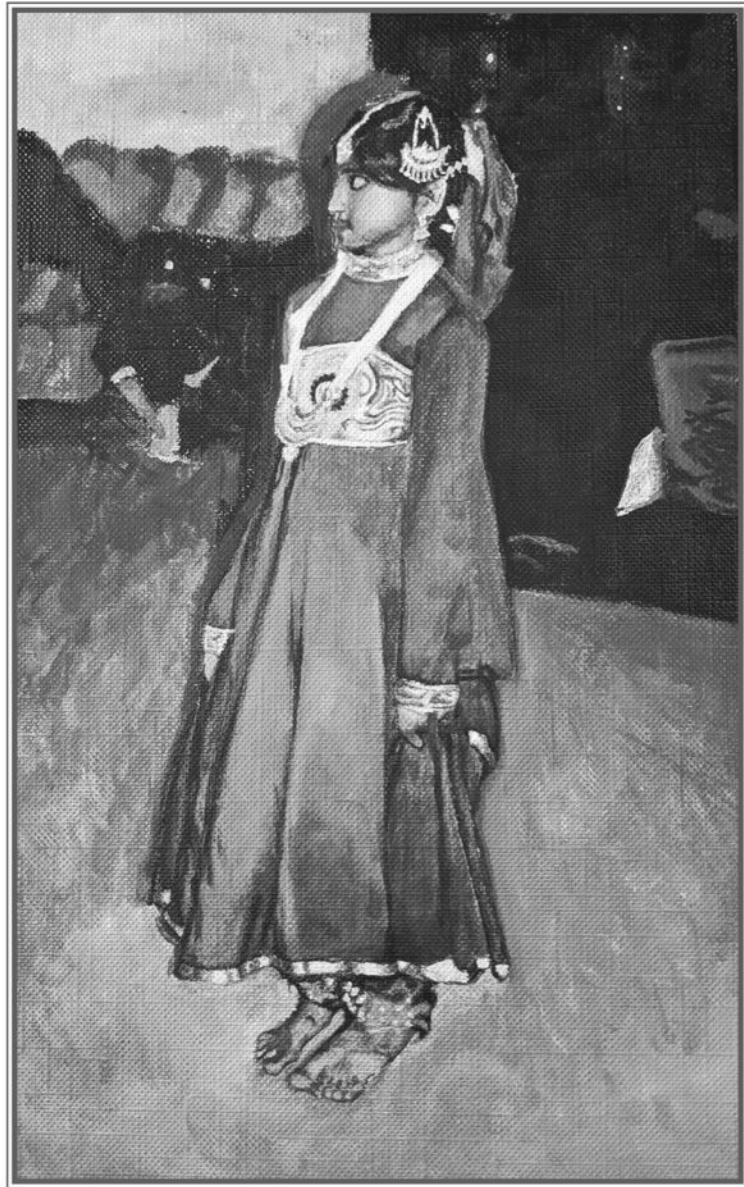


**THEY
CALLED US
EXCEPTIONAL**

— AND OTHER LIES THAT RAISED US —

PRACHI GUPTA



They Called Us Exceptional

AND OTHER LIES THAT RAISED US

Prachi Gupta

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NEW YORK

This book is a work of memoir; it is a true story based on the author's best recollections of events in her life, supported, where possible, by journal entries, emails, legal documents, and interviews. In some instances, the names and identifying characteristics of certain people have been changed in an effort to protect their privacy.

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“A story always starts before it can be told.”

—Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

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Prologue

OUR PLAN TO SURPRISE you was simple. Yush told Papa that he had to work on a project so he couldn't come home over spring break. Papa wouldn't question that, because nothing mattered more than school, and because Papa wouldn't question it, neither would you. Yush drove to my apartment, wearing his tattered Brooks sneakers and my oversize hoodie, the one he'd borrowed with no intention of ever returning. I played DJ, rummaging through a thick black DVD case, picking out CD mixes that we had burned for road trips back home. Alongside Yush, the five-hour drive home from Pittsburgh was serene. We were siblings, but more than that, we were siblings who liked each other, and more than even that: siblings who were friends.

Halfway through, we switched spots. I drove and he DJ'd. When I pulled into the driveway, Yush ran down the slope of our backyard, the grassy hill where, on snow days as teenagers, we dug "bumslides," shallow grooves that we formed with our butts and then slid down on black trash bags. He waited at the basement door, and I entered through the garage. You greeted me with a hug, distracted by the roti you had already begun heating over the stove when you heard the garage door open. I could hear the restrained sadness in your voice. This was the first time Yush wasn't home from college to meet you. I crept down to the basement and let Yush in, ushering him up the stairs while you were turned away. He crouched at the foot of the leather sofa. I led you to the living room. Yush sprang up. "Hey, Mummy!" he cheered.

"Huh? Yush? What? Yush? How!"

You nearly fell over in excitement. You ran to Yush, gently pushed him, then pinched him several times to see if he was real. Yush laughed at this, and so did I. The idea that in your surprise, in your disarmed state, it was more conceivable to you that your son was an apparition than physically present was so charming and amusing to both of us. It was why we had planned the surprise in the first place, with this adorable reaction in mind.

"Hey, Mummy," Yush said again, grinning. He wrapped his arms around you, pulling your head into his collarbone as if you were his child.

We wanted to surprise Papa, too, but you couldn't contain yourself. When he called from work, you sang, "Yush is here!" As I heard the familiar rustling of the keys behind the garage door, the sound of Papa's arrival, I rushed over to hug him. He opened a bottle of nice wine, and we inhaled your fresh sabzi, roti, and dal, the best food in the world. These moments form my happiest memories: the four of us together, laughing, eating, and talking around the dinner table.

We had so much to celebrate. Papa, a surgeon, had recently opened his own medical practice. Yush was programming robots at college, while I was leading a team of students to

victory in a consulting-case competition. You told us about the classes you were taking at a local community college. All of your classmates wanted you to be their mom, you joked. Everything in our lives had fallen into place the way that we'd always dreamed. We had perfected the delicate alchemy of culture, family, and work that resulted in happiness and success in America.

THAT WAS THE STORY about our family that you and Papa likely would have wanted me to tell. I want you to know: I wanted to tell that story, too. I wish that I could have.

But that is not where our story ends. That is where our story begins.

In order to tell that story, I have to tell this one, too.

I was thirteen; Yush was eleven. Papa drove us to a fair at what would later become our high school, a private school with a sprawling campus. I was nervous. We had recently moved to a town of cornfields in the blue hills of Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, and today I'd be meeting my new friends outside a classroom setting. It felt like a test. Would they embrace me? Or would they see me as childish if I clung to you and Yush? As I lost myself in my anxiety, Papa asked you for directions. You unfolded a large, unwieldy paper map. I snapped to attention. Bad things happened when that map came out. Papa asked you again. I heard you stumble over the directions. It began.

Papa screamed at you. *Stupid, uneducated, worthless, good-for-nothing, you can't even read a simple map? Read it again! Why are you so stupid! Learn to do it right!* You froze. This made him angrier. His rage, raw and boundless, could not be quelled once unleashed. He screamed and screamed and screamed and you fumbled, fumbled, fumbled. I remember silently pleading with you to give him the answer he wanted to hear. I was angry that you couldn't just say the right words to make him stop.

It didn't occur to me to be angry at him.

Then Papa jerked the car over to the side of the road at a busy intersection and screamed at you to get out. Cars swerved around us.

"Papa!" Yush cried. "No!"

Papa ignored him. He left you stranded and sobbing as he sped off with your children. We watched you become a dot. For a few minutes, I thought I'd never see you again. Yush and I were crying, pleading with Papa to bring you back to us.

Papa reached the school. It was just another mile down the road. He made a U-turn in the parking lot. You stood where he had left you. He pulled up to the curb and you got back in the car without a word.

For a long time, that memory stood alone, without context. I never spoke of it, not even with Yush. But I can still remember the way I froze in the back seat. I can still feel the fear of not knowing if I'd see you again. I can finally locate the anger that rushed through me that day and, with no outlet, fell somewhere deep within me when I realized that Papa wasn't taking us home. He was returning to the school. We had to go to the fair and perform as the exceptional family everyone expected us to be.

TODAY, INDIAN AMERICAN FAMILIES like ours represent an American success story. But it is easy to forget that, long before they called us “the good immigrants,” they called us “the bad immigrants.”

For much of their history, Canada and America barred Asians from entry. In 1882, America enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first significant race-based immigration ban in the country’s history. America later extended the ban to all of Asia. Canada passed a similar set of laws, and both countries curbed citizenship, land, and other rights for Asian laborers already within their borders. While America’s racial segregation was more explicit, both countries shared a commitment to building a white nation.

That changed during the Cold War, when America wanted to promote itself as a liberal democracy capable of leading the world. Politicians reversed decades of discriminatory policy, reinventing America as a melting pot. With the Hart–Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, America established a new system of selection that favored immigrants with professional skills, high educational levels, and strong family ties. Canada followed suit, allowing immigrants like Papa’s parents, my Dadaji and Dadiji, into the country.

Growing up, I didn’t see myself as Asian or even as Asian American. But I understood that, in America’s racial construct, the people whose ancestors came from those distant landmasses in the East were all lumped together. These imperfect labels evolved through movements of solidarity that made the presence of various Asian ethnic communities more visible in America. But I still struggle with what to call myself, rotating between Indian American, South Asian, desi, or, simply, brown. None seem quite right.

White America crafted a tempting story to explain the ascent of Asian Americans—“an important racial minority pulling itself up from hardship and discrimination to become a model of self-respect and achievement,” as a 1966 article in *U.S. News & World Report* described Chinese Americans. Those once seen as “Yellow Peril” and “Dusky Peril” became a “model minority,” creating a new racial category: Asians were those who could assimilate into whiteness but maintain a distinct cultural identity. In America, riches await, and with a little grit, anyone can reap them. The story tempered the racial progress of the civil-rights era, as if to tell Black people: *If those Asians can be so successful, why can’t you?* Racism was a part of America’s sordid past. The success of these new Asians proved that.

Indian Americans have since been allotted a specific prominence within the context of this story. In 2009, the year I graduated from college, an article in *Forbes* declared Indian Americans “the new model minority,” hailing families like ours as “the latest and greatest ‘model.’” Within a little more than a generation, Indian Americans have become one of the wealthiest and most highly educated immigrant groups in the country, earning a median income of more than one hundred thousand dollars. The steep ascent of Indian Americans reified the pernicious model-minority myth. They called us exceptional. We fulfilled their prophecy.

But the story of our subcommunity’s rise wasn’t one of genetics, nor can it simply be explained by work ethic, as pundits may have one believe. The true story, as described in *The Other One Percent: Indians in America*, is largely due to a rigorous but invisible selection process that often begins in India itself. In India’s highly stratified society, middle- and upper-class Indians from dominant castes typically access the best schools and jobs that feed

into opportunities in America, which favor immigrants who bring specialized skills in tech and science. The result: an American diasporic community that is roughly nine times more educated than Indians in India. These conditions enabled Indian families like ours—families that had been thrice-filtered and stratified—to prosper like few other immigrant groups have ever done in America. Even though pockets of Indian Americans still struggle, this insular group has become the poster image for America’s post-racial fantasy.

As a girl, I did not know that the story built around the upward mobility of families like ours was used to represent how far immigrants can go in this country if they are determined. I did not know that the way I understood and related to the world was through a myth carefully constructed by those in power to keep Black people locked into low-wage labor to build white wealth. I was, as historian Vijay Prashad observed in *The Karma of Brown Folk*, “unaware of how we are used as a weapon by those whom we ourselves fear and yet emulate.” When I was growing up, nothing countered the myth about who we were. Schools did not teach Asian American history. The few characters portrayed as South Asian in American media taught me how little white America cared about the realities of our lives. In the world beyond our network of Indian Americans, our family was a hypothetical. I accepted the only story available to me, which fit with what little I could see.

But if I’m being honest, I liked the story. I *needed* the story.

The story soothed me when, in preschool, a blond girl told me that I could only play house with the white girls if I was their servant. The story shielded us from the pain of realizing that Yush’s best friend in first grade wasn’t allowed to come over because his mom didn’t trust brown people. As a boy who emigrated to Canada at nine, Papa, too, had endured these slights. But now he was a man with authority. The classmates who once bullied him now deferred to him as “Doctor” or “sir.” When we had nothing to throw back at the slurs thrown at us, when we had to silently swallow the humiliation of knowing that we were inferior in our own country, Yush and I found solace in the idea that success was part of our destiny. The belief that we were exceptional protected us.

Until it didn’t. Because stories designed to uphold hierarchies protect only one group—those at the very top.

Myths imbue the ordinary and mundane with celestial meaning. But this is also what makes them so dangerous: They do not reveal truths. Rather, they obscure any part of our realities that do not conform to the fantastical narrative. The myth creates a strict role to play: Those who project the right image are more likely to be tolerated. Anyone who fails to meet the expectations set forth by white America risks being ignored, overlooked, dismissed, forgotten, abandoned. Asian Americans have the highest income disparity of any ethnic community—a statistic that speaks to both inherent inequity and the category’s broad overreach. Dadiji and Dadaji came to the West not to flee war or persecution but to fulfill personal ambition. The racism Yush and I experienced in white suburbia and corporate America, though painful, was nothing like the discrimination, violence, and exploitation experienced by more-vulnerable working-class immigrants, refugees, or undocumented people. But the model-minority myth cares not, recklessly rolling twenty million people into a static image defined by an apparent predisposition to success, stability, and familial unity.

It is not hard to see how the myth reinforces America’s existing social and racial order, then, seducing its adherents with the promise of belonging in a country where their position

remains tenuous and their acceptance is always in question. Rather than fostering solidarity over the ways in which white America disenfranchises those who look unlike them, the myth sows division among Asian ethnic communities. The myth encourages those at the top of the economic ladder to reinforce it, pushing those at the bottom further down. The privilege of the few sets constraints upon the many.

The myth erases the legacy of racial exclusion from America's collective consciousness while perpetuating racial exclusion. The myth creates cognitive dissonance and then tells us that this dissonance does not exist. The myth splits our psyches, then calls this violence peace. The myth forces our minds to forget that which our bodies cannot: that belonging is *always* conditional.

—

I HAD PLANNED TO write my story as a novel. I wanted to mask our identities but preserve the message to challenge the powerful binaries about success, identity, and culture that defined my life, without hurting you and Papa.

But after everything that has happened to us, fictionalizing our lives felt like an act of cowardice. To turn what was true into what could be turned into a parable, erasing real people who struggled with real issues. To portray the truth as hypothetical felt like another way to participate in the lie that had ruined our lives, bending toward the myth of exceptionalism, ever so slightly.

According to the story that I had used to make sense of the world, none of what was happening to you and me was possible. Worse, when I did try to talk about incongruencies at home, my experiences were rewritten to conform to the myth that everyone else used to make sense of us. My problems remained invisible, and the conclusion I drew was that something was deeply, profoundly wrong with me. It has been tiring, and a little humiliating, to always contend with this myth, to again and again compare my real life to a stereotype about who I am supposed to be and to seek to understand who I am by wrestling with the dissonance between this pervasive story and how that story makes me feel. Even I judge myself for invoking it, rolling my eyes for reducing myself to some essentialist, universalizing experience that reflects no one's actual truth.

I think often of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she shows how women's voices in colonial India were appropriated by both the British colonizers and Indian men in power during the struggle for control. Spivak's observations are about oppressed women who have been erased from history entirely, but her insights helped me find a way to articulate my own story and separate it from the myth about who I supposedly am.

The British justified colonizing India by drawing attention to the burning of sati, the esoteric Hindu practice of widow self-immolation. Although Europeans had hunted witches and burned the accused alive at the stake, the British used the ritual to cast brown men as barbarians from whom brown women needed saving. The Hindu male upper-caste elite reacted to British aggression by insisting that the women wanted to die, pushing an "Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins," as Spivak put it. All the while, "One never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness." Even when women in colonial India spoke or acted, their words and actions were reinterpreted through

the stories of those in power: An Indian woman's act of political protest was rewritten as hysteria, her sense of duty perceived as desire. In this construct, an Indian woman's feelings and expressions were never her own; she experienced her womanhood as pathology.

I realized: I had struggled to articulate my own story because, when I spoke, my words took on meanings I did not intend. My speech was trapped behind two dueling narratives that claimed to speak for me.

The problems between you and me began when I started trying to create context around things that were meant to be forgotten. Our problems began when I started searching for a way to explain everything that felt so inexplicable. Our problems began when I was expected to shrink myself, as you had been forced to do, but instead I insisted on expanding.

—

I KNOW THAT BY writing this book, I risk appearing ungrateful for the sacrifices of those who came before me, including your own. I risk turning our pain into a spectacle, further dehumanizing us in this white country.

But the risks of not saying anything are far greater. We abide by their story because we think that is how we gain acceptance in America. But we cannibalize our bodies, our spirits, and our minds to feed a hunger that never abates. We struggle under a weight that the world tells us does not exist. We serve a story that will never serve us, and I fear that the next generation will seek to do the same.

The world we live in, which demands perfection and achievement, teaches us we cannot love ourselves as we are. The myth teaches us to think greatness always resides outside us instead of within us. We must become stronger, taller, richer, thinner, smarter, prettier—and perhaps then, we think, we may be worthy of love. Yet we cannot love ourselves and we cannot love each other well so long as we are preoccupied by the desire to leave ourselves, to abandon ourselves in search of something beyond ourselves. Serving the myth teaches us how to belong but severs our ability to connect.

I used to think that memories followed a straight line, starting at one point and ending at another, held together by the backbone of the strong linear narrative of cause and effect that takes each of us from birth to death. Now I think of memories as haphazard blots of ink in a Rorschach test that we assemble along the spine of the story we are told about who we are. If given enough space, time, and support, we can arrange the memories along a story that we write for ourselves, extracting new meaning from events experienced one way and later understood as another. The memories that stand out to me now, Mummy, and the story I have woven to make sense of them, are likely different from the ones that you hold to support your understanding of our family.

In our family, we learned to love one another for how well we were able to conform to the story they wrote for us—not as who we really are. It was not until I began to articulate my own story that I realized how little I knew about yours. You and I cannot speak because we live on opposite sides of that story. We cannot speak because my truth negates yours, and yours negates mine. My story can never speak for anyone else's, including yours. But maybe by explaining to you why I abandoned the story that I was raised to love, I can make room for others to write their own stories instead.

Chapter 1

Dawn

KANIKA HAS SEVERAL MEANINGS in Sanskrit, but Papa liked “gold”—an object so striking that people traded it for food and clothing. You preferred the name Prachi. East. Sunrise. Dawn. A nod to the homeland you’d left five years before my birth. A word that, in poetry and literature, represents new beginnings. Papa suggested a creative compromise: Let me decide. If born during daylight, I was to be Prachi. If born at night, I would be Kanika.

I was born just as the sun began its climb into the sky, exercising its full power on a hot day in the middle of July. I had made my choice clear.

I wish I had asked you why you picked the name Prachi. Instead, I remember telling you when I began to hate my name. Jessica and the other white girls in my pre-kindergarten class played a game: One girl had candy in her hands, and she would open and shut her palms quickly. The girl next to her had to pick pieces of candy from her friend’s hands before she clamped them shut. I asked Jessica if I could play. She smiled and said, “Give me your hand.” Then Jessica grabbed my fingers and yanked them back toward my wrist and looked into my eyes as I yelped in pain. She laughed. The teachers ignored me when I told them that Jessica had hurt me.

I didn’t tell you what had happened. Instead, when I came home, the confusing, turbulent feelings inside me distilled to one question: “Why didn’t you name me Jessica?” I think you were taken aback, and in your surprise, you apologized. I didn’t have the words for racism yet. I only understood that if I was more like Jessica somehow, I wouldn’t have been treated that way. “I’m sorry,” you said, accepting my feelings as fact, likely unaware of the cruelty children inflict on those who look unlike them. “I liked Prachi.”

I wish I could tell you now that I love my name.

We had moved to the Land of Jessicas in New Jersey from Silicon Valley, where we’d lived among one of the biggest Indian communities in the country. In California, Papa owned a townhouse and began a lucrative career as a hardware and software engineer, a rare skill set that positioned him well for the coming tech boom. After your initial years surviving icy Canadian winters, you welcomed the warmth. You looked after me at home, and eighteen months later, to the day, Yush arrived. For most of my childhood, I thought that half birthdays were the day that one’s sibling was born.

At first, I envied the attention you gave Yush. You told me that once, while you were changing his diaper in the bathroom, you left him alone for just a moment. I snuck in and locked the door behind me. Like a hostage negotiator, you cajoled and convinced me to open the door. Yush remained unaware of the danger he was in. He was the easy baby: He sat with anyone, content in his own world. He was like you—gentle, mild-mannered, and kind. I was

the fussy, possessive, mischievous one, clawing at you for constant attention. My temperament mirrored Papa's—stubborn, opinionated, strong-willed, outspoken, and loud. Traits admired and encouraged in my father but concerning when manifested by a girl. Yet Papa was proud of me. I, in turn, thought that Papa looked the way all papas should: thick curly hair with a nascent bald spot, a strong black mustache, and a slight paunch.

Just as your amorphous future in America acquired a shape, Papa abandoned his promising engineering career and propelled us into the unknown. His decision to pursue medicine came top-down, like a CEO's directive. Dadaji tried to talk Papa out of this doctor business. "Think of what this means for your wife and little kids," Dadaji said. To him, it sounded like another one of his son's impulsive decisions. Papa was angry that his father, who had always felt distant, yet again withheld his emotional support.

Papa said that he made a long list of reasons why it made sense for him to switch careers, as if it were a purely logical decision. But this was not a simple job change; this was accumulating a mountain of debt and earning little income and relocating the family every few years to complete medical school, residency, fellowship, and specialized surgical training. It was a decision that meant you'd have to raise two young kids in an unfamiliar country with little support as your husband worked long hours. It was a decision that meant you would move too often to build a close circle of friends. You would see your parents only a handful of times again in your life because we could not afford frequent trips to India. When your parents died, we would meet your grief like strangers.

Papa was passionate about medicine and wanted to help people. But somewhere on Papa's list of reasons—the one that stands out to me now above all of the others—is this: He noted that being a doctor would earn him more respect, particularly within the Indian community. I had underestimated the power and the depth of that desire and how the force of that current swept up the rest of us.

—

PAPA MOVED TO NEW Jersey for medical school and lived in student housing. He worried that we would distract him from his studies, so he sent the three of us to live with Dadaji and Dadaji in Toronto, where he expected us to stay for the next four years. I remember the extended visit at their apartment building only in flashes: Yush and I running around a 200-meter indoor track on the top floor; entering the narrow mail room with anticipation for packages from Papa; opening a box to find the T-shirts he sent us—a peach shirt with a beach sunset cartoon graphic for me, a tiny blue shirt for Yush. I think it was during that first year that I grabbed ahold of crayons and drew all over the white walls, and then Dadaji and Dadaji had to repaint them, after which I did it again: untamed signs of what would become a lifelong passion for painting and drawing.

I was Dadaji's little Pachu, Yush her Yushie Bushie. Through her broken English, I was never sure how much she understood of what I said, but it didn't matter. She expressed her love by squeezing me so hard with her plump body that for a moment I had to hold my breath. Then she smushed her face into mine, shaking her head so vigorously that her prickly mustache hair scratched my skin and reddened my cheeks, and I closed my eyes to shield them, squealing throughout. Dadaji's apartment housed her entire world: her plants, her original artwork, and photos of family. In the photo that best captures our friendship, Yush

and I posed in front of her cascading plants. I am holding him tight, smiling at the camera and squeezing my little brother like he's my doll. He stands warm and protected as he gazes off into the distance.

Dadiji doted on us, but it was Dadaji who animated me. We exchanged love through banter. His voice was thick and knotty, like a banyan tree, later lilted by a slight slur from a stroke. He spoke in concise, pithy sentences and half sentences, weaving between the sardonic and the serious so quickly that either he or I was always on the verge of laughter. The constant pain from sciatica made him stiff, so he hugged not with his arms but with his hands, showing me how much he missed me with each light, excited pitter-patter on my back. Seeing as I was Prachi, the Goddess of the Rising Sun and Destroyer of Darkness, on gray days he'd say, "Prachi, where is the sun? Call the sun!"

"I tried, but the sun didn't answer me!" I'd say.

He'd laugh. "Yes, the darkness is not done yet."

As Papa told it, on his first visit to Toronto that year, I ran to the door and gave him a big hug. As the visit ended, I begged him not to leave. When he left, I cried. When he returned, I was again excited to see him. But as the ritual of Papa's arrival and departure happened again and again, I stopped coming to the phone to take his calls. Then I refused to meet him at the doorway altogether. "When I came back," he said, "you wouldn't even talk to me."

"Why should I?" I apparently said to him on his last visit. "You're just going to leave us again," and I walked off.

He always laughed when retelling that part. "That's when I said, 'Uh-oh, I have to watch out. This girl knows what she wants!'" Papa said that my protest convinced him to move the family to New Jersey, where he completed the next three years of medical school with us in tow.

Please remember: There was a time when my outspokenness brought us together instead of tearing us apart. There was a time when speaking my mind was received not as a threat but as an act of love.

—

IN NEW JERSEY, THE four of us settled into a small apartment by a park that hugged a river. We shared a wall with a man who you once saw put a knife to another man's throat in the hallway, around the time that our apartment building began renting to outpatients of a local psychiatric facility. Anytime the neighbor's door stood open, you rushed us through the hallway. Dadaji gave us his bulky brown Toyota Cressida, which you commanded from atop a pillow folded in half. Drivers did double takes as this behemoth car piloted by a phantom driver floated along the road.

Papa told his sister, my Buaji, that he needed some money to make ends meet. Like him, Buaji was raising children on a limited budget, taking on debt to pay for medical school. He then used her money to put me in a private school. After show-and-tell one day, when a girl brought in a photo of her house—a mansion—I came home and asked you if we were poor. We were not poor, but whatever wealth we did have was an illusion. Papa borrowed money to pay for a lifestyle that was beyond his means. He shielded Yush and me from the low-income upbringing he had as an immigrant boy in Canada, teaching us that, though we might not have wealth right now, we were to think of ourselves as rich people and learn their ways.

But it wasn't extravagance that built my happiest moments. I relished our quotidian adventures: walking to the park with you and Yush while licking candy buttons off strips of paper, sitting on the couch as you read out loud to us, drinking your spicy and sweet shikanji lemonade on hot summer days. When you put us to bed, you sang us "Chanda Mama Door Ke." Sometimes Yush and I begged you to sing these Hindi lullabies during the day because we liked to hear your voice in song. When Papa worked overnight, I crawled into bed and cuddled with you until I fell asleep. At the end of the school year, you, Yush, and I held hands and ran around the living room, the three of us screaming, "Happy happy joy joy!" like the cartoon characters Ren and Stimpy did, and then we fell on the floor, giggling. I saw you as one of us but older and wiser. When we asked you questions, you answered with consideration, never speaking down to us and rarely raising your voice.

One night, as you bent down to hug me good night, I grabbed your face and kissed you on the lips and tried to force my tongue into your mouth. I had never seen Indian people kiss—not you and Papa, and not in a Bollywood movie—but I had seen American adults kiss like this to express their overwhelming love. You jerked your head back and said, "Prachi, what are you doing!" As soon as I did, it felt wrong. But I told you why I tried to kiss you like that, and you laughed, running out of the room to tell Papa.

I am ashamed that, when I look back at my childhood now, I have trouble remembering specific memories and dialogue that we shared. For years I have not had you, Papa, or Yush to help me remember, and now the things unsaid between you and me have calcified and I do not know how to cut through to allow the memories of our joy to flow unobstructed. But I want you to know that when I think of you, I feel your warmth.

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IF OUR FAMILY WERE an organism, you were its heart, pumping blood into us all. Papa was the brain, the part that tried to stay in control, well attuned to the fears that threatened our safety. Sometimes the threat to our safety was palpable, particularly in the years after 9/11, when security stopped us at the airport and border crossings for so-called random searches. But most times Papa monitored the existential dangers that American culture posed to our delicate way of life.

You were the only one among us raised in India. In most of the homes we lived, you maintained a tiny altar with unlit agarbatti resting below images of Hindu deities. Rarely did you talk about religion, aside from casual mentions—that as a teen you got high while drinking bhang lassis on Holi, or when you told Yush and me not to leave our books on the floor because it was disrespectful to Goddess Saraswati. I wish now that I had asked you what tradition and culture meant to you.

Instead, it was Papa, not you, who defined and maintained Indian cultural values at home. One day you took me to Supercuts. I returned with a shoulder-length bob. At home, Papa screamed at you. My pride curdled into shame. After yelling at you, he turned to me. "You need my permission to cut your hair," he told me. This is how I learned that Papa had rules about what our hair was supposed to look like.

"Why?" I asked him.

"Because I know what's best for you, and you don't," he said. "You have to have a purpose for cutting your hair. You can't just do it without a reason."

I considered this. Dadiji's hair was shorter than both yours and mine, framing her face with a tight pixie cut. But Papa was a guru who dispensed wisdom that I didn't fully understand. I feared him the way white people feared the wrath of their mercurial Western God, certain that behind his methods was a larger intelligence that I could not yet ascertain. It must have been such a burden for a man to take on so much, I thought, and still have to show us how to behave in the world.

Though it was you who did everything at home for us, it was Papa who we looked up to, as if he personally made the stars and the moon glow bright. Your love was stable, which made it expected and ordinary. Papa's love was mysterious, like the weather patterns during the rainy season in the tropics. Sometimes his affection beamed over me like a hot sun, and other times I was caught in a torrential downpour, unsure if I'd ever see sunlight again. It was a love that felt exciting and curious, a love that we had to jockey and perform for—a love that we could not afford to take for granted, as we did yours. As children, we did not appreciate or understand the effect of love like this. Your love was so synonymous with safety and warmth that I didn't have words to describe its power until I mourned your absence.

Years later, as a teenager, I told Papa that I used to see him as a God. I thought he might find this surprising. I thought he might see that I was transitioning from childhood to adulthood. I thought our relationship may evolve to reflect this change. But in his response, I picked up a feeling of woundedness and a tinge of accusation. He said, "Why did you stop?"

Chapter 2

Color-Blocked

WHEN WE MOVED FROM New Jersey to Pittsburgh for the next part of Papa's medical training, Papa said he didn't want us to be deprived because of his decision to switch careers. He borrowed more money to buy a boxy ranch house with a sloping lawn and a swing set. Papa bought Yush and me bikes and walkie-talkie headsets. We rode them side by side, charting the new territory of our neighborhood like explorers. Papa always said that he wanted Yush and me to be best friends. But neither "sibling" nor "friend" accurately described our bond: Yush was my birthright, the person who anchored me to earth, and the boy who felt like home when no other place did.

I invented most of the games we played, and Yush followed along. One of my favorite games was time travelers. We combined his Legos and my pink and purple Tyco Dreambuilders set and created little rooms, each of which represented a different time period: a medieval room, a robot room, a caveman room. I liked the tiny hearts and curved door trimmings from my set, but I was annoyed that my blocks were not as practical for building large structures, like Yush's blocks were. Our blocks didn't fit together well. I wanted one large set, filled with the best parts of all our blocks, so that we could build better rooms for our time travelers. It felt like the block-makers were conspiring against Yush and me, unnecessarily complicating our game just because he was a boy and I was a girl. As children, those differences didn't exist between us. But the world was already putting us into boxes, enforcing rules for each of us based on our biological sex, slowly teaching us who we could and could not be.

We created a kind of code, a slang that made sense between us but to no one else. I decided that names were arbitrary, and Yush agreed, so we made up new names for each other. I called him Blunt Man Ricky because I thought that was funny when I was ten. He named me Ingrid. We watched some movie where an American boy said, "What guy? Oh, *that* guy!" with a strong inflection on "guy," like he was saying "ghoi," which made no sense to us. Yush and I found this hysterical. "What ghoi? Oh, that ghoi!" We fell over ourselves laughing the first time we heard it, and then we continued to laugh and we knew it made no sense, and that just made it funnier. Even when we were teens, sometimes I'd look at Yush and say, "What ghoi?" and he'd laugh and say, "Oh, that ghoi!" finishing the line. It meant absolutely nothing and yet, between us, it meant everything.

YUSH AND I WERE short and wispy thin, like blades of cut grass. Although we inherited our stature from you at four foot eleven and Papa at five four, Papa tried to plump us up to fit in better with American kids. He often forced us to drink Ensure between meals, treating our height and thinness as a deficiency to be urgently corrected. The first time I sipped Ensure, I almost threw up. The thick gloopy liquid tasted like syrup mixed with the sludge from the bottom of a trash can. I quieted my gag reflex because I knew that if I didn't drink without complaining or gagging, Papa would make me drink even more. Behind his back, I asked you to not get the strawberry flavor. If Papa found out I was being picky about the flavors, he might slap me, or he might scream at you, and then he'd force me to drink only the bad-tasting ones until I stopped complaining and pretended to like them. I didn't want to be so small forever, but I felt ashamed that I couldn't just be bigger like Papa wanted me to be.

Yush and I were different from the other kids at school, not only because they were chalk-white but because Papa studied medicine and their parents worked as office assistants and teachers. Some of the dads in our neighborhood were in jail or were alcoholics, or both. I believed that such hardship could not befall our family because, unlike white families, South Asian families prioritized closeness and success. We stayed so close and performed so well because we followed certain rules—like no divorcing and no dating—that kept us bonded as one impenetrable unit. I thought white people didn't observe these rules because they didn't like one another as much as we liked one another. I thought they were just as mean to others as they were to Yush and me, so it made sense that they didn't care about their families the way we cared about ours. I knew that one day I'd stay at home like you did to raise my kids, and I wanted Papa to arrange my marriage like he and you had done, because I wanted to raise a family that was as exceptional as ours.

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ONE DAY I ARRIVED at recess a few minutes late. My friends stood in a line, waiting for me. That made me feel special, like they didn't want to play without me. I rushed over and heard one of them say, "There she is! Run! Don't let her get us!" They squealed and ran away from me as fast and as far as they could. I didn't chase them. I stopped and I watched. I turned back and sat by myself in the empty classroom. Later, one of them told me it was just a game, that they didn't mean anything by it. But it was a game they didn't invite me to play. They had decided among themselves that excluding me was fun. After that, I knew they weren't really my friends, but I didn't understand why or what I'd done. From then on, I spent many recesses in the classroom with Miss Hagerty, who liked me.

Miss Hagerty walked like a runway model, with one foot directly in front of the other so that her hips swayed when she clacked down the linoleum hallway in her high heels. She had a big, blond perm that made her head look like a makeup puff and wore colorful business suits to school that reminded me of an airline stewardess. She taught us how to write in cursive, which felt like art to me. I spent a long time perfecting the slopes of my S's and connecting the letters. I won a John Hancock award for my handwriting. I didn't know awards for handwriting existed, but I knew that adults, particularly Papa, lit up when I got an award. I didn't know how to get the girls in my class to see me as special or good, but I learned that winning over adults was easy. I wanted to feel special, always. During elementary school, I was voted to student council nearly every year, and my art and short