

RANI

Rani stood by the bedroom door and strained to hear her husband's voice on the other side. A 500-minute calling card lasted only two weeks anymore. Two years, three years back, Gopal's voice was stronger on the telephone, arguing with them. Defending her. Now his tone was quieter, with longer intervals on his end. Rani could not hear the words but knew how the debate was evolving. Gopal's parents would be pushing him to send her back to her family and find someone more suitable. Undamaged. She knew the fate of the unfit wives in the rural areas, of the accidental kitchen fires with propane cans, but that was not the way of Gopal's family. They were educated, they were enlightened, they would just put her on an airplane. Were they persuading him, had they already made other arrangements? Rani had learned not to ask, not to interfere in family business. As if she were no longer part of the family.

Gopal would be concerned first about appearances, and as an afterthought about fairness. Rani knew not to question if hearts could grow cold; her stepmother had shown her very well what a business relatives were. And she knew her fate was in Gopal's hands; where she would live would depend on whether he chose to keep her or discard her. That was the way of life and it was understood. She would cook and wash and kneel for her husband's pleasure, and whether he thanked her or caressed her or turned away without a

Rani

word when he was finished did not matter as long as he permitted her to stay under his roof.

It had not always been this way. In the first days Gopal was gentle and caring with her. Still just a boy, she had thought, a boy she had seen only twice before their wedding. On Gopal's second visit to Rani's house her father accepted his proposal, and three weeks later father spent half a year's salary for the ceremonies, jewelry, and hosting 200 guests for three days. Gopal's family looked at Rani like a rug at the market, appraising her and whispering to each other. Two days after the ceremonies ended the new couple were on a plane to Minneapolis.

Rani accepted without question the rightness of fate that had brought her halfway around the world. She had been allowed to go to university as a gift, as a luxury even, but she was trained from the start what her occupation must be: she would tend and obey a suitable husband, maintain an honorable house, and bear his children and especially his sons. The house of her parents would no longer be her home; his family was to be her family. Rani learned to cook the way Gopal liked, with more garlic and less chilies than she might have preferred. She kept his clothes and shoes and living space spotless, she learned to kneel in the position he liked when he wanted to take her, she kept silent when he criticized her. Her destiny was to be together with this man who had been a stranger until the day before they were engaged.

Rani

During that first summer Rani walked hand in hand with her new husband, soaking in the evening warmth in the strange new country, marveling at the clean cement sidewalks that lined both sides of every street. Gopal was so careful to help her step up and down the three inches as they crossed each curb. They talked then, about everything, about his extended family in Jaipur and her home in Delhi, about her real mother and university days, about the peonies and lilies-of-the-valley blooming by the edges of the stucco houses where six months earlier snowdrifts had piled up almost to the windowsills. And always they talked about another new life forming and starting to protrude under her sari. “Surely it is a boy,” Gopal explained. “When the belly protrudes it is a boy, when it is flatter it is a girl. It is the same with chicken eggs, you can tell what is inside just from the outside shape.”

“And what does the electrical engineer know of such things?” she laughed. “The city boy knows as much about chicken farming as a man knows about being pregnant.” She could still tease him then. “Oh! Surely it is a boy! No good daughter would kick her mother like just now.”

During that summer life in the new country was an adventure full of promise. Gopal had his degree from an American university, now a job in telecommunications; she was a young wife with a family to come. He would rise with the company, and already they were looking farther ahead: there would be a house, a large house with several small bedrooms and guest rooms for when the parents would visit, there would be travel to the Grand Canyon and Europe, there would be a piano and soccer and (something they never

Rani

imagined) ice skates for the little ones, and searches for the best schools and colleges later.

But all that changed in an instant, but not exactly at that instant. Rani wished she could tear that moment from her mind and live in amnesia, but instead it grew and grew until it drowned out every other thought. It was the weekend before Labor Day, the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi, and the Hindu community from 50 miles around gathered at Hudson on the St. Croix, just across the Wisconsin border, to celebrate the birthday of the elephant-headed boy. The taste of cashew and mango sweets lingered in their mouths as they rode home in the dark on the back road past Stillwater. Gopal was humming one of the songs from the day, a theme from a film that was popular the year they were married, and Rani was drowsing. They were descending a hill when Gopal shouted “Oh shit!” as the white car in front of them braked and skidded. Amid the sound of shrieking tires and metal smashing plastic a bright cloud flashed in Rani’s vision and struck her with a hammer blow, and everything went black. When she awoke Gopal was calling her name in her left ear and two flashlights were shining through the front and passenger windows. A white plastic film lay across her lap and her head and whole body ached. She was nearly doubled over in pain as the police untangled the air bag and led her to the police car. She heard a woman screaming in the distance and saw flashing lights surrounding the upended white car, no longer on the road but in a creek bed off to the side. A stabbing pain pierced her midsection and she was shivering as the police car sped away. She remembered Gopal was sitting in the back, holding her hands, when she fell unconscious again.

Rani

The next days were a haze of pain, bright lights, and foggy drowsiness. Faces appeared and disappeared over her, sometimes Gopal, sometimes masked nurses. Voices floated in and out of her hearing as she was wheeled from one room to another. Amid the swirling and fading images, one phrase stood clear and clutched her heart. “She lost the baby.” Other words came from above, not connected to any person in view. “Are you all right? You’ll be all right. Can you walk now? Can you raise your arms? Can you see this? Can you hear me? Yes, you’re going to be all right.”

Gopal sat by her side and told her she would be all right, and she never could have loved him more. The doctors told her she would be all right, the cheery Filipina nurses told her she would be all right. See, she was up and around now. She was going to be all right now. Gopal held her hands and talked reassuringly, but a hint of doubt flickered in the back of his eyes. They had taken a loss, a big loss. It was a boy, they doctor told them. Would have been a boy. Would have been. “We can try again,” said Gopal. “As long as you’re all right, that’s the important thing.”

Rani was back on her feet in a week, and in another week the bruises on her face were gone. She walked and cooked, and dared Gopal to play tennis with her. And at nighttime she proved to him that she still was vigorous. She was all right again.

Except she wasn’t going to be all right. It wasn’t until months later that she learned the diagnosis. There was a little tear, a small separation of tissue. The Korean doctor was

Rani

proud to be able to name it, a connection between this and that. “You can’t even feel it, there won’t be any danger of bleeding. You will be fine. Except that pregnancy won’t be possible now. Otherwise you can do anything.” Rani had completed her degree in computer science with honors. She could play four of the Chopin nocturnes from memory and repair her own saris with needle and thread. She had cooked for her father for three years after they had to let the servants go, and now she cooked and cleaned and maintained the apartment for Gopal better than two servants together could have managed. Or so he said once, in that first year. She was sure she could drive if Gopal would permit her to learn, she could read three languages (though the college French was shakier than her English and Hindi), and twice as many codes. I can do anything, she thought, anything at all. Except the one thing that everyone wanted from her.

Rani cried for a week. At first Gopal tried to comfort her, but Rani could feel he didn’t want to touch her shoulders. She could not be a mother, she could not give sons. She was damaged, useless. It was not her fault, she cried into her pillow, it was not anybody’s fault, it was just fate. Gopal said nothing. He did not blame or criticize her, not then. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, Gopal drew back from her. Conversations became shorter and shorter, until they reached the limit of a simple yes or no. The accounts of family adventures were replaced with the details of household maintenance; what needed to be washed next, which bills were due. Plans for houses or family visits or Europe were not discussed. Gopal’s job became more demanding, he needed to spend more time at the office, sometimes staying through suppertime. Finally Rani got permission to seek a job

Rani

herself, and the reason was understood if unspoken. Because there was no point in a childless woman staying around the apartment all day.

Now Rani filled her days with work. It was better to be busy than to think. She rose before dawn, laid out Gopal's clothes for the day, and prepared breakfast quietly, lest she disturb her sleeping husband. Rani stood by the table with her palms pressed together when Gopal entered the kitchen. "Good morning, *pati-dewa*," Rani used the formal term of respect for her husband. He grunted and sat down at the table. He examined the spotless fork, wiped an imaginary mote from one of the tines, and began eating, his eyes fastened on the newspaper. Once he had started, Rani took her seat and sipped spoonfuls of her porridge while she watched Gopal eat. When his coffee cup was half empty she got up and refilled it; that was the amount he wanted for the morning, not two whole cups. After he folded the paper and set it aside, she asked, "Is everyone well back home?"

Gopal glanced up. "They're all fine. Everyone is fine *there*." The extra emphasis reminded her of what she was never allowed to forget, that whatever problems or inadequacies there were in the family, they did not come from his side. Gopal finished his breakfast without another word, checked his hair in the hallway mirror and put the Tupperware lunch bowl into his briefcase. Rani stood by the door and waited for him to pass by. In the first years there would always be one more kiss in the morning to complete the night before. Gopal looked at his watch and said, "Call the Anands and tell them we will not be coming on Thursday. I will be going to Chicago Wednesday and

Rani

won't be back until late the next night." Rani watched the door close and let her breath out.

Rani did not need to bother with putting on makeup or selecting jewelry for her workplace. Gopal had said there was no reason a woman should try to make herself attractive for other men besides her husband. Rani finished with the linens and hurried through the hallway, past the closed door of Gopal's home office. That room had been designated for a different purpose once, but when it became clear that it would not be a nursery Gopal removed the small furniture and installed his computers there. Rani did not go into that room anymore, even to clean.

Every morning Rani rode a half-empty bus to downtown. So different from the packed buses of Delhi, with brave boys hanging off the roofs while inside the standing passengers pressed together in a solid, steaming mass and strange hands had slid across Rani's thighs and buttocks while she held her arms tightly folded across her breasts and heard whispered, leering invitations from undetermined points behind her. Such "Eve-teasing" was just innocent play by low-class boys, it meant nothing, said the male teachers and even her father. The same teachers who wanted to expel Chandrika as a whore for posting her photo in a one-piece bathing suit in the all-university online beauty contest. Rani shook off the memory and looked away as they passed the Hiawatha elementary school.

Rani

At the dot of eight Rani was at her cubicle in the basement of the brick fortress that was the Social Security's regional data processing center. The cloth-covered square, eight feet on a side, was not her prison but her refuge. The beige walls were bare except for a calendar with a photo of Shahrukh Khan and Preity Zinta gazing at each other in a *Veer Zara* poster. She had a desk, a chair, and a computer monitor, her window onto the world. Every two weeks her paycheck was signed over for Gopal to deposit, but that did not trouble her. Rani heard her co-worker's complaints about salary and hours and lack of promotion filtering through the cloth walls but she did not reply. Rani had been in her cubicle longer than most of the tattooed American children sitting around her and still drew a smaller salary than them, but she loved her job fiercely. This little square, beneath the steam pipes and ventilation duct in the basement of a converted warehouse half a world away from her birthplace, was the one fragment of space that was truly hers alone.

At lunchtime she examined the sticker with a red owl, the symbol of the grocery store chain, on the red American apple sitting on her desk. *Ullu*, her stepmother had called her, owl. *Ullu* meant both owl and stupid, and her stepmother never failed to let her know how useless she was. Who would marry a lazy girl who kept her nose in books rather than helping out around the house? A girl who needed a rap across the shoulder with a stick to wake her up. If anyone had said the bright dark eyes behind her black-framed owl glasses were beautiful, she would have thought they were mocking her. In the movies the university girls being serenaded were full bodied, ripe and tall and fair, like the Kashmiris. Rani was barely over five feet tall and thin, not like the daughter of a merchant. Being slim was not a sign of beauty, it was a mark of poverty.

Rani

Rani turned the apple around. If the sticker was Delhi, she was now on the opposite side. Here the owl was the symbol of wisdom. She had come halfway around the earth, and now in this little box she lived in a world of symbols and code and numerical applications. Would she be sent back to the other side, where it was midnight now, returned in shame to wash her stepmother's pots?

During the daytime she could stay occupied with the Java code and folding databases into a master matrix, but today, intruding into those thoughts, was the conversation she could not escape hearing through her cloth wall. Two of the American girls, both younger than her and each married scarcely two years, were debating the best way to manage their divorces. Rani could not believe her ears. What problems did these girls have? A promised vacation was postponed? The man mentioned the name of a previous girlfriend? Now these girls, on their own, without consulting their relatives, were deciding to discard their marriages because they were judging their husbands were not sufficiently committed? And they were calculating what sort of financial package they should receive?

Rani was still holding the apple with the red owl sticker looking back at her. Foolish girl, she told herself, you can run halfway around the world but never escape the fate that is destined for you. Happiness is not yours to create or to seek out. If it does not come to you, you cannot chase it down, no matter how fast you run. She set the uneaten apple on

Rani

the shelf above her monitor and returned to merging the spreadsheets from the past month's claim entries.

That night after clearing the dishes Rani packed Gopal's suitcase for the next morning and thought about her own day coming up. Gopal traveled on business almost every month, and in the first years his absence for more than one night was almost unbearable. This time, the thought of his being away for a day was a relief, a chance for her to breathe, to stand or sit without straining her ears for the impatient clearing of a throat that meant a chore had gone untended, that a paper or an article of clothing was out of place. In the early days Gopal was not that way; when he was just leaving bachelorhood he was as careless with his laundry as a child – or a male student – and he had marveled at Rani's precision. Now he was as watchful as a hawk, and Rani knew why. It was not that he cared about his socks or the flatware, but he was gathering evidence, cataloging her missteps or deficiencies, to justify to himself the decision that was being forced on him. If she could not be held to blame for her main defect, if that were too unfair, other failings needed to be discovered.

Rani laid out Gopal's clothes for the next day, and on the nightstand on her side of the bed she set out the black slacks and black and white pullover sweater she usually wore on Wednesdays. She followed her customary routine, aware of Gopal's notice of the slightest details. Except for holidays or going to temple she now wore Western clothes; saris and sandals were impossible in the Minnesota snow and ice. But tomorrow would be the start of summer and other things would be possible. Rani looked in the bathroom

Rani

mirror. It had taken her awhile to get used to wearing her hair shorter and swept up on the sides rather than in a single plait down her back. Gopal had liked the more modern look, and Rani was surprised to discover her head was free of a tugging pressure and weight. Plus it helped keep her ears warm. What would the people back home think if they saw me looking this way? she thought, and then she shivered. She might learn the answer soon enough.

In the morning Rani repeated the breakfast ritual while Gopal looked at his airplane ticket for a third time. A horn sounded from the street, a signal from the airport taxi, and Gopal set his cup down and rose and put on his jacket, picked up his suitcase and briefcase and let himself out the front door. No goodbye kiss anymore, thought Rani.

When the sound of the taxi had faded Rani hurried to her chores. Everything must be in order. The dishes were cleaned and back on the shelves, the food returned to the pantry and the refrigerator, the countertops and tables were bare and gleaming. She dialed her work number twice and hung up before the second ring, then took a breath and the third time waited for the Center's answering system to play its recorded message and menu. She pushed button five and worked to keep her voice calm. "This is Rani Agarwal of Data Processing, I'm sorry, I will not be in today." She hung up quickly before offering an excuse. She had never taken a day of sick leave and was entitled to, but still she wanted to keep things orderly.

Rani

Although she had bathed in the evening, Rani stepped into the shower, faced the showerhead and gave each faucet handle a quick half turn. She stood still as the dozen needle sprays struck her face, the first rush icy, then gradually warming. She closed her eyes and willed the full stream to bore into the middle of her forehead, if only it could, and let the holy purifying waters rush through and cleanse her of the memory that stayed in her brain like a piece of broken glass. That evening of Ganesh Chaturthi, the happiest celebration of the year. An hour earlier everything was so joyous, even her serious husband was like a child. Then in a moment it was all gone. Rani stood facing the stream for ten minutes, until the warm water was exhausted and she began to shiver. There was no healing, no relief – as if this filtered and chlorinated and piped American liquid had all of the spirit of living flowing water driven from it, and all it could do was supply tears for her now. It would have been just the same if she had died then too, she thought. Maybe better. It would be easier for her husband’s family if he were just a widower.

Wrapped in a towel, she searched the bottom drawer of the dresser. The wedding jewelry was still in the cloth bag beside the emerald sari and the passports. Was it only five years ago that she had worn these? One by one she fastened the gold ornaments, the tikka across her forehead, the gold flower nath on the side of her nose, the ruby earrings matching the pendant of the necklace, three rings of bracelets on each wrist, and the tinkling anklets. Three months of father’s salary for these ornaments on that day of glory. She turned back and forth in front of the mirror on the closet door, then stood on tiptoe and raised her arms over her head. She had never looked at herself this way, naked except for her jewelry, but now she saw the vision she had presented to Gopal that night.

Rani

She brushed the thought from her mind – that was another time, another life, when the world was right side up. Carefully she wrapped and pleated her sari and pinned the pollu over her shoulder, then she adjusted her hair and finally applied the vermilion bindi between her eyebrows. She set her purse and keys by the telephone. Everything in the apartment was in place for Gopal's return.

After the winter months of leaden gray skies and snowdrifts, followed by the dirty slush of April and the buffeting prairie winds of May, the once frozen city glowed clean and calm and radiant on the day of the summer solstice. The longest day of the year was still only early spring in this northern climate and the apple trees and azaleas were just starting to bloom. White-haired Swedish women peered through their venetian blinds and clucked at the sight of the tiny woman in green and gold walking along the grassy median of the parkway, her wrists and ankles tinkling. Rani followed the path they had strolled that first summer, past the Longfellow library on Hiawatha Avenue to the familiar entrance to Minnehaha Park, heedless of the stares from the passing automobiles.

On some days she and Gopal had picked their way down the three flights of uneven rocky steps to view the falls from the grassy field below, but today she stayed at the upper level and walked along the path parallel to the nearly dry creek. In spring when the snows were melting the stream rippled and the falls rushed in torrents, and in winter the falls froze solid, and postcards showed giant stalactites of ice that hung from the edge of the cliff all the way to the bottom like a giant crystal wall. But by the summertime the flow was reduced to a trickle, a small curtain of beads more like a leaking faucet than a plunging

Rani

cataract. At a shady crossing an arched stone bridge overlooked a statue of the young lovers, Hiawatha carrying Minnehaha in his arms across the stream. This was the place Rani loved the most, and she smiled at the thought - here she was an Indian woman who would never be famous and should not be living, standing before a statue of an Indian woman who was not Indian and had never lived. Minnehaha was no princess, but just a fanciful creation by the white settlers to romanticize the aboriginal natives after they had exterminated most of them. In every way things were upside down on this side of the world.

An iron fence bordered the creek to keep children from playing near the falls, but children are resourceful, and Rani noticed a small gap where the fence met the bridge, too large for a man to fit through, but just wide enough for a slim woman who held her breath. Rani edged through the opening slowly, careful not to catch her trailing pollu on the protruding fence, and laid her sandals on a flat rock underneath the bridge. Barefoot she picked her way like a deer along the damp stones of the creek bed, her emerald dress and gold ornaments dappled by the patches of sunlight and shade filtering through the canopy of aspen and elm and oak branches that blanketed the stream. There was scarcely enough water to make a ripple now, and the only sound of her motion was an occasional laughing tinkle from her anklets. Rani approached the edge of the falls and could see the stream below wending its way to join the Mississippi half a mile distant. At the edge of the falls enough water merged from twenty different side streams to make a puddle that cooled the bottom of her feet without covering her toes. Rani bent at the waist and leaned over the edge and saw two boys, no more than twelve years old, wading waist-deep and

Rani

chasing a river carp that had gotten trapped in the shallow pool directly below her. Her toes clutched the wet stones, slick with moss, and she stood back up and surveyed the panorama laid out before her. Overhead cottony mounds of clouds marched across the robin's egg sky in parallel with their shadows crossing the grassy fields with picnickers and sunbathers. Directly ahead a ribbon of stream led from the pool through the woods and on to the river that shone as a blue-gray haze filtering through the trees below her. Every other minute the scene faded or brightened as the sun dueled the crossing clouds.

Rani pressed her palms together, with the tips of her forefingers just touching her lips, and tried to see the river beyond the trees. Her mind raced. Was everything out of place here, or was it just she who was out of place? Could she return to her father's house, could she be accepted back after all they had paid to be rid of her? What awaits there? Would she be allowed in the house to join her stepmother's servants or would she be sent out like a widow, bad luck for anyone even to let her hand touch them?

She looked back down at the pool, sixty feet below, at the fish now swimming undisturbed by the American boys. Even this fish has a home, she thought, but where is my home? Beyond that pool, straight through the earth, on the other side is the holy Ganges. There is my home. My mother and grandmother, and all their mothers before them, bathed in that river and blessed it with their ashes. If they want me to fly back there I will go willingly. Rani leaned forward and peered down again at the pool, now barely shimmering, and saw her reflection looking up, beckoning, welcoming. All the waters in the world flowed from the same source and all returned to their source. She

Rani

could go home where she belonged and make things right. Rani took a breath and bowed to Lord Krishna.

The sunbathers on the grassy picnic grounds were watching a mother hawk from the river cliffs soar and dip as it taught her baby bobbing above her how to fly. Over by the falls, unnoticed, a green leaf fluttered and sparkled in the breeze as it floated towards the water below. Rani felt at peace now, the order of her world was restored, now everything would be all right. She stood straight and rose, palms pressed together, the clouds beneath her feet, the wind brushing her face, as she rushed upwards ever upwards, to burst outwards from the holy water like a leaping fish.