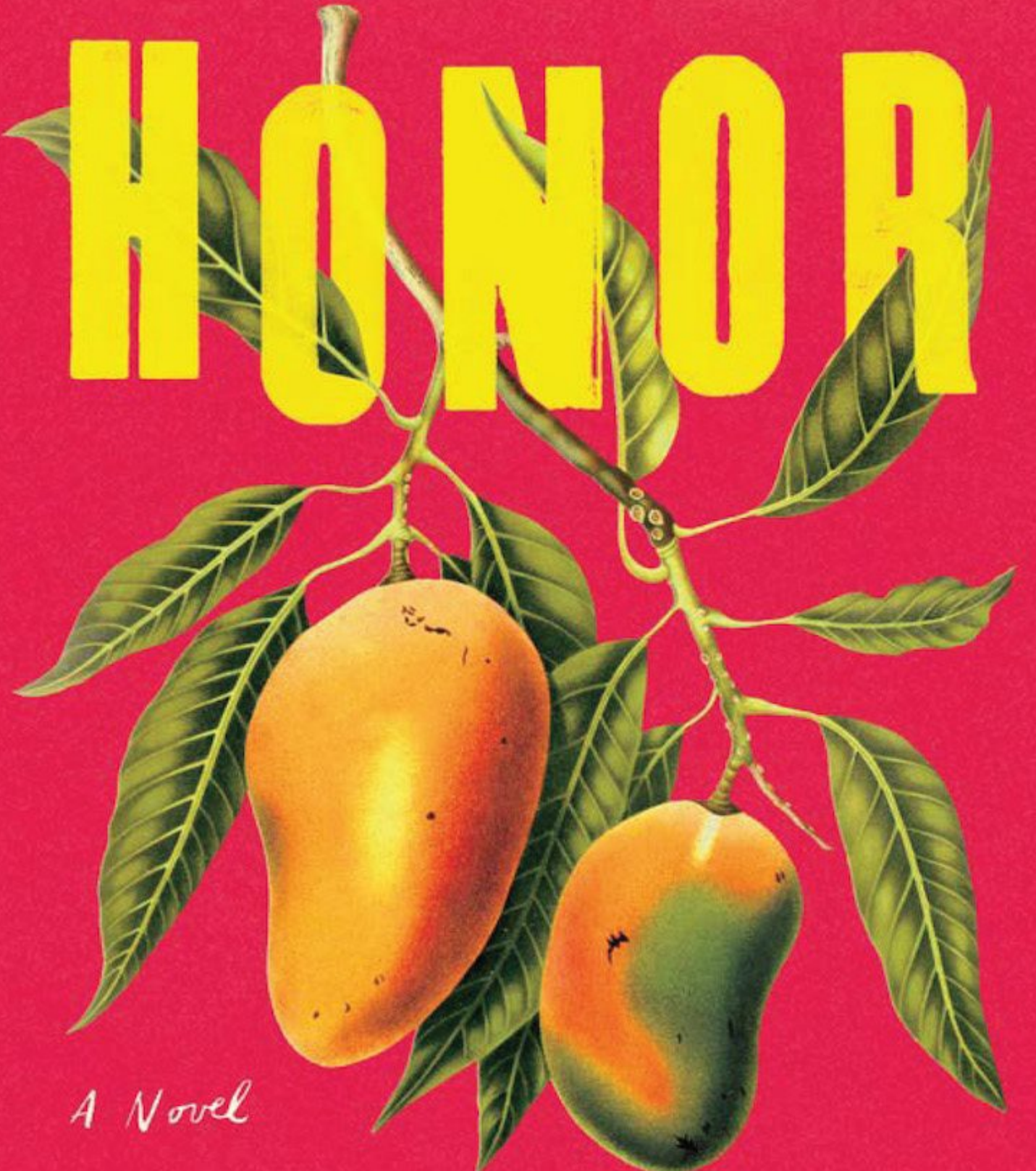


"A powerful, important, unforgettable book." —CHERYL STRAYED, author of *Wild*

HONOR



A Novel

THRITY UMRIGAR

Bestselling author of THE SPACE BETWEEN US



HONOR



a novel

Thrity Umrigar

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2022

For Feroza Freeland,
whose light brightens our path

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What we don't say
we carry in our suitcases, coat pockets, our nostrils.

—“Town Watches Them Take Alfonso,” ILYA KAMINSKY

This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

—“Good Bones,” MAGGIE SMITH

HINDU WOMAN SUES BROTHERS WHO KILLED HER MUSLIM HUSBAND

BY SHANNON CARPENTER
South Asia Correspondent

BIRWAD, India—Her face is a constellation of scars.

Her left eye is welded shut, while a network of stitches has reassembled the melted cheek and lips. The fire rendered her left hand useless, but after reconstructive surgery, Meena Mustafa is once again able to hold a spoon in her right hand to feed herself.

The fire that took the life of her husband, Abdul, has long since been extinguished. He was allegedly set on fire by Ms. Mustafa's two brothers, Hindus who were infuriated by her elopement with a Muslim man. Police allege that the brothers tried to kill the couple to avenge the dishonor caused by the interfaith marriage.

"My body did not die the night of the fire," Ms. Mustafa says. "But my life ended then."

Now, a new fire glows in her heart—a burning desire for justice.

This made her defy the wishes of her embittered mother-in-law and her Muslim neighbors, and demand that the police reopen the case. With pro bono help from a group called Lawyers for Change, Ms. Mustafa is taking her brothers to court. She says it is to seek justice for her dead husband.

In a country where dowry deaths, bride burnings and cases of sexual harassment are commonplace, such an act of defiance makes Ms. Mustafa a singular figure in her community. But the move has also made her a social pariah in this small, conservative Muslim village, where many fear retribution by the Hindu majority. Still, she is undeterred. "I'm fighting this case for the sake of my child. To tell my child that I fought for her father's sake," she says.

A petite, demure woman, Ms. Mustafa has a soft demeanor that masks

an iron will. It is this same will that earlier allowed her to defy her older brother and get a job at the local sewing factory where she met her future husband.

Encouraged by her lawyer, she agreed to be interviewed in the hopes that her courage would inspire other Indian women to confront their perpetrators.

“Let the world know what they did to my Abdul,” she says. “People need to know the truth.”

BOOK ONE



CHAPTER ONE

THE AIR SMELLED of burnt rubber.

That was the first thing that Smita Agarwal noticed as she stepped out of the cool, rarefied air of the airport and into the warm, still Mumbai night. The next instant, she recoiled as the sound hit her—the low rumble of a thousand human voices, punctured by occasional barks of laughter and shrill police whistles. She gaped at the sight of the wall of people, standing behind the metal barriers, waiting for their relatives to emerge. She wondered if the old Indian custom of entire families converging to drop off travelers still prevailed in 2018, but before she could complete the thought, she felt her throat burn from the smell of exhaust fumes and her eardrums thrum from the blare of the cars just beyond the waiting crowd.

Smita stood still for a moment, cowering just a bit. She traveled more days of the year than not, her foreign correspondent job taking her around the globe, and yet, barely a few seconds into India, and already the country was overwhelming her, making her feel as if she had been hit by a force of nature, a tornado, maybe, or a tsunami that swept away everything in its path.

Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment, and she again heard the lap of the waves in the Maldives, the paradise she'd left hours earlier. In that moment, she hated all the weird confluence of events that had brought her to the one place she had spent her entire adult life avoiding—the fact that she'd happened to be on vacation so close to India when Shannon had desperately needed her help, that Shannon's contact had procured her a six-month tourist visa in a matter of hours. Now, she wished his effort had failed.

Get a grip, Smita thought, echoing the stern talking-to she'd given

herself during the flight. *Remember, Shannon is a dear friend.* A memory of Shannon making Papa smile during the dark days following Mummy's funeral flashed through her head. She forced herself to cast the image aside while peering through the mob, hoping to spot the driver that Shannon had sent. A man stared back at her brazenly and pursed his lips in a suggestive pout. She looked away, scanning the crowd for someone holding a sign with her name on it while reaching for her cell phone to call Shannon. But before she found her phone, she saw him—a tall man in a blue shirt holding up a cardboard sign emblazoned with her name. Relieved, she walked over to him. "Hi," she said, from across the metal barrier. "I'm Smita."

He looked at her, blinking, confusion on his face.

"You speak English?" she said sharply, realizing that she had asked him the question in that language. But her Hindi was rusty, and she felt self-conscious using it.

The man spoke at last, in perfect English. "You're Smita Agarwal?" he said, glancing at his sign. "But you were not supposed to get here until . . . The plane was early?"

"What? Yeah, I guess so. A little bit." She looked at him, wanting to ask where the car was, wanting to get out of the airport and into the Taj Mahal Palace hotel at Apollo Bunder, where, she hoped, a long hot shower and a comfortable bed awaited her. But he continued staring at her, and her annoyance rose. "So? Shall we go?" she asked.

He snapped to attention. "Yes, yes. Sorry. Sure. Please. Come around this way." He motioned for her to walk toward a gap in the barricades. She passed the boisterous, squealing reunions that were occurring around her, the profusion of kisses bestowed on the faces and heads of teenagers by middle-aged women, the extravagant bear hugs with which grown men greeted one another. She looked away, not wanting to lose track of her driver as he pushed his way through the crowd toward an opening.

On the other side, he reached for her carry-on suitcase, then looked

around, puzzled. “Where’s the rest of your luggage?”

She shrugged. “This is it.”

“Only one bag?”

“Yup. And my backpack.”

He shook his head.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said as they resumed walking. “It’s just that . . . Shannon said you were Indian.”

“I’m Indian American. But what does that . . . ?”

“I didn’t think there was an Indian anywhere in the world who could travel with only one suitcase.”

She nodded, remembering the tales her parents used to tell her of relatives traveling with suitcases the size of small boats. “True enough.” She peered at him, puzzled. “And you are . . . Shannon’s driver?”

Under the glow of a streetlamp, she caught the flash in his eyes. “You think I’m her chauffeur?”

She took in the blue jeans, the stylishly cut shirt, the expensive leather shoes—and knew she’d made a gaffe. “Shannon said she would send someone to pick me up,” she mumbled. “She didn’t say who. I just assumed . . .” She took in the bemused way he was looking at her. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s okay. Why sorry? Nothing wrong with being a driver. But in this case, I’m a friend of Shannon’s. I just offered to pick you up since you were arriving so late.” He flashed her a quick half smile. “I’m Mohan, by the way.”

She pointed to herself. “I’m Smita.”

He waved the cardboard sign. “I know. Same as the Smita on the placard.”

They laughed awkwardly. “Thank you for doing this,” she said.

“No problem. This way to the car.”

“So, tell me,” Smita said as they walked. “How is Shannon doing?”

“She’s in a lot of pain. As you may be knowing, the hip’s definitely broken. Because of the weekend, they couldn’t do the operation. And now they’ve decided to wait a couple more days until Dr. Shahani gets back into town. He’s the best surgeon in the city. And hers will be a complicated case.”

She looked at him curiously. “And you’re—you’re close to Shannon?”

“We’re not boyfriend-girlfriend if that’s what you mean. But she’s my dear friend.”

“I see.” She envied Shannon this—as the South Asia correspondent for the paper, Shannon could put down roots, form friendships with the local people. Smita, whose beat was gender issues, was hardly ever in the same place for more than a week or two. No chance to stay in any place long enough to plant the seeds of friendship. She glanced at the suitcase that Mohan was carrying for her. Would he be surprised to know that she kept two other identical bags packed in her New York apartment, ready to go?

Mohan was saying something about Shannon, and Smita forced herself to listen. He mentioned how frightened Shannon had sounded when she’d called him from the hospital, how he had rushed to be by her side. Smita nodded. She remembered the time she’d been laid up with the flu in a hospital in Rio, and how isolating it had felt to be ill in a foreign country. And that hospital was probably paradise compared with this one. Although Shannon had been covering India for—How long had it been? Three years, maybe?—Smita couldn’t imagine her having to undergo surgery alone in a strange country.

“And the conditions in the hospital?” she asked Mohan. “They’re good? She’ll be okay?”

He stopped walking and turned to look at her, his eyebrows raised. “Yes, of course. She’s at Breach Candy. One of the best hospitals. And India has some of the finest doctors in the world. It’s now a medical destination, you know?”

She was amused by his wounded pride, his quickness to take insult, a quality she'd noticed in several of Papa's Indian friends, even the ones—*especially* the ones—who had lived in the States for a long time. "I didn't mean to be rude," she said.

"No, it's okay. Many people still believe India is a backward country."

She bit down on her lip, lest the thought that leapt into her mind escaped her lips—*It sure was, when I lived here*. "The new airport is gorgeous," she said as a peace offering. "Light-years better than most American airports."

"Yah. It's like a five-star hotel."

They walked up to a small red car, and Mohan unlocked it. He heaved her suitcase into the trunk and then asked, "Would you like to sit in the back or front?"

She glanced at him, startled. "I'll ride in the front if that's okay."

"Of course." Even though his face was deadpan, Smita heard the quiver of laughter in his voice. "I just thought . . . Since you thought I'm Shannon's driver, maybe you wish to ride in the back."

"I'm sorry," she said, vaguely.

He pulled out of the parking lot, eased the car into the lane, then swore quietly at the bumper-to-bumper traffic heading out of the airport.

"Lots of cars, even at this time," Smita said.

He made a clucking, exasperated sound. "Don't ask, *yaar*. The traffic in this city has gone from bad to worse." He glanced at her. "But don't worry. Once we get on the main road, it will get better. I'll have you at your hotel in no time."

"Do you live near the Taj?"

"Me? No. I live in Dadar. Closer to the airport than to your hotel."

"Oh," she cried. "That's ridiculous. I . . . I could've just taken a cab."

"No, no. It's not safe, for a woman to get in a cab at this hour. Besides, this is India. We would never allow a guest to take a taxi from the airport."

She remembered her parents driving to Columbus Airport through the

sleet and storms of Ohio winters, to pick up visitors. Indian hospitality. It was real. “Thank you,” she said.

“No mention.” He fiddled with the dial for the air-conditioning. “Are you comfortable? Hot? Cold?”

“Maybe turn up the air a notch? I can’t believe how hot it is here, even in January.”

Mohan gave her a quick glance. “The joys of global warming. Imported to poor countries like India from rich countries like yours.”

Was he one of those nationalist types, like Papa’s friend Rakesh, a man who railed against the West and had plotted his imminent return to India for the past forty years? And yet, Mohan wasn’t wrong, was he? She had often argued the same point herself. “Yup,” she said, too tired to start a political conversation, her eyelids beginning to get heavy with sleep.

Mohan must have sensed her fatigue. “Take a nap if you like,” he said. “We have at least another thirty minutes.”

“I’m fine,” she said, shaking her head, distracting herself by looking at the long line of shanties built on the sidewalk. Even at this late hour, a few men in shirtsleeves and lungis lounged near the open mouths of the huts, kerosene lamps burning inside some of them. Smita chewed on her lower lip. She was no stranger to third world poverty, but the tableau they were driving past was so unchanged from what she remembered from her childhood. It was if she had passed these very same slums and the same men the last time she and her family had driven to the airport twenty years before, in 1998. So much for the new, globalized India that she kept reading about.

“The government paid these people to vacate and go into government housing,” Mohan was saying. “But they refused.”

“Is that so?”

“So I’ve heard. But in a democratic country, how can you force people to relocate?”

There was a short silence, and Smita had the feeling that simply by

staring so openly at the slums they were passing, she had made Mohan feel defensive about his city. She had seen this phenomenon often in her job, how middle-class people in poor countries bristled against the judgment of people in the West. Once, while she was in Haiti, a local official had almost spat in her face and cursed American imperialism when she'd tried questioning him about the corruption in his district. "I suppose you can't blame them," she said. "This is their home."

"Exactly. This is what I try to tell my friends and coworkers. But they don't understand what took you less than ten minutes to understand."

Smita felt unexpectedly warmed by Mohan's words, as if he'd presented her with a small trophy. "Thanks. But I used to live here, you know. So I get it."

"You lived here? When?"

"When I was young. We left India when I was fourteen."

"*Wah*. I had no idea. Even though Shannon told me you were Indian, I just assumed you were born abroad. You sound like a *pucca* American."

She shrugged. "Thanks. I guess."

"And you have family here?"

"Not really." And before he could ask another question, she said, "And you? What do you do? Are you a journalist, also?"

"Ha. That's a joke. I could never do what you and Shannon do. I'm not a good writer. No, I'm an IT guy. I work with computers. For Tata Consultancy. Have you heard of the Tatas?"

"Yes, of course. Didn't they buy Jaguar and Land Rover several years ago?"

"That's right. Tata makes everything, from cars to soap to power plants." He rolled down his window a bit. "So, we're going over the new Sea Link, which connects Bandra to Worli. It wasn't here when you were living here, obviously. But it will cut down on our driving time a great deal."

Smita took in the lights of the city as the car climbed up the cable

bridge that spanned the dark waters of the Arabian Sea below them. “Wow. Mumbai looks like any other city in the world. We could be in New York or Singapore.” Except, she thought, for the acidic smell of the warm air blowing into the car. She was about to ask Mohan about the smell but thought better of it. She was a guest in his city and the truth was, the knot in her stomach was growing as they got closer to their destination. The truth was, she didn’t want to be in Mumbai. No matter how many beautiful bridges the city threw up, no matter how beguiling its new, bejeweled skyline, she didn’t want to be there. She would spend a few days with Shannon in the hospital, and then, as soon as she could, she would clear out. It would be too late to rejoin the others in the Maldives, of course, but that was okay. It would be nice to return to her brownstone in Brooklyn for the rest of her leave. Maybe take in a movie or two. But there she was, in a car speeding toward her hotel room at the Taj. Speeding toward her old neighborhood.

Smita Agarwal looked out of the car window onto the streets of a city she had once loved, a city she’d spent the last twenty years trying to forget.

CHAPTER TWO

SMITA WOKE UP early the next morning and for a moment, as she lay in an unknown bed, she thought she was still at the Sun Aqua Resort in the Maldives. She heard the sound of the waves lapping against the shore and felt her body sinking into sand the color of sugar. But then she remembered where she was, and her body tensed.

She rolled out of bed and padded to the bathroom. When she returned, she made her way to the window and pulled open the heavy drapes to the brightness of the day, the sun alive on the dull, perennially brown waters of the sea. She remembered the first time she saw the Atlantic Ocean, how its pristine blue had astounded her, used as she was to the murky waters of the Arabian Sea. She remembered how Papa used to yell at the servants of the denizens in the buildings around the seaside when they flung bags of trash into the water and at the young men who urinated in the sea at Juhu or Chowpatty Beach. Poor Papa. How much he'd loved this city that, ultimately, didn't love him back.

She looked toward the Gateway of India, the beautiful yellow basalt monument, with its four turrets and arch, that sat across the street from her hotel window. How solid and rooted it was, much like her childhood in India had once appeared to be. When she had played under its arch, had she ever imagined that she would someday be staying at this iconic grand hotel, one of the most opulent hotels in the world? Hell, everyone from George Harrison to President Obama had stayed there. She and her parents had celebrated birthdays and other happy occasions at the Taj's many restaurants, of course. But staying at the Taj was a different matter.

She glanced at her watch and saw that it was 8:00 a.m. Should she phone Shannon? Or would she still be sleeping? Just then, her stomach

growled, and she realized she had not eaten since the afternoon the day before, her nervousness stronger than her appetite. She decided to get breakfast.

Half an hour later, she was at the Sea Lounge. The restaurant was fairly crowded even at this hour. The young hostess, radiant in a blue sari, approached her. “How many people in your party, ma’am?” she asked and, when Smita held up her index finger, led her to a small table by a window. Smita looked around the room, remembering its understated elegance from her childhood visits there with her parents, the hushed, impeccable service, the large windows overlooking the sea. She was pleased to see that the beauty of the restaurant remained unchanged. She caught the eye of the man at the next table, his face broiled red by the Mumbai sun. He gave her a crooked smile that she pretended not to notice. Instead, she looked out the window, blinking away the tears that filled her eyes. It was hard to be at the Sea Lounge and not think of her soft-spoken, genteel mother. Smita had been in Portugal covering a women’s conference at the time of Mummy’s death, and when Rohit, her older brother, had called to give her the news, she had yelled and sworn at him, made him a target for her wild grief. But sitting in her mother’s favorite restaurant, Smita was warmed by memories of going to the Sea Lounge on Saturday afternoons, her mother ordering her favorite chicken club sandwich while her father sipped his Kingfisher beer.

She half wished she could order a club sandwich at this hour, in memory of Mummy. Instead, she ordered coffee and a spinach omelet. The waiter set the plate down in front of her with the care and precision of a mechanic setting down an engine part. “Can I get you anything else, ma’am?” he asked in a respectful voice. He was probably just a year or two older than her, but his obsequious manner, so typical of how working-class Indians addressed the rich, made her grit her teeth. But then, a quick look around this beautiful room told her that nobody else—not the many Germans and Brits in the room, nor the paunchy Indian businessmen out

with their clients—seemed to mind the sycophantic manner of the members of the waitstaff; in fact, they seemed to expect and demand it. She had already noticed the snapping of fingers for service and the dismissive tone with which the other diners spoke to the servers.

“No, thank you,” she said. “This looks delicious.”

Her reward was a sincere, delighted smile. “Enjoy, ma’am,” he said, and edged away, silent as a ghost.

She took a sip of the coffee and then licked the froth from her upper lip. She had tasted coffee all around the world, but God, how wonderful this cup of Nescafé tasted. She knew it would be an object of derision back home—“It’s *instant* coffee, for Christ’s sake, Smita,” she could hear Jenna trill as they ate brunch at the Rose Water café in Park Slope—but what could she say? It was only in the last year of her time in India that her parents had allowed her to drink coffee, and that, too, just a few sips from her father’s cup as he sat grading papers. One taste and she was transported to their large, sunlit apartment in Colaba, a short walk from the Taj, and to Sunday mornings as her parents bickered good-naturedly about whether to play his Bach and Beethoven CDs or her mother’s *ghazals* on the living room stereo. Rohit would be in his room, still in bed as he listened to Green Day or U2 on his Walkman. Their cook, Reshma, would be making the South Indian *medhu vadas* and *upma* that was their Sunday morning breakfast treat.

Where was Reshma now? Surely, she was still living in this city of twenty million, working for another family? Smita would like to find her during this trip, but how, she hadn’t a clue. Had Mummy stayed in touch with Reshma after they’d left? She didn’t know. They had all worked so hard to forget what they’d left behind and to build a new life in America. Maybe it was just as well that she didn’t know their old cook’s whereabouts.

Reshma often used to accompany them to the Gateway, watching over Smita as she played under its arch. Every evening it seemed as if half the