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KIRKUS (starred review)

A GUARDIAN AND A THIEF



Bestselling
author of
A BURNING

MEGHA MAJUMDAR

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A GUARDIAN
AND A THIEF



MEGHA MAJUMDAR



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FOR LEO

DAY 1

A.

FROM THE STOREROOM HIDDEN UNDER the stairs, ma fetched a cup of rice and a sack of eggs speckled gray like the moon, then cooked, standing before the stove's blue fire, her eye upon the window and its dusk, in which bats swooped and the neem tree shivered and a figure down on the road pedaled a bicycle, whistling, as if everything was all right.

Thief, thought Ma. Who else but a person who had chanced upon fresh vegetables or fruit would wander the city of Kolkata in this ruined year, the heat a hand clamped upon the mouth, the sun a pistol against one's head, and recall a song? She watched to see what the thief would do. He pedaled past. But Ma saw a different reality shimmer into being, in which he leaned his bicycle against the wall, climbed the pipes like a toddy tapper, and appeared at her window. In that picture, the thief was a collector of local information, dutiful in his neighborhood eavesdropping, shrewd in following what he heard about the bins of onions and carrots, the sacks of lentils and rice, the bags of raisins and cashews hidden in the dark fist of the house, stolen by Ma from donations made to the shelter where she worked, while the city outside wept for a handful of something to eat.

There was— in the label accepted by the region— a shortage. In the year prior to this day, farmers across the region had fallen, their bodies running fevers in air that no longer cooled. In the croplands, among stilled machines, pests had traveled from acre to new acre, savage in their feeding of grains. In the west a drought had cleaved riverbeds and in the east salt water had tainted the paddy fields. In the city, those who walked to the neighborhood markets with umbrellas in their hands and wishful lists in their pockets, broad corners torn from the newspaper with writing in Bengali—cabbage, ginger, lychees if they were good, ice cream, half loaf of bread—found the roads alongside which the markets usually sat, its baskets and tarps invading, rickshaws and cars sounding their

horns, slow shoppers inspecting the purple shine of eggplant and pressing guavas hard as hail, instead completely empty, nothing but some onion peel scattered at the edges where the pavement gave way to earth, where on most days goats and cows might have nudged the soil for something to eat. But those animals were gone too.

It had happened before. 1770, when crops failed and smallpox plagued the enfeebled. 1876, when drought struck the Deccan Plateau and the British continued to export what grain remained. 1943. Those black-and-white newspaper photos, in which people appeared as sunken eyes and twig-thin limbs, facing a photographer who could do nothing for them, their fullness—their love, their humor, their annoyance, their preference—pared by the lens to reveal what remained, which was hunger.

The eggs clacked against one another in the turbulent water, the rice grew earthen and buttery, and Ma gathered in her hands a kitchen towel with which she would lift the pot lid before her, hot enough to pass for a weapon. But what would the thief have done had she, instead, glanced at him as if he were a returning member of the family, and told him with her mother's authority to wash his hands and sit at the table? In fetching him a plate, who might she have become?

Ma shook her shoulders free of the distress. She did not need to put herself through such exercises anymore. She was leaving in seven days. Only seven days: It was close enough on the calendar to cast its glow over the whole week. Everything was in order. She had hired a new manager for the shelter; she had convened and concluded a final meeting with the board. The shelter, which had been her life for the past decade, would carry on without her, and she would begin a new life, perhaps at a new nonprofit, in Michigan. It was relief. It was even thrill.

After dinner on this day, she would go to the American consulate at the appointed time and collect the passports with climate visas inside, treasure beyond her greatest hope. And in seven days, she would be aboard a plane grading upward, its motion so beyond human comprehension that it would feel like stillness. Impossibly, the plane would speed through a night of sleep like sand blown in her eyes, toward a sunrise bright as iron poured upon the horizon, and finally, it would arrive in the United States. She knew plenty about America. Who didn't, given Hollywood? It was a country of grocery stores as large as aircraft hangars, stocked with waxed fruit and misted vegetables and canned legumes from floor to ceiling. It was a country of breathable air and potable water, and,

despite a history of attempts to cultivate a poorly educated electorate, functioning schools and tenacious thinkers. It was a country of encompassing hope, sustained by the people despite the peddlers of fear and pursuers of gain who wore the ill-fitting costumes of political representation. It was a country of opportunity for her child.

Ma's husband had moved six months ago for a research position on mosquito-borne diseases at a laboratory in Ann Arbor. While settling in his new position, contributing to a healthy savings account, and searching diligently for an apartment suitable for all of them, he had also put the paperwork in place to bring his wife, child, and widowed father-in-law over. He had purchased the plane tickets and helped secure climate visas, a long process of supplication in both America and India before various bureaucrats who believed themselves gods. Before such interrogation, his standing as an urgently needed scientist had favored Ma and Dadu; the family's middle-class savings and ownership of the house had favored them; luck had favored them. All Ma needed to do was survive these seven days.

When Ma brought the rice and eggs to the dining table, Dadu was seated, writing a poem in his notebook, which was a child's math book, pages turned ivory with age, grids holding not numbers but words written in the Bengali script that folded and straightened like caterpillars upon a stem. In this notebook he had written rhymes for Mishti, observations of the day, even an op-ed that had been published a few years ago. As he wrote, he spoke: "Every morning, mother crow / Looked for rice, high and low—"

Ma smiled. "Is this a new one?" She sat in her usual chair and put two eggs on a plate before him. "Eat."

He smiled, too, showing teeth crooked as gravestones. With one hand he brushed Ma's shoulder in thanks, the touch of his hand gentle, though the movement was clumsy. Then he capped his pen, tucked his chin, and regarded himself.

"I'm ready," he said. While she had been in the kitchen, he had changed into outside clothes, ironed pants and ironed shirt, sleeves loose about his thin elbows, and rubbed a sheen of Vaseline on his fish-scale skin. He had combed and parted his white hair. Dressing for the consulate was one way of asking for respect.

They ate.

In the living room, only a few paces from the dining table, were three suitcases, packed and stood upright, a Michigan address written on paper and sellotaped to each. Next to

the suitcases, on the daybed, instead of the mound of pillows upon which Ma usually leaned to watch television, was a gathering of items that they could neither take nor bear to lose, items that awaited their fate in a land of indecision—a potted cilantro, a pressure cooker, a costly vacuum cleaner, and, most delicate and difficult of all, a dinner set and tea set, purchased decades ago in China by Dadu’s grandparents. Other than these items, the room felt empty, its walls and shelves bare but for a few hardcovers fallen on their sides, surrendered to the termites that would eventually chew passageways through the paper. The entire house had been stripped. Objects that had rested in trunks and deep inside closets had been retrieved, dusted, evaluated. For so long these belongings had lived quietly in their spots, secured to Ma and Dadu by memory and the occasional cleaning, but now the objects were coldly separated from the people, and from the house itself, which seemed to bow its head in defeat, knowing its own burdensome immovability.

It was a good house, in a part of the city distant from the river, and on a nearly unnoticeable slope that nevertheless prevented rainwater pooling around it. In addition, Ma’s own mother—Dadu’s wife—had insisted on upgrades years ago, while she still had her vigor, and her salary, and now they benefited from her foresight. She had hired plumbers to set up a rainwater harvesting tank with multiple pipes and gutters feeding it, so that when the municipal water supply failed, the house still had plenty of water. She had hired electricians to install solar panels on the roof, and to connect the air-conditioning to the solar panels, comprehending that cooling would soon be not a luxury but a matter of survival, so that their house remained cool while neighbors lay on their beds, fatigued, under fans that grunted and groaned, wearily completing their rotations. She had gotten these things done for the incompetents in her life, and then, Dadu said sometimes, with a small smile, dusted off her hands and made her exit.

Now Dadu pushed his chair back, brought the cilantro to the table, and gave it a little water from his drinking glass.

Then he called in the direction of the bedroom: “Mishti? O Mishti! It’s time to eat. Then we have to go out.”

Hearing her name, his granddaughter—Ma’s daughter, two years old, glint of mischief in her eye—emerged from the bedroom.

“What were you doing there?” said Dadu. “Were you doing Scooby stickers? Or were you spilling water again?”

Mishti grinned, showing tiny teeth with spaces between them, and wide gums.

“Come, eat,” said Dadu to the child, and Ma rose to put a towel on the spill.

In the bedroom, knees on the hard floor, Ma wiped from side to side and felt water soak through the thin cotton of her pants. When she found two damp stickers stuck to the floor, she scraped with her fingernail until they lifted, incompletely, then scrubbed the debris with the towel. Much of her life was a series of tedious acts like these, and yet the patience of performing them contained her love, less tender and often less tenderly shown than Dadu’s, but steadfast in its plain truth. From under the bed, she retrieved a picture book about airplanes and took it to the living room. “I found it, Mishti. Under the bed this whole time.”

Dadu took over the duty of reading, allowing Ma to return to the evening’s tasks. He turned to the child. “Soon—do you remember?—we will go on an airplane, with wings and windows and a nose just like this.”

Behind his cheer, Dadu, who had worked all his life managing distribution at a company that manufactured secateurs, or pruning shears—always knowing, and accepting, that the arena of true feeling, for him, lay elsewhere, for example in the pursuit of trivial hobbies like writing poems—was afraid of stepping onto that plane. He was too old to commence life in a new country. In America, he knew, he would be a diminished version of himself—uncertain of social mores, unaccustomed to the accents, wary of car culture. There would be nobody in that place acquainted with his boyhood self. Was such an escape rescue or its own ruin?

While he read, he thumped the saltshaker on the table to loosen the clumps, and shook a little on his egg. He ate slowly, yolk rich as loam on his tongue, and held pieces out to Mishti, who pressed her lips together and shook her head. She had remembered her current craving.

“Flowerflower?” she asked hopefully.

“We don’t have any more cauliflower, Mishti. You ate all of it.”

“I want flowerflower, peese!”

“Eat this, then we all have to go to the consulate. We can’t be late.”

“Flowerflower,” she pleaded. “Peese! I say it nicely!”

“She has had no fresh vegetables,” allowed Ma, returning to the table. What she meant, and what Dadu understood, was that there had been no recent donations to the

shelter of fresh vegetables. All that arrived these days—and it had slowed to a worrisome trickle—were packages of protein bars, in numbers so small that the removal of even a few would be noticeable. The shelter residents had begun to split bars between themselves, trading flavors, a game that grew subdued after a resident who had stolen some bars for reselling was caught and evicted—not by the administrators but by his fellow residents.

“After the consulate,” said Ma, “we can stop by the market and see if they have cauliflower. Then we can eat a nice lunch of rice and cauliflower tomorrow. What do you say, Mishti?”

B.

OUT THEY WENT INTO THE night. The tops of their ears, and their necks and arms, too, shone with mosquito gel. Ma carried a purse heavy with three water bottles and electrolyte tablets in the zippered pockets. When they emerged from their quiet residential lane onto the main street, the lamplit darkness grew dense with people moving noisily along, clutching bundles to their chests, shouting into phones, coughing, adolescents shrieking as they ran, causing the adults to be fearful of snatchers before they remembered: That was how it was to be young. Those teenagers shrieked because they were coming to know their own voices. No crisis could quiet their glee.

When a cockroach dashed up Mishti’s leg, alarming her, Ma suppressed her own lifelong fear and flicked the insect off with her bare hand. “It’s gone,” she comforted Mishti. “It can’t do anything to you.” For a while afterward, Mishti refused to set foot on the pavement, and Ma carried her, feeling both the discomfort of the growing child’s weight and the peace she felt only when their bodies were nestled together, as in the first days of this body-rending, earth-shattering love.

Farther along the sidewalk, clusters of people played carrom, in their fingers the lit tips of old-fashioned cigarettes, beneath their feet pavement hot as a stovetop, hosed every now and then by a well-meaning shopkeeper. Dadu wove around them, thumping his walking stick in a steady beat, delighting in the conversations he overheard.

“It’s half boat, half rickshaw, don’t ask me, only he knows what it is—but he is convinced he has invented something fantastic! Orville and Wilbur Wright, followed by Arindam of our paan shop!”

“Then one day I cooked the synthetic beet—”

“No question, friend! Even if I have to hang from the side of the ferry by my fingertips, I will make it to the feast—”

“O ma go! Why did you run on my foot!” This from a man built like a wrestler, to a mouse.

“I could spend all night listening,” said Dadu to Ma. “I could put some of this into a poem.”

Then he couldn’t resist stating what he had stated to her a hundred times before, for the unparalleled pleasure of speaking what he believed: “The best philosopher, don’t you know, is the one who laughs, and makes others laugh. This city will survive because it is full of such street corner philosophers. They understand that laughing is the most truthful way of approaching life.”

Dadu felt invigorated by the city around him, the only city in which he knew who he was—a young man, with a heart given to a love of small things. The more banal and the more comedic, the more fervent his love. In Michigan, he would never be able to share with a new acquaintance, if he even found one, that he did not want to introduce himself by his job. His job represented very little of him. Perhaps only his discipline, and his sense of responsibility. But all the parts of him that he delighted in—his creativity, his pull toward rhymes, his curious eyes and ears, his laughter—these he would never be able to claim in a new land, before a new peer. These, too, would remain in Kolkata. That old self would roam the vacant house like a ghost.

“You say that,” said Ma, her eyes upon the ground. She had heard his sentiments countless times, and on this day, with departure imminent, she finally spoke a little bit of her mind. “But I think that, maybe, you and I have lived in two different cities.”

In his—jokes, crows, lizards, corner conversations. In hers—men on buses who reached for schoolgirls’ chests. Once, she had been such a schoolgirl. Dadu said nothing, and Ma patted Dadu’s shoulder to show that she did not mean to be cruel. He put a hand on hers, and held it for a moment.

He knew that she was not being unkind. She was the opposite, he thought, an endlessly feeling and helpful person. The shelter had come her way soon after she had graduated from a local university with a master's in nonprofit administration. At that time, it was a new shelter, funded by the city's remaining benevolent billionaire, built to serve solo adults with children under ten— mostly women, but some men, too—who were moving to the city from regions of the state that were flooded. The influx was massive. Men and women crowded railway platforms, bus stations, medians, metro stops, and mall garages, selling trinkets or begging for money, their faces marked by exhaustion. Many of them held the hands of their children, who, after all, were children. They hopped and twirled, holding baskets of items for sale, their long familiarity with hardship visible in their obedience. Theirs was not the unruly childhood of *I want I want I want* or *no I will not, you do it*; theirs was a childhood of compliance. How could a person with a heart not wish to help them? Ma had risen from shelter assistant to shelter manager swiftly and confidently, never doubting her own wish to do good.

That she had, in the past year, with the increasing scarcity of food, been quietly taking from the shelter's donations did not erase nor taint how deeply she felt for the shelter's residents.

C.

AFTER FIFTEEN MINUTES OF WAITING at the lord's more bus stop, Ma and Dadu approached a police car that was parked by the side of the road. Around the vehicle, a dog patrolled, its metal paws clicking on the pavement, peacefully tolerating heat that would have a true animal panting. Within the vehicle, a policeman played a game on his phone.

"Brother," said Ma, marching up to the window. This was her manager's voice. The dog paused mid-step, and the policeman frowned and lowered the window an inch, permitting a pleasant flume of cool air. "Can you tell us, what happened to the Exide bus? We have been waiting for a long time, and there hasn't been a single one."

The policeman laid his phone on his leg, screen side down. "You have been waiting?" he said. "Many buses didn't pass their pollution today." He inclined his head to indicate,

vaguely, the part of the city in which inspections had occurred. “Maybe that’s why. Wait for a different bus.”

“How about a taxi?” said Dadu from behind Ma.

Mishti clutched his hand and jumped up and down, partly reading the car’s number plate, partly yelling what she knew, “One, two, three, seven, ten!”

“You won’t find a taxi,” the policeman said, then eased back into his playing position and flipped his phone up. He was bored of this talk. “There’s a strike. Driver died of heatstroke yesterday.”

This was unsettling news. It was past eight o’clock, and the collection window for the passports closed at nine. On foot, they wouldn’t make it. For a moment, Ma and Dadu watched the road and its unabated activity continue without them. Daring pedestrians vaulted over the divider, cars played their orchestra, and pockmarked banners swayed above the traffic, offering discounts at a coaching center. Then Ma said to Dadu, as she had on errands before, “Why don’t you go home with Mishti? I’ll find a way. I can flag down a private car if I need to. I have—”

She looked in her purse and discreetly counted her cash.

Dadu said nothing, which meant: No. He knew, of course, that he was slowing down his daughter. But the heat and the short-age made citizens quick to anger, and quick to turn to violence. Despite his love of the city, he was clear-eyed about that. The previous week, a man on a bicycle had knocked over a woman in a residential lane for the paper bag of three greening potatoes in her hands. When she fell, the pavement burned her palms. The week before that, three college students had beaten up an elderly woman and taken not only her tiffin box, containing long beans, but also the gold ring she wore on a necklace. In such a city, how could Dadu let his own child go alone? One evening, in play, he had told Mishti: “The way your Ma loves you? That is the way in which I love her. Your Ma is my Mishti. Did you know that?”

Mishti had laughed. Everybody knew that Ma was Ma and Mishti was Mishti; why was Dadu speaking nonsense? But Ma, from the kitchen, had heard. She remembered, and now she understood that Dadu would not let her go alone.

On the sidewalk, a barber who had set up shop with a chair, a mirror, a comb, and a pair of scissors eavesdropped all the while without shame. He looked with interest to see

what they would do, and when he heard Ma's question, he caught Dadu's eye and issued an invitation.

"Where are you trying to go in this heat?" he said to Dadu. "Sit for a while, and when her work is done, she can find you right here. Once you get my world-famous head massage, all your worries will vanish. And a little haircut too?"

Dadu raised a hand in acknowledgment.

"Come," said the barber, turning his chair toward Dadu.

Dadu shook his head. "Not today," he said. "I will come back another day."

The barber looked at him with an expression that was puzzled but not unkind. He could not imagine emigrating and settling in America, Dadu knew. The barber's world was the sidewalk, just as the taxi driver's world had been the road. These worlds would continue, and in these worlds the city would seek its own future, no matter the faithless emigrants.

Had these emigrants ever loved the city, ever known its many faces, ever felt themselves as much a part of it as trees leaning upon each other in a forest? Perhaps such natives had always been, somewhere in their temperament, foreigners.

D.

A RICKSHAW CAME ALONG. THE driver called, "Uber! Uber! Get this discount Uber!"

Ma and Dadu hailed him, and Mishti hopped in agitation, hailing him the hardest. As they hoisted themselves up into the sloping seat, Ma promised the rickshaw driver five hundred rupees if he could get them to the consulate on time. Mishti sat on Dadu's knees, and he wrapped his arms around her belly and interlocked his fingers, feeling her fingertips, gentle as spiders' legs, hovering above his knuckles, playing a game whose progression she narrated to herself.

The young driver leaned forward and pedaled, his calf muscles hard below the hem of his rolled-up pants, his head bobbing up and down in the shade of an umbrella affixed to the handlebars, sweat soaking his spine. When cars and autos came in his way, he blew the horn with a sense of personal affront. To a driver who cursed at him in reply, he said, "You're cursing at a sick child?"

Then he turned back and winked at Dadu.

It was a beautiful lie, and it resonated in them like the truth.

When Dadu saw that the driver was making good time, he began to feel a kinship with him. “How do you manage in this heat?” said Dadu kindly. “If I exerted myself in these temperatures, I would collapse on the road. You would see me like a horizontal line over there.”

For a while the driver said nothing, and Dadu thought he had not heard. Then the driver spoke. “Used to be the night was better,” he said. “Now even the night is hot as a —” He glanced at Mishti. “Sit back, babu, don’t fall.”

“How about the—weren’t they distributing cold water?” said Dadu. “On TV, they said—”

“Oh, TV,” the driver said, as if television were a relative who never conveyed family news accurately. “I won’t say that they did *nothing*. They delivered water for a few days. They did. That much is fine.” The driver spoke slowly, a few words at a time. It was a marvel that he spoke at all. The air that rushed past their faces as the rickshaw sped onward was difficult to breathe. When Ma and Dadu gulped it, they felt it to be both aid and enemy. “But the water boiled in the sun,” continued the driver. “Who could drink that water? If they were serious about it, shouldn’t they have set up a fridge, or a box of ice? It was all for show, if you ask me.”

Dadu, reflecting on the driver’s words, gave Ma a look of encouragement, and Ma drew from her purse one of their three bottles of cold water. She held it to the driver’s shoulder.

“Water from the fridge,” she said.

The driver glanced at the cool object touching his shirt, as taken aback as a child at a birthday party when presented with a whole cake, complete with a sparkler on top. “For me?”

“Take it,” said Dadu.

“It’s for you!” said Mishti, delighting in the insistence of the adults.

The driver didn’t offer thanks, because it wasn’t his way. For him, offering thanks was a mode of alienation. True intimacy, true gratitude, was in wordless acceptance, and in vigorous use of what had been gifted. They now had enough time in hand that he paused by the side of the road and drank, the cool water sweet as chewed sugarcane on his

tongue, his throat working, thirst rising until it could rise no more, then falling, the water becoming unremarkable again.

Watching the driver drink, was it deep satisfaction Ma felt, or anxiety that she had given away water Mishti might need? She couldn't tell. Both, perhaps. In order to soothe her unease, she soaked a handkerchief in cool water and held it to Mishti's neck until she squirmed, after which she put the cloth on Dadu's neck. When it was warm from their bodies, it came back to her, a pale blue cloth embroidered in the corner with a hexagon, one handkerchief out of hundreds donated to the shelter, and she wrung the last bit of water from it onto her wrist, where the blood pulsed.

E.

THE STREET BEFORE THE UNITED states consulate was closed to traffic by concrete barriers, the closure enforced further by policemen who sat behind heaps of sandbags, their faces sunken and bony beneath helmets that fit loosely. One fiddled with the rifle slung on his shoulders. A second looked up from his Asterix & Obelix comic book, which he was reading in the glow of a streetlight, glanced at Ma's and Dadu's appointment papers, and waved them through. The three of them continued into the consulate building, the severe air-conditioning giving them—

“Goosebumps!” yelled Mishti. “Look, Mama, I have goosebumps!”

At a window sealed in bulletproof glass, a woman with blond hair appeared, called their receipt numbers, and, with no further words, handed them their passports. Ma and Dadu stood before her, waiting for a sense of conclusion, until the woman called the next person.

“Me, me, me!” called Mishti, when they turned to leave, sensing that something significant had been delivered. She stretched her arms above her head as high as she could. “I hold it!”

Ma bent to kiss her cheek. “No, you can't hold it. But you know what? Soon we will see Baba.”

“Today?” said Mishti. “Today we will see Baba?”

“Very soon,” said Ma.

Now she felt able to believe it. Now she allowed herself to feel, with unsuppressed honesty, and with no embarrassment, how wrenching it had been to be separated from her husband—his night her day, their reunion uncertain. How lonely it had been to remain in this old life, how unbearable for herself, though she had borne it well enough for her family, to lose the comfort of his present and daily love, shown in how he fed Mishti, how he cleaned the smears of fruit and rice that stained the floor after her meals, how he bathed her and taught her to accept a towel she had been afraid of, how he took her to the pediatrician and asked the questions he had prepared, and how he folded Ma's clothes late at night while she slept on the other side of the bed, all of it with a standard of calm and happiness that would have been irritating and false in a stranger. In him, it was all true.

Mishti flung both arms around Ma's neck and whispered, "Let's see Baba today."

Near the exit, but not exiting yet—what if they needed a correction? Never again would they have entry to the palace—Ma and Dadu stood close together, their limbs ashiver, a thrill running down Ma's spine, dread down Dadu's, because now they were really leaving. They opened each passport with gentle fingers that took care not to cause any tear or fold, no sullying of these divine documents permitted, and checked, murmuring as they did, that the visa stamps bore their names spelled correctly, their dates of birth formatted clearly, the climate category and family subcategory clearly identified. Dadu turned his eyes to the number of entries allowed, and saw, with some relief, the word *multiple*. He could return from Ann Arbor—which he still pronounced *arboar* in his own mind, as if it was written in Bengali—if America wore him down.

But the room's envious eyes could not see his apprehension. Those eyes saw only their triumph. Ma and Dadu had won. Now, together, like schoolchildren given their first responsibility, they bundled the passports in a plastic bag, wrapped that bag in a second plastic bag, and tucked the treasure deep in Ma's purse before drawing the zipper closed.

"You can't hold it, Mishti Ma," said Dadu gently, as Mishti resumed her pleading. "What if you tore it? Then what would we do?"

And yet he felt, while he was speaking, before banishing the feeling, wouldn't it be a relief if his passport—only his—tore? Then it would be as if fate had directed him to remain in Kolkata, directed him to plant new greens in the small patch of garden, watch the birds land on the wires, call his friends who had moved to Australia and Sweden and

Ranchi and Bangalore with news of the city. It would be as if he had been selected to remain and report on all that made him laugh each day: the pet society that had mistakenly been caring for a fox, the charity kitchen that cooked khichuri in the kitchen of a Mainland China, a bewildered American wood duck found swimming in a pond in Behala.

Ma knew none of his deliberation either. She felt excitement, and impatience, and underneath both, gratitude. An orientation toward gratitude came easily to her, though its relationship with moral purity was vulnerable to questioning. Still, this gratitude came from her knowledge that she might have been born into a different life—a shelter resident's life, or the barber's life, or the rickshaw driver's life. Then she would have known nothing of escape. She would have believed that the city was the whole world, and its fate was her fate. Extrication from one's hometown was for the lucky. Her own luck dazzled her.

They emerged once more into the heat of night. The street was, now, glorious with its imminent vanishing from their lives. Past the security barriers, there stood a seller of jhalmuri besieged by children even though he was missing fresh cucumber and onion. Behind him rose the glass edifice of a mall whose Pizza Hut, now shuttered, was hosting an auction of boats and fuel. Goodbye to all of it, thought Ma.

F.

AFTER A SHORT BUS RIDE, the market, a great hall whose sopping lanes Ma and Dadu knew well, appeared before them. Naked bulbs illuminated the interior. Sparrows, awake even at night, chattered in the rafters, high above men who sat with meager scatterings of field mushrooms and pond greens, buckets whose bottoms were populated with shrimp as slender as pins, and snails collected from village porches. Among these wares, the men waited on low wooden stools, some seated cross-legged, the soles of their feet the color of sand from years of potato dust, their lean arms holding scales up for weighing, the scale pans floating up and down as if in water, before the men collapsed them and tucked them away. These were the same men who had presided over what Ma thought of as true food—tomatoes and eggplant and bunches of spinach upon which they once sprinkled water

with the sieve of their fingers. Those days would come again, if in altered guise, in Michigan.

In the fish lanes, scales of synthetic rui fish flew in the gutters, the true rui having become scarce, slow to thrive in the warmed waters of the ponds in which they were raised. Yet the elderly customers who roamed the market—they were nearly all elderly; the young people went to the grocery stores that had aisles of products, air-conditioning, bright lights, labels for all goods, and no negotiation, that is to say, no sparring with a stranger—persisted in their known gestures. They examined the false fish for bright gills, touched their silver scales, and looked them in the eye, until what they saw disturbed them.

There had once been a reward for buying vegetables and fish at a shed in the corner, where Ma would buy a newspaper bag of kochuri and a clay pot of dal flecked with coconut. But the kochuri shop had closed three months ago, after a robber in a pollution mask tipped the vessel of hot oil upon the cook, and fled with all the cash in his lockbox.

Now sellers elsewhere in the market called:

“Flour, flour!”

Cricket flour, they meant.

“Greens! Five hundred for fifty!”

“Rice!” called a voice, but when Dadu lifted a palmful to his eyes, the grains wriggled.

In the entire market, all these months, there had been one seller who reliably stocked the food they liked—rice, lentils, occasionally eggs or a vegetable, such as Mishti’s favored cauliflower. Rumor was the seller cultivated connections at the docks south of the city, and intercepted goods meant for export. The prices were, accordingly, sky-high. But Mishti was a growing child, and Dadu grimly paid those prices. What had a lifetime of salaried employment been for, if not this?

The shop at the edge of the market had once sold knockoff cell phones. The phone displays were still there, empty boxes and rows of power sockets awaiting the return of lighthearted exchanges. The eleven- or twelve-year-old boy who eyed Ma, Dadu, and Mishti with authority, then allowed them in, was unfamiliar.

“Where is he?” said Ma, climbing the two steps into the store with Mishti. There was a strange smell in the air. “Are you his son?”

The boy, his neck heavy with silver necklaces that he wore as a mule might bear its burden, shook his head. "There's different supply today," he said, the words joined together in his speech, as if he was repeating syllables he had heard somebody else speak.

Ma saw what he meant. Her voice took on the sharpness of disappointment and its kin, annoyance. "What is this? You don't have cauliflower?"

Tarp on the floor held sheets of seaweed, dark as the bottom of the ocean, giving off an odor more mineral than fish. People inspected the sheets, their voices hushed as they selected bunches, negotiated with a woman who sat in a corner with a calculator and a lockbox, and paid. The boy, perhaps her son, ran back and forth between the entrance and the interior, functioning as a security guard, an usher, a shopkeeper who answered rudimentary questions. Every now and then the woman, with her alert eyes upon the store, held a phone up to her ear, listening to a drama narrated on the radio.

Dadu bent to a stack and inhaled. It felt like an absurd iteration of learning to pick a good fruit or herb at the market. How much give should a ripe mango have? How fragrant should cilantro stems be? But it was stranger than that, the thought of eating greens that grew underwater, waving their long arms in the currents, acquainted with creatures of fins and tails, the light around them muddy.

"I can eat many things, but I can't eat algae," said Ma crossly.

"Tell them," a stranger said in agreement, a woman whose cheeks were blistered after a heat rash, who was considering her own purchase. "Has the shortage turned us into turtles?"

Ma wanted wheat with which she would make ruti on the stove's blue flame, its belly gaining brown spots. She wanted okra and pumpkin vine, the stain of turmeric on her fingernails even after scrubbing with soap. She wanted to pluck the domed half potato from a box of biryani, keen to yield to the press of fingertips, fragrant and sweet. She wanted a jar of pickles open before her upon the table, lime peel and sugar and chili ardent on the tongue, before the crow that tracked lunchtime alighted on the balcony and dipped its demanding head at her, going *caw caw* until it received a small handful of the fish bones that remained.

"Let's go," she said curtly. "Time for you to sleep, Mishti. It's so late."

"Flowerflower!" protested Mishti, with a wail rising in her voice, and on the way home Dadu did his best to soothe her.