies. And he alone slept, unafraid that one of the members would murder and consume him, or that he would have to eat a dead companion. The others began to hallucinate. They tore at their bodies and hair, or reminisced for hours, going back over misdeeds, tying loose ends, losing their temper, or apologizing in their tortured minds to friends, strangers, and apparitions. They feared any contact with each other, and so tried to keep a safe distance, which was hard in a land as flat as an anvil. They caught sight of haunting, astigmatic smudges, trying to head northwest where they imagined the Greenlanders to live in their glassy abodes. The pale distances, the stark blow of emptiness between white ground and grey sky, the flat, unending stop sign of the horizon to the nerves, exacerbated and prolonged their cruel fantasies.

"On the tenth day, they ran into a group of Inuits, who offered to feed and house them. The expedition members seemed restored to their wits. But soon enough the warmth of human kindness was unbearable to them. After all they had had to imagine, they couldn't take it, and gave in to a terrible sleep each. Consumed by nightmares that

even the strongest of us could not withstand—because they are made of our absolute worst fantasies—they died in shrieks in their sleep."

"Jesus Christ."

Uncle smiled cheekily. "We're here. Chocolate-chip and mint?" He laughed this time, as did Brother. The man behind the counter served brother his ice cream. Then Brother looked up at Uncle: "Say, Uncle, how do you think we'd fare on that expedition?" He smiled teasingly.

Uncle seemed far away. His face twisted between that monster's smile and a frown. He seemed to be repeating to himself, over and over, the same gesture abstracted from a love that seemed to be the only one he possessed.

Uncle was Brother's father.

His name was Mark, and he had been an American journalist married to an Indian woman by the name of Amita. Several months after their move to Mumbai, Mark had begun to read about the Maoist insurgents of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, so terrorized by the military and so maligned in the papers. He read about their actual struggle: the struggle of millions of ex-villagers who had been uprooted from their forest homelands and lost everything, for deals made between their government and multinational corporations concerning the extraction of minerals (including uranium). The more he read, the more he was moved to action as a writer and a human being. The day he told his wife that he wanted to interview the insurgents, that this might take a very long time, a very long absence, on his part, and much danger, she told him if he did she'd be moving with Brother to the US. She said this as an ultimatum, but also because she had been offered a well-paying job at a university there (she taught philology and Indian mythology), and she knew there'd be more opportunities for Brother in the US. Mark told her he had to: he felt overcome when he said this, as if his fate lay in those twilit provinces, but also a larger picture that he could not yet understand. He thought also, as

a last recourse—when he had made up his mind—that maybe he would die there. Before she left, Amita gave him the address to which he could write: a temporary apartment she'd found to rent in Jackson Heights. There would be no way for him to write her letters from where he would be in the jungle. He told her this, but she thrust it his way anyway, and wept.

Three months later, when Uncle lay under the stars in a glade—in the new campsite the Maoists had moved to that week, to hide their position—he would be in awe at how much of the Milky Way he could see, and think that his wife and son saw maybe one thousandth it. He became overwhelmed by pain. And yet he also thought he received something from the sky. Then he uttered the words "31 74th Street, Jackson Heights," "31 74th Street, Jackson Heights," over and over.

When he left the insurgents about a year later, and came back to the US, he sought after his wife and son. He found out that she had died in a car accident, on her way home with groceries. She had been worried that she was late and Brother, who was just 2, and left alone with his new babysitter, would be worried. Uncle found Brother in an orphanage—Amita had cut all ties with her family in India—and "adopted" him, then raised him and homeschooled him.

Now they went around selling the healing substance only they were able to produce, as far as they knew. Selling it to the currently marginally wealthier middle class (in 2040) was their way of making a living, and being able to distribute it for free among the needy—especially climate refugees living in camps on the outskirts, who had been lucky enough to make it across the country. The power of what was called "holy water" spread by word of mouth, as they had a shadow sense of the problems that would occur if larger forces knew of it.

And on that day, Mark wondered how long he could lie to the boy, now almost a man. He wondered, also, if their mutual powers lay in the strong bond between them that had

been forged by their severance and reunion. He worried therefore that it might disappear if he were to suddenly reveal that he was a humongous liar, and an abandoner.

His heart contracted. And he smiled to Brother again—like that poor, gentle, damaged monster, the latter thought. Then he took out his wallet to pay for the chocolate-chip mint ice cream.