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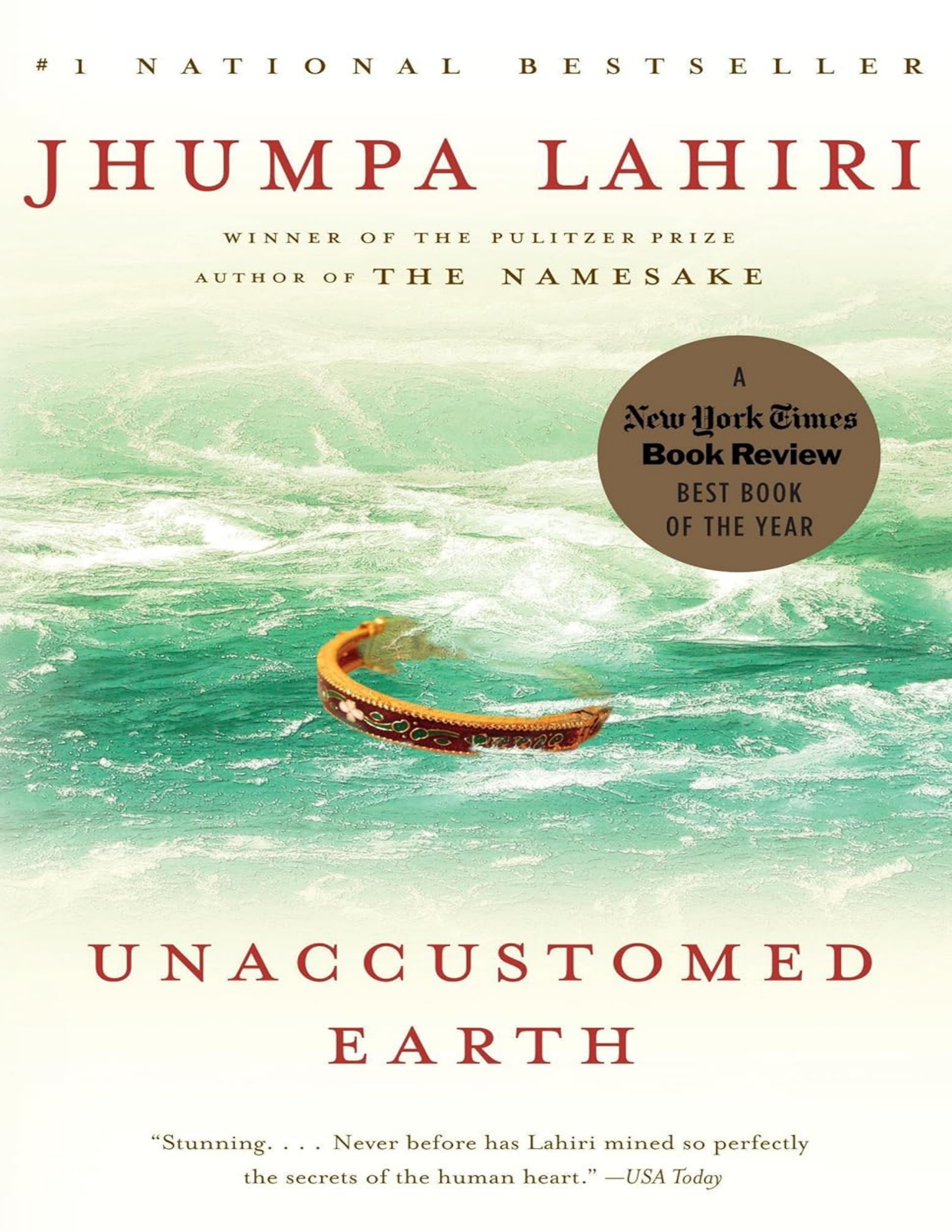

UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

"Stunning. . . . Never before has Lahiri mined so perfectly the secrets of the human heart." —*USA Today*

Unaccustomed Earth

Jhumpa Lahiri

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For Octavio, for Noor

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

—NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE,
"The Custom-House"

PART ONE

Unaccustomed Earth

After her mother's death, Ruma's father retired from the pharmaceutical company where he had worked for many decades and began traveling in Europe, a continent he'd never seen. In the past year he had visited France, Holland, and most recently Italy. They were package tours, traveling in the company of strangers, riding by bus through the countryside, each meal and museum and hotel prearranged. He was gone for two, three, sometimes four weeks at a time. When he was away Ruma did not hear from him. Each time, she kept the printout of his flight information behind a magnet on the door of the refrigerator, and on the days he was scheduled to fly she watched the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world.

Occasionally a postcard would arrive in Seattle, where Ruma and Adam and their son Akash lived. The postcards showed the facades of churches, stone fountains, crowded piazzas, terra-cotta rooftops mellowed by late afternoon sun. Nearly fifteen years had passed since Ruma's only European adventure, a month-long EuroRail holiday she'd taken with two girlfriends after college, with money saved up from her salary as a paralegal. She'd slept in shabby pensions, practicing a frugality that was foreign to her at this stage of her life, buying nothing but variations of the same postcards her father sent now. Her father wrote succinct, impersonal accounts of the things he had seen and done: "Yesterday the Uffizi Gallery. Today a walk to the other side of the Arno. A trip to Siena scheduled tomorrow." Occasionally there was a sentence about the weather. But there was never a sense of her father's presence in those places. Ruma was reminded of the telegrams her parents used to send to their relatives long ago, after visiting Calcutta and safely arriving back in Pennsylvania.

The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had received from her father. In her thirty-eight years he'd never had any reason to write to her. It was a one-sided correspondence; his trips were brief enough so that there was no time for Ruma to write back, and besides, he was not in a position to receive mail on his end. Her father's penmanship was small, precise, slightly feminine; her mother's had been a jumble of capital and lowercase, as though she'd learned to make only one version of each letter. The cards were addressed to Ruma; her father never included Adam's name, or mentioned Akash. It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection between them. "Be happy, love Baba," he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that.

In August her father would be going away again, to Prague. But first he was coming to spend a week with Ruma and see the house she and Adam had bought on the Eastside of Seattle. They'd moved from Brooklyn in the spring, for Adam's job. It was her father who suggested the visit, calling Ruma as she was making dinner in her new kitchen, surprising her. After her mother's death it was Ruma who assumed the duty of speaking to her father every evening, asking how his day had gone. The calls were less frequent now, normally once a week on Sunday afternoons. "You're always welcome here, Baba," she'd told her father on the phone. "You know you don't have to ask." Her mother would not have asked. "We're coming to see you in July," she would have informed Ruma, the plane tickets already in hand. There had been a time in her life when such presumptuousness would have angered Ruma. She missed it now.

Adam would be away that week, on another business trip. He worked for a hedge fund and since the move had yet to spend two consecutive weeks at home. Tagging along with him wasn't an option. He never went anywhere interesting—usually towns in the Northwest or Canada where there was nothing special for her and Akash to do. In a few months, Adam assured her, the trips would diminish. He hated stranding Ruma with Akash so often, he said, especially now that she was pregnant again. He encouraged her to hire a babysitter, even a live-in if that would be helpful. But Ruma knew no one in

Seattle, and the prospect of finding someone to care for her child in a strange place seemed more daunting than looking after him on her own. It was just a matter of getting through the summer—in September, Akash would start at a preschool. Besides, Ruma wasn't working and couldn't justify paying for something she now had the freedom to do.

In New York, after Akash was born, she'd negotiated a part-time schedule at her law firm, spending Thursdays and Fridays at home in Park Slope, and this had seemed like the perfect balance. The firm had been tolerant at first, but it had not been so easy, dealing with her mother's death just as an important case was about to go to trial. She had died on the operating table, of heart failure; anesthesia for routine gallstone surgery had triggered anaphylactic shock.

After the two weeks Ruma received for bereavement, she couldn't face going back. Overseeing her clients' futures, preparing their wills and refinancing their mortgages, felt ridiculous to her, and all she wanted was to stay home with Akash, not just Thursdays and Fridays but every day. And then, miraculously, Adam's new job came through, with a salary generous enough for her to give notice. It was the house that was her work now: leafing through the piles of catalogues that came in the mail, marking them with Post-its, ordering sheets covered with dragons for Akash's room.

"Perfect," Adam said, when Ruma told him about her father's visit. "He'll be able to help you out while I'm gone." But Ruma disagreed. It was her mother who would have been the helpful one, taking over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes, throwing loads of laundry into the machine. Ruma had never spent a week alone with her father. When her parents visited her in Brooklyn, after Akash was born, her father claimed an armchair in the living room, quietly combing through the *Times,* occasionally tucking a finger under the baby's chin but behaving as if he were waiting for the time to pass.

Her father lived alone now, made his own meals. She could not picture his surroundings when they spoke on the phone. He'd moved into a one-bedroom condominium in a part of Pennsylvania Ruma did not know well.

He had pared down his possessions and sold the house where Ruma and her younger brother Romi had spent their childhood, informing them only after he and the buyer went into contract. It hadn't made a difference to Romi, who'd been living in New Zealand for the past two years, working on the crew of a German documentary filmmaker. Ruma knew that the house, with the rooms her mother had decorated and the bed in which she liked to sit up doing crossword puzzles and the stove on which she'd cooked, was too big for her father now. Still, the news had been shocking, wiping out her mother's presence just as the surgeon had.

She knew her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty; in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her. Her father had never mentioned the possibility, and after her mother's death it hadn't been feasible; their old apartment was too small. But in Seattle there were rooms to spare, rooms that stood empty and without purpose.

Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January, conceived just before the move. She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse. It was a dilemma Adam didn't understand. Whenever she brought up the issue, he pointed out the obvious, that she already had a small child to care for, another on the way. He reminded her that her father was in good health for his age, content where he was. But he didn't object to the idea of her father living with them. His willingness was meant kindly, generously, an example of why she loved Adam, and yet it worried her. Did it not make a difference to him? She knew he was trying to help, but at the same time she sensed that his patience was wearing thin. By allowing her to leave her job, splurging on a beautiful house, agreeing to having a second baby, Adam was doing everything in his

power to make Ruma happy. But nothing was making her happy; recently, in the course of conversation, he'd pointed that out, too.

How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check. He had never visited the Pacific Northwest, never appreciated the staggering breadth of his adopted land. He had flown across America only once before, the time his wife booked tickets to Calcutta on Royal Thai Airlines, via Los Angeles, rather than traveling east as they normally did. That journey was endless, four seats, he still remembered, among the smokers at the very back of the plane. None of them had the energy to visit any sights in Bangkok during their layover, sleeping instead in the hotel provided by the airline. His wife, who had been most excited to see the Floating Market, slept even through dinner, for he remembered a meal in the hotel with only Romi and Ruma, in a solarium overlooking a garden, tasting the spiciest food he'd ever had in his life as mosquitoes swarmed angrily behind his children's faces. No matter how they went, those trips to India were always epic, and he still recalled the anxiety they provoked in him, having to pack so much luggage and getting it all to the airport, keeping documents in order and ferrying his family safely so many thousands of miles. But his wife had lived for these journeys, and until both his parents died, a part of him lived for them, too. And so they'd gone in spite of the expense, in spite of the sadness and shame he felt each time he returned to Calcutta, in spite of the fact that the older his children grew, the less they wanted to go.

He stared out the window at a shelf of clouds that was like miles and miles of densely packed snow one could walk across. The sight filled him with peace; this was his life now, the ability to do as he pleased, the responsibility of his family absent just as all else was absent from the unmolested vision of the clouds. Those returns to India had been a fact of life for him, and for all their Indian friends in America. Mrs. Bagchi was an exception. She had married a boy she'd loved since girlhood, but after two years of marriage he

was killed in a scooter accident. At twenty-six she moved to America, knowing that otherwise her parents would try to marry her off again. She lived on Long Island, an anomaly, an Indian woman alone. She had completed her doctorate in statistics and taught since the seventies at Stonybrook University, and in over thirty years she had gone back to Calcutta only to attend her parents' funerals. Meenakshi was her name, and though he used it now when he addressed her, in his thoughts he continued to think of her as Mrs. Bagchi.

Being the only two Bengalis in the tour group, naturally they'd struck up a conversation. They started eating together, sitting next to one another on the bus. Because of their common appearance and language, people mistook them for husband and wife. Initially there was nothing romantic; neither of them had been interested in anything like that. He enjoyed Mrs. Bagchi's company, knowing that at the end of a few weeks she would board a separate plane and disappear. But after Italy he'd begun thinking of her, looking forward to receiving her e-mails, checking his computer five or six times a day. He searched MapQuest for the town she lived in to see how long it would take him to drive to her home, though they had agreed, for the time being, to see each other only when they were abroad. Part of the route was familiar to him, the same path that he and his wife used to take to visit Ruma in Brooklyn.

He would soon see Mrs. Bagchi again, in Prague; this time, they'd agreed, they would share a room, and they were thinking, in the winter, of taking a cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. She was adamant about not marrying, about never sharing her home with another man, conditions which made the prospect of her companionship all the more appealing. He closed his eyes and thought of her face, which was still full, though he guessed she was probably almost sixty, only five or six years younger than his wife. She wore Western clothing, cardigans and black pull-on slacks and styled her thick dark hair in a bun. It was her voice that appealed to him most, well modulated, her words always measured, as if there were only a limited supply of things she was willing to say on any given day. Perhaps, because

she expected so little, he was generous with her, attentive in a way he'd never been in his marriage. How shy he'd felt, asking Mrs. Bagchi for the first time in Amsterdam, after they had a tour of the Anne Frank House, to pose for a photograph in front of a canal.

Ruma had offered to drive to the airport and greet her father, but he insisted on renting a car and following directions off the Internet. When she heard the sound of tires on the gravel drive, she started picking up the toys that were scattered across the living-room floor, putting away the plastic animals and closing the books that Akash insisted on leaving open to his favorite pages. "Turn off the television, Peanut," she called out to him now. "Don't sit so close to the screen. Come, Dadu's here."

Akash was lying motionless on the floor, on his stomach, his chin cupped in his hands. He was a perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam, his curly hair they'd never cut and his skin a warm gold, the faint hair on his legs gold as well, reminding her of a little lion. Even his face, with its slanted, narrow green eyes, had a faintly leonine aspect. He was only three, but sometimes she already felt the resistance, the profound barrier she assumed would set in with adolescence. After the move he'd grown difficult. It was a combination, she knew, of the new surroundings, and her lack of energy, and Adam being away so much. There were times Akash would throw himself without warning on the ground, the body she'd nurtured inside of her utterly alien, hostile. Either that or he was clingy, demanding that she hold him while she was trying to make a meal.

Though she'd mentioned nothing about the baby, she was convinced that he'd figured it out already, that already he felt replaced. She'd changed, too—she was less patient, quicker to say no instead of reasoning with him. She hadn't been prepared for how much work it was, how isolating it could be. There were mornings she wished she could simply get dressed and walk out the door, like Adam. She didn't understand how her mother had done it. Growing up, her mother's example—moving to a foreign place for the sake of

marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household—had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now.

She walked across the living room, turned off the television. "Answer me when I talk to you, Akash. Get up, let's go."

The sight of her father's rental car, a compact maroon sedan, upset her, freshly confirming the fact that she lived on a separate coast thousands of miles from where she grew up, a place where her parents knew no one, where neither of her parents, until today, had set foot. The connections her family had formed to America, her parents' circle of Bengali friends in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, her father's company, the schools Ruma and Romi had gone through, did not exist here. It was seven months since she'd last seen her father. In the process of selling and packing up their old apartment, moving and settling into the new house, and her father's various trips, over half a year had gone by.

Akash got up and trailed behind her, and together they watched as her father opened the trunk of the car, lifting out a small black suitcase with wheels. He was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and a sky-blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers. She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere. It was her mother who would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels.

He began to pull the suitcase along the driveway, but because of the inconvenience of the gravel under the wheels, he picked it up by the handle and walked across the grass up to the house. She saw that it was a slight struggle for him, and she wished Adam were there to help.

"Akash, is that you?" her father called out in mock bewilderment, in English. "So big you have become." By now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little. After he started speaking in full sentences English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali. Besides, it was one thing to coo at him in Bengali, to point to

this or that and tell him the corresponding words. But it was another to be authoritative; Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her. Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn't mind. On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore, when an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday, she tripped over words, mangled tenses. And yet it was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life.

"How old now? Three? Or is it three hundred?" her father asked.

Akash did not respond, behaving as if her father did not exist. "Mommy, I'm thirsty," he said.

"In a minute, Akash."

Her father seemed the same to her. For a man of seventy, the skin of his hands and face was firm and clear. He had not lost weight and the hair on his head was plentiful, more so, she feared, than her own after Akash's birth, when it had fallen out in clumps on her pillow each night, the crushed strands the first thing she noticed every morning. Her doctor assured her it would grow back, but her bathtub was still filled with shampoos that promised to stimulate scalp growth, plump the shafts. Her father looked well rested, another quality Ruma did not possess these days. She'd taken to applying concealer below her eyes, even when she had no plans to leave the house. In addition she'd been putting on weight. With Akash she'd lost weight in her first trimester, but this time, at just twelve weeks, she was already ten pounds heavier. She decided that it must have been the food she found herself always finishing off of Akash's plate and the fact that now she had to drive everywhere instead of walk. She'd already ordered pants and skirts with elastic waistbands from catalogues, and there was a solidity to her face that upset her each time she looked in the mirror.

"Akash, please say hello to Dadu," she said, giving him a gentle push behind the shoulder. She kissed her father on the cheek. "How long did it take you to get here? Was there traffic?"

“Not so much. Your home is twenty-two miles from the airport.” Her father always made it his business to know the distances he traveled, large and small. Even before MapQuest existed, he knew the exact distance from their house to his office, and to the supermarket where her parents shopped for food, and to the homes of their friends.

“Gasoline is expensive here,” he added. He said this matter-of-factly, but still she felt the prick of his criticism as she had all her life, feeling at fault that gas cost more in Seattle than in Pennsylvania.

“It’s a long flight. You must be tired.”

“I am only tired at bedtime. Come here,” her father said to Akash. He set down the suitcase, bent over slightly, and put out his arms.

But Akash pressed his head into Ruma’s legs, refusing to budge.

They came inside, her father leaning over to untie the laces of his sneakers, lifting one foot at a time, wobbling slightly.

“Baba, come into the living room, you’ll be more comfortable doing that sitting down on the sofa,” Ruma said. But he continued removing his sneakers, setting them in the foyer next to the mail table before straightening and acknowledging his surroundings.

“Why does Dadu take his shoes off?” Akash asked Ruma.

“He’s more comfortable that way.”

“I want shoes off, too.” Akash stomped his sandals on the floor.

It was one of the many habits of her upbringing which she’d shed in her adult life, without knowing when or why. She ignored Akash’s request and showed her father the house, the rooms that were larger and more gracious than the ones that had sheltered her when she was a child. Akash trailed behind them, darting off on his own now and then. The house had been built in 1959, designed and originally owned by an architect, and Ruma and Adam were filling it slowly with furniture from that period: simple expensive sofas covered with muted shades of wool, long, low bookcases on outwardly turned feet. Lake Washington was a few blocks down a sloping street. There was a large window in the living room framing the water, and beyond the dining room was a screened-in porch with an even more spectacular view:

the Seattle skyline to the left, and, straight ahead, the Olympic Mountains, whose snowy peaks seemed hewn from the same billowing white of the clouds drifting above them. Ruma and Adam hadn't planned on living in a suburb, but after five years in an apartment that faced the backs of other buildings, a home so close to a lake, from which they could sit and watch the sun set, was impossible to resist.

She pointed out one of the two bridges that spanned the lake, explaining that they floated on pontoons at their centers because the water was too deep. Her father looked out the window but said nothing. Her mother would have been more forthcoming, remarking on the view, wondering whether ivory curtains would have been better than green. It appeared, as her father walked from one end of the living room to another, that he was inwardly measuring its dimensions. She remembered him doing this when he helped her to move in the past, into dorm rooms and her first apartments after college. She imagined him on his tours, in public squares, walking from one end to another, pacing up and down a nave, counting the number of steps one had to ascend in order to enter a library or a museum.

She took him downstairs, where she had prepared the guest room. The space was divided into two sections by an accordion door. On one side was the bed and a bureau, and on the other, a desk and sofa, bookcase and coffee table. She opened the door to the bathroom and pointed to the wicker basket where he was to put his laundry. "You can close this off if you like," she said, pulling at the accordion door to demonstrate.

"It's not needed," her father said.

"All the way, Mommy," Akash said, tugging at the handle, causing the folded cream-colored panel to sway back and forth. "Close it all the way."

"No, Akash."

"This is my room when I get bigger," Akash announced.

"That little TV in the corner works, but it's not hooked up to cable," Ruma told her father. "Nine is the PBS station," she added, knowing those were the programs he was fond of.

“Hey, don’t walk on my bed with your shoes on,” her father said suddenly to Akash, who had gotten onto the bed and was walking with large, deliberate steps around the bedcover.

“Peanut, get off the bed.”

For a moment Akash continued exactly as he was doing, ignoring them. Then he stopped, looking suspiciously at his grandfather. “Why?”

Before Ruma could explain, her father said, “Because I will have nightmares.”

Akash dropped his head. Quickly, to Ruma’s surprise, he slithered onto the floor, briefly crawling as if he were a baby again.

They went back upstairs, to the kitchen. It was the room Ruma was most proud of, with its soapstone counters and cherry cupboards. Showing it off to her father, she felt self-conscious of her successful life with Adam, and at the same time she felt a quiet slap of rejection, gathering, from his continued silence, that none of it impressed him.

“Adam planted all this?” her father asked, taking in the garden that was visible through the kitchen window, mentioning Adam for the first time.

“No. It was all here.”

“Your delphiniums need watering.”

“Which are they?” she asked, embarrassed that she did not know the names of the plants in her own backyard.

He pointed. “The tall purple ones.”

It occurred to her that her father missed gardening. For as long as she could remember it had been his passion, working outdoors in the summers as soon as he came home from the office, staying out until it grew dark, subjecting himself to bug bites and rashes. It was something he’d done alone; neither Romi nor Ruma had ever been interested in helping, and their father never offered to include them. Her mother would complain, having to keep dinner waiting until nine at night. “Go ahead and eat,” Ruma would say, but her mother, trained all her life to serve her husband first, would never consider such a thing. In addition to tomatoes and eggplant and zucchini, her father had grown expert over the years at cultivating the things

her mother liked to cook with—bitter melon and chili peppers and delicate strains of spinach. Oblivious to her mother's needs in other ways, he had toiled in unfriendly soil, coaxing such things from the ground.

He glanced at the gleaming six-burner stove with its thick red knobs and then, without asking, began to open one of the cupboards.

"What are you looking for?"

"Do you have a kettle?"

She opened the pantry. "I'll make tea, Baba."

"Let me water your delphiniums. They won't survive another day." He took the kettle from her hands and filled it at the sink. Then he carried it, slowly and carefully, through the kitchen door outside, taking oddly small steps, and for the first time since his arrival she saw that in spite of his clear eyes and skin, her father had become an old man. She stood by the window and watched her father water the flowers, his head bent, his eyebrows raised. She listened to the sound of the water hitting the earth in a forceful, steady stream. It was a sound that vaguely embarrassed her, as if he were urinating in her presence. Even after the sound stopped, her father stood there for a moment, tipping the spout and pouring out the final drops that the kettle contained. Akash had followed her father outside, and now he stood a few feet away, looking up at his grandfather with curiosity.

Akash had no memory of her mother. She had died when he was two, and now, when she pointed her mother out in a photograph, Akash would always say, "she died," as if it were something extraordinary and impressive her mother had done. He would know nothing of the weeks her mother had come to stay with Ruma after his birth, holding him in the mornings in her kaftan as Ruma slept off her postpartum fatigue. Her mother had refused to put him into the bassinet, always cradling him, for hours at a time, in her arms. The new baby would know nothing of her mother at all, apart from the sweaters she had knit for Akash, which he'd already outgrown and which the new baby would eventually wear. There was a half-knit cardigan patterned with white stars still on its needles, one of the few items of her mother's Ruma had kept. Of the two hundred and eighteen saris, she kept only three,