



TRANSLATED BY THE AUTHOR WITH TODD PORTNOWITZ

ROMAN STORIES

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

JHUMPA LAHIRI

AUTHOR OF *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*

ALSO BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

Fiction

Whereabouts

The Lowland

Unaccustomed Earth

The Namesake

Interpreter of Maladies

Nonfiction

Translating Myself and Others

The Clothing of Books

In Other Words

Roman Stories

JHUMPA LAHIRI



Translated from the Italian by the author
with Todd Portnowitz

ALFRED A. KNOPF

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*For Noor, Octavio, and Alberto:
ten years later*

Crescebat interim urbs munitionibus alia atque alia appetendo loca,
cum in spem magis futurae multitudinis quam ad id quod tum
hominum erat munirent.

Meanwhile the city was growing this way and that, building walls and
striving to gain new ground; they built walls hoping for a population
that would be greater, one day, than the people there at the time.

—Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, I, 8

nondum tamen in via Iani
ora patentis erant, neque iter praecluserat unda

But the gaping gates of Janus were still unblocked; the current hadn't
barred the way.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIV, 789–90

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Part I



The Boundary

· 1 ·

EVERY SATURDAY, a new family comes to stay. Some arrive early in the morning, from afar, ready to begin their vacation. Others don't turn up until sunset, in bad moods, maybe having lost their way. It's easy to get lost in these hills; the roads are poorly signposted.

Today, after they introduce themselves, I show them around. My mother used to do the welcoming. But she's spending the summer in a nearby town, helping out an elderly gentleman who's also on vacation, so I have to do it.

As usual, there are four of them: mother, father, two daughters. They follow me, wide-eyed, happy to stretch their legs.

We stop for a moment on the shaded patio that looks out over the lawn, under a thatched roof that filters the light. There are two armchairs and a sofa, covered with white fabric, lounge chairs for sunbathing, and a wooden table big enough for ten people.

I open the sliding glass door and show them inside: the cozy living room with two comfortable sofas in front of the fireplace, the well-stocked kitchen, two bedrooms.

While the father unloads the car and the girls, who are probably around seven and nine, disappear into their room, shutting the door behind them, I tell the mother where to find extra towels, and woolen blankets, in case it gets cold at night.

I show her where the mouse poison is hidden. Kill the flies before going to bed, I suggest, otherwise they start buzzing at dawn and become a nuisance. I explain how to get to the supermarket, how to use the washing machine behind the house, and where to hang the laundry, just on the other side of my father's garden.

Guests are free to pick lettuce and tomatoes, I add. There were lots of tomatoes this year, but most of them spoiled in the July rain.

· 2 ·

I pretend not to watch them, to be discreet. I do the housework and water the garden, but I can't help noticing how happy and excited they are. I hear the girls' voices as they run across the lawn, I learn their names. Since the guests usually leave the sliding door open, I overhear what the parents say to each other as they settle into the house, as they unpack their suitcases and decide what to have for lunch.

The cottage where my family lives is a few yards away, behind a tall hedge that forms a kind of screen. For years, our house was just a room that served as both kitchen and bedroom for the three of us. Then, two years ago, when I turned thirteen, my mother started working for the elderly gentleman, and, after saving up enough money, my parents asked the man who owns the property if they could add a small room for me—where stubby lizards slip through cracks between the wall and ceiling.

My father is the caretaker. He looks after the big house, chops wood, works the fields and the vineyard. He looks after the horses, which the owner loves with a passion.

The owner lives abroad, but he's not a foreigner like us. He comes every now and then, on his own. He doesn't have a family. During the days he goes horseback riding; in the evenings he reads in front of the fireplace. Then he goes away again.

Not many people rent his house other than in summer. The winters here are biting, and in the spring there's lots of rain. In the mornings, from September to June, my father drives me to school, where I feel out of place. I don't mix easily with others; I don't look like anyone else.

The girls in this family resemble each other. You can tell right away that they're sisters. They've already put on matching bathing suits to go to the beach later on. The beach is about fifteen miles from here. The mother looks like a girl, too. She's small and thin, she wears her long hair loose. Her

shoulders are delicate. She walks barefoot on the grass even though the father tells her not to, saying (and he's right) that there might be porcupines, hornets, snakes.

· 3 ·

After just a few hours, it's as if they'd always lived here. The things they've brought for a week in the country are scattered all over the place: books, magazines, a laptop computer, dolls, hoodies, colored pencils, pads of paper, flip-flops, sunscreen. At lunch I hear forks striking plates. I notice each time one of them sets a glass down on the table. I detect the calm thread of their conversation, the sound and smell of the coffeepot, smoke from a cigarette.

After lunch, the father asks one of the girls to bring him his glasses. For a long time, he studies a road map. He lists small towns to visit nearby, archaeological sites, ruins. The mother isn't interested. She says this is her only week of the year without appointments and obligations.

Later on, the father heads off to the sea with his daughters. He asks me, as they're leaving, how long it takes to get there, which of the beaches is nicest. He asks me about the weather forecast for the week, and I tell him there's a heat wave coming.

The mother stays home. She's put on her bathing suit anyway, to get some sun.

She stretches out on one of the lounge chairs. I assume she's going to take a nap, but when I go to hang up the wash I see her writing something. She writes by hand, in a little notebook resting on her thighs.

Now and then she lifts her head and looks intently at the landscape that surrounds us. She stares at the various greens of the lawn, the hills, the woods in the distance. The glaring blue of the sky, the yellow hay. The bleached fence, and the low stone wall that marks the property line. She looks at all the things I look at every day. But I wonder what else she sees in them.

· 4 ·

When the sun starts to set, they put on sweaters and long pants to shield themselves from mosquitoes. The father and the girls have wet hair from the hot showers they took after the beach.

The girls tell their mother about their trip: the burning sand, the slightly murky water, the gentle, disappointing waves. The whole family goes for a short walk. They go to look at the horses, the donkeys, a wild boar kept in a pen behind the stables. They go to see the flock of sheep that passes in front of the house every day around this time, that blocks the cars on the dusty road for a few minutes.

The father keeps taking pictures with his cell phone. He shows the girls the small plum trees, the fig trees, the olives. He says fruit picked straight from the tree has a different flavor. It tastes like the sun, the countryside.

The parents open a bottle of wine on the patio. They try some cheese, the local honey. They admire the blazing landscape and marvel at the huge, glowing clouds, the color of pomegranates in October.

Evening falls. They hear frogs, crickets, rustling wind. In spite of the breeze, they decide to eat outside, to take advantage of the lingering light.

My father and I eat inside, in silence. He doesn't look up when he eats. With my mother away, there's no conversation during dinner. She's the one who talks at meals.

My mother can't stand this place, this town. Like my father, she comes from much farther away than anyone who vacations here. She hates living out in the country, in the middle of nowhere. She says the people around here aren't nice, that they're closed off.

I don't miss her complaining. I don't like listening to her, even though she's probably right. Sometimes, when she complains too much, my father sleeps in the car instead of in bed with her.

After dinner, the girls wander around the lawn chasing fireflies. They play with their flashlights. The parents sit on the patio contemplating the starry sky, the intense darkness.

The mother sips hot water with lemon, the father a little grappa. They say that being here is all they need, that even the air is different, that it cleanses. How lovely, they say, being together like this, away from everyone.

First thing in the morning, I go to the chicken coop to gather eggs. They're warm and pale, filthy. I put a few in a bowl and bring them to the guests for breakfast. Normally there's no one around and I just leave them on the patio table. But then I notice, through the sliding door, that the girls are already awake. I see bags of cookies on the sofa, crumbs, a cereal box overturned on the coffee table.

The girls are trying to swat the flies that buzz around the house in the morning. The older one is holding the flyswatter. The little sister, frustrated, complains that she's still waiting for her turn. She says she wants to swat them, too.

I put down the eggs and go back to our house. Then I knock on their door and lend the girls our flyswatter; that way they're both happy. I don't remind them that it's better to kill the flies before you go to bed. It's clear that they're having fun while the parents, in spite of the annoying flies and the girls' racket, continue sleeping.

After two days, a predictable routine sets in. In the late morning, the father goes to the café in town, to buy milk and the paper, to get a second coffee. He pops over to the supermarket if need be. When he gets back, he goes running in the hills despite the humidity. One morning he comes home rattled, after a sheepdog blocked the path and growled at him, even though nothing happened in the end.

The mother does what I do: she sweeps the floor, cooks, washes dishes. At least once a day she hangs up the laundry. Our clothes mingle and dry on the same line. She tells her husband, clasping the laundry basket in her arms, how happy this makes her. Since they live in the city, in a crowded apartment, she can never hang their clothes out in the open like this.

After lunch, the father takes the girls to the beach and the mother stays home alone. She stretches out and smokes a cigarette, writing in her notebook

with an air of concentration.

One day, back from the beach, the girls run around for hours trying to catch the crickets that leap through the grass. They snatch them up. They put a few in a jar with little pieces of tomato stolen from their parents' salads. They turn them into pets, even give them names. The next day the crickets die, suffocated in the jar, and the girls cry. They bury them under one of the plum trees and put some wildflowers on top.

Another day, the father discovers that one of the flip-flops he'd left outside is missing. I tell him a fox probably took it; there's been one prowling around. I tell my father, who knows the habits and hideouts of all the animals around here, and he manages to find the shoe, along with a ball and a shopping bag abandoned by the previous family.

I realize how much the guests like this rural, unchanging landscape, how much they appreciate every detail, how these things help them think, rest, dream. When the girls pick blackberries, staining the pretty dresses they're wearing, the mother doesn't get mad at them. Instead she laughs. She asks the father to take a picture, and then throws the dresses in the wash.

At the same time I wonder what they know about the loneliness here. About the identical days in our dilapidated cottage. The nights when the wind blows so hard the earth seems to shake, or when the sound of rain keeps me awake. The months we live alone among the hills, the horses, the insects, the birds that pass over the fields. What would they make of the harsh quiet that reigns here all winter?

. 7 .

On the last night, other cars arrive. Friends of the parents, invited along with their children, who run around the meadow. A couple of them report that the traffic was light coming in from the city. The adults take a look around the house, walk in the garden at sunset. The table on the patio is already set.

I hear everything as they eat. The laughter and chatter are louder tonight. The family relates all their mishaps in the country: the tomato-eating crickets and their funeral under the plum tree, the sheepdog, the fox that carried off

the flip-flop. The mother says that being in touch with nature like this has been good for the girls.

At a certain point a cake comes out, with candles, and I realize it's the father's birthday. He's turning forty-five. Everyone sings and they slice the cake.

My father and I finish up some overripe grapes. I'm about to clear the table when I hear a knock at the door. I see the girls, hesitant, out of breath. They give me a plate with two slices of cake on it: one for me and one for my father. They dash off before I can say thanks.

We eat the cake while the guests talk about politics, trips, life in the city. Someone asks the mother where she got the cake, and she tells them that one of the guests picked it up; the guest chimes in with the name of the bakery, the piazza it's in.

My father lays down his fork and lowers his head. His eyes are agitated when he looks at me. He gets up abruptly and then steps out to smoke a cigarette, unobserved.

· 8 ·

We used to live in the city, too. My father sold flowers in that very piazza. My mother used to help.

They spent their days next to each other in a small but pleasant stand, arranging bouquets that people took home to decorate their tables and terraces. New to this country, they learned the names of the flowers: rose, sunflower, carnation, daisy. They kept them, their stems submerged, in a row of buckets.

One night three men showed up. My father was alone; my mother, pregnant with me at the time, was at home, because he didn't want her to work at night. It was late. The other stores around the piazza were closed, and my father was about to lower his metal shutters.

One of the men asked him to open up again, saying that he was on his way to see his girlfriend. He wanted a nice bouquet. My father agreed that he'd make him one, even though the men were rude, a little drunk.

When my father held up the bouquet the man said that it was skimpy and asked him to make it bigger. My father added more flowers, an excessive number, until the man was satisfied. He wrapped paper around the bouquet, then he bound it up with colored ribbon, tying a bow. He told him the price.

The man pulled some money out of his wallet. It wasn't enough. And when my father refused to hand over the bouquet the man told him that he was an idiot, that he didn't even know how to put together a nice bouquet for a beautiful girl. Then, together with the others, he started beating my father until his mouth filled with blood, until his front teeth were shattered.

My father yelled, but at that hour no one heard. They said, Go back to wherever you came from. They took the bouquet and left him like that on the ground.

My father went to the emergency room. He couldn't eat solid foods for a year. After I was born, when he saw me for the first time, he couldn't say a word.

Ever since, he's struggled to speak. He garbles his words, as if he were an old man. He's ashamed to smile, because of his missing teeth. My mother and I understand him, but others don't. They think, since he's a foreigner, that he doesn't speak the language. Sometimes they even think he's mute.

When the pears and red apples that grow in the garden are ripe, we cut them into thin slices, almost transparent, so that he can savor them.

One of his compatriots told him about this job, in this secluded place. He wasn't familiar with the countryside: he'd always lived in cities.

He can live and work here without opening his mouth. He's not afraid of being attacked. He prefers to live among the animals, cultivating the land. He's gotten used to this untamed place that protects him.

When he talks to me, as he drives me to school, he always says the same thing: that he couldn't make anything of his life. All he wants me to do is study and finish school, go to college, and then go far away from them.

The next day, late in the morning, the father starts to load the car. I see four people, tanned, even more closely knit. They don't want to leave. At breakfast they say that they'd like to come back next year. Nearly all the guests say the same thing when they go. A few faithfully return, but for most of them once is enough.

Before heading out, the mother shows me the stuff in the fridge that they don't want to take back to the city. She tells me that she's grown quite fond of this house, that she already misses it. Maybe, when she's feeling stressed, or overwhelmed by work, she'll think of this place: the clean air, the hills, the clouds blazing at sunset.

I wish the family safe travels and say goodbye. I stand there waiting until the car's out of sight. Then I start to prepare the house for the new family that's scheduled to arrive. I make the beds. I tidy the room the girls turned upside down. I sweep the flies they swatted.

They've forgotten, or left on purpose, a few things they don't need, things I hold on to. Pictures the girls drew, shells they picked up at the beach, the last drops of a scented shower gel. Shopping lists in the faint, small script that the mother used, on other sheets of paper, to write all about us.

The Reentry

ON A SUNNY DAY in September, two women meet on the Ponte Sisto and embrace. It's been a year since they've seen each other. They step over the low rusty chain that blocks traffic on the bridge. Lovers affix padlocks to the links; distracted pedestrians tend to trip over them. It's past two in the afternoon, and both women are hungry.

One of them, raised close to the bridge, is in mourning. Her father died a few weeks before, and she's also grieving for her dying marriage. She's a thin, short woman with blond hair pulled back, big green eyes, and an earlobe studded with diamonds and small gold hoops.

The other woman is a university professor. She has darker hair and darker skin and she's taller than her friend. At the moment, she's also happier. She's just celebrated her birthday at the sea, so she's tanned and feels rejuvenated. She's been meaning to meet up with her friend who's going through a hard time, who's facing a separation and the loss of her father.

"When did you get back?" she asks, linking elbows with the woman in mourning as they walk.

"About ten days ago. What about you?"

"Day before yesterday."

The two women, who both have children around the same age, met one another some years ago in the playground at Piazza San Cosimato. When they both lived in Rome they would often have lunch together in a trattoria and talk for hours.

But for the past two years the woman in mourning, the one who's returned for her father's funeral, has been living in another city, in a country not far from Italy. She went to live there with her two children but without her husband, who had to stay on in Rome for his job, though back then, things

between them were still relatively smooth. The woman was forty-six and wanted a change of scenery; she was tired of the run-down city she'd been born in.

The professor, too, has recently returned to Rome, not to face a loss but to enjoy a year on sabbatical with her family. She knows the city well and loves it. She visits often to conduct research or to attend conferences, either on her own or with her family, at times for lengthy stays. Ancient Roman history is her field.

Today the woman in mourning has booked a table at a trattoria she's particularly fond of. It's one of the few, she says, that's held out—stubbornly and marvelously—against the flow of time. "It'll be a chance to show you something new," she says. "Even though my city is your city by now."

In order to reach the trattoria they walk past the elegant palazzo where the parents of the woman in mourning lived for the greater part of the year. "It's so strange to think that he'll never go back there," she says now, referring to her father. He was a journalist who spoke five languages and traveled the world. In the summers her parents would decamp to the mountains, where it was cooler. Her father, who was over ninety, had died in the same bed in the mountains in which he'd been born. The city house was always empty in the summers, but now it held a different sort of emptiness.

The woman in mourning tells her friend that, earlier in the day, she'd gone in quickly to fetch a few things and that she'd been surrounded, as a result, by paintings, books, and other objects belonging to her father. Needless to say, it had shaken her.

"Were you with him when he passed away?" the professor asks.

"I was on the plane, I didn't make it in time."

The trattoria is on a street without a sidewalk in a warren-like neighborhood that's always crowded. It's the same part of the city where, years ago, the professor had rented an apartment for the summer, on the very same street where the woman in mourning had grown up. The two women liked to remark on this coincidence: the fact that they'd both lived on the same street in different stages of life, under different circumstances.