

❖ chapter one ❖

He had a habit of regretting his purchases. He'd buy vanilla yogurt when he meant to buy plain, nylon socks when he wanted cotton, and lobster at the Chinese take-away when most people knew that a lobster plate for 70 pence was not a promising choice. And now he sat on a Pan Am airliner with his new small wife beside him. He'd had a girlfriend, Victoria. Not anymore. He'd told her, when he left for India, not to wait for him. He'd spent most of his time in India secretly hoping she would. And now he fervently hoped she hadn't.

The plan was this: to go to Madras as a visiting scholar and return with a chunk of an art history dissertation in hand. Instead, he had an Indian woman. He wasn't certain that the marriage was binding. It had been performed hastily in a temple down the road from the college, and there hadn't been a notary present. The priests hadn't worn shirts. He felt a shirtless man could have little in the way of official authority. But then, if the marriage weren't binding, what would he do with this woman, leaning trustfully against his shoulder, asleep or pretending to be? *Sorry, love, he might say, it seems we're not actually married. There's a letting agency down the road and a market on the corner. Best of luck with everything.* Her hair was loose

and drifted onto his chest. She wore a sari and two gold bangles. From above, he studied the fringe of her lashes. No, he couldn't turn her away.

George had left for India with visions of social clubs and exclusive dining rooms that served gin and tonics and Sunday roasts. His supervisor at the university was from Exeter and would show him how to make his way through the heat and the dust. He would spend his afternoons in the cool of the English library, and emerge in the evenings for drinks at the club. There would be bridge games, played by English girls gone moist who would sit with their legs spread, wearing thin cotton dresses and fanning the heat away.

It was August 1974. Everyone spoke of the heat, the cloud of it that had smothered him the moment he stepped off the plane in Madras. But it wasn't the heat that stayed with him, not even the dust. It was the air, thick and glutinous, that existed nowhere else in the world. And swarming through every molecule of it was Madras and everything in Madras: sweaty silk, water, the curiously thin coins, tin cups, oil, frying food, groundnuts, the empty smell of boiled rice, turmeric, coriander, cumin, coconut oil, cow dung, goats in the street, naked children wearing nothing but gold chains around their waists, beggars with no legs, adobe houses, power cuts, wells, irrigation ditches, billboards, hotels, mothballs, citronella, fire. All of it rushed into George each time he inhaled. And when he exhaled, none of it came back out.

There were two English women on his course, Stella and Jo, and they didn't play bridge. They took tea in their rooms, spending most of their time studying and the rest

of it on “expeditions” to local temples, getting skinny and brown as natives, wearing badly wrapped saris, and maintaining a steadfast indifference to George. No club, no parties, no nights made slippery by gin. George was a student, and no different from every other student around him. He ate in the canteen with the rest of them, spooning watery lentil soup onto rice, drinking from his own bottle of preboiled water to keep off the runs. He studied in his hall library under the whirl of some sleepy ceiling fans, haunted daily by the room’s single resident fly. His supervisor was an effete and sweaty man who spent his days in a very large office. He could happily speak with George for three and a half hours about seventh-century temple engravings. But an existence outside of his office was something he probably never risked. Days swelled like bloated carcasses and ruptured into months. George stayed and worked and was oblivious to the gift that this country was about to push, with its wide and forceful smile, into his arms.

And this was where they met: it was May, a month when bathing was useless. George stepped out of the bathroom and into a fresh coat of sweat. He put on a clean linen shirt, cool at first, until it too melted to his skin.

In the lecture hall, fans were mounted to the walls, but any air they made vanished immediately into the roomful of bodies.

Her first words: *Excuse me*. His first words: *Go ahead*.

And she squeezed past him into the crowded lecture hall. George looked after her, the first Indian woman he’d

seen in a dress. The dress was white, cotton, so thin that it shaded her more than clothed her. It fell to her knees. Hers were the first brown calves he'd seen since leaving Heathrow.

He watched for her the next week and the week after, spotting her always in the back row. Legs crossed, dress creeping above the knee, showing a narrow strip of thigh. Brown skin was taking on new meaning for George. In a country with so much of it, he got to see so little. After eight months, he'd begun to forget the thighs and breasts of English women.

To look without looking was a vanishing art form. It had certainly vanished in Madras, where people gawked at him, leaned out of their windows as if they'd never seen a tall white man before. In his one and only lecture, George looked without looking at the people around him, homogenously brown, speaking an English that brought to mind neither Forster nor Kipling. He sat at the lecture hall's center and had to turn in his seat to look at her, which he did, awkwardly, three times. The man next to him stared at George each time, annoyed at the needless fidgeting. She wore her hair loose around her shoulders. Indian women didn't do this. Loose hair was intimate. He looked again and his elbow knocked his pencil to the ground, where it rolled under the seat in front of him, unreachable, gone forever. Feeling foolish, he vowed never to look back again.

When he did look back again, Viji caught him. She stared back, her eyes wide with some mixture of amusement and surprise. The man next to him turned to have a look too, but he didn't see what George saw. Brown legs, bedroom hair.

And now, there were worse places she could be. The last four days had been a fever dream, and this, the baggage claim at Heathrow, was just an extension of it. Viji stood by the carousel and watched other people's luggage go by. Hulking suitcases, brown boxes wound desperately with twine, a black leather bag with the tip of a shoe sticking out. She'd had to come in through the noncitizen line; George had said he would meet her on the other side. She watched the clock at the far end of the hall. Ten minutes, still no husband. His line had been shorter. He should have been through by now. Around her glided a sea of British people—towering, pink-hued, dressed in trousers, hair that was brown and lighter brown and lightest brown. They all looked like George. Which one had she married? Next to her stood a tall Caucasian male, a few days' stubble sprayed across his cheeks. Same sand-colored hair. Linen shirt, linen trousers. She looked down to find sandals and pink toes, knobby with the lesions of a hundred mosquito bites. This could have been her husband, but it wasn't.



A month after they married, they had a honeymoon. George felt it was only right, that after all the strangeness something predictable was in order. They toured the Lake District, driving around Cumbria in his father's '67 Volkswagen. They listened to the radio, tinny beneath the engine's urgent roar. *Cooar blimey!* was a phrase she learned, and *six of one, half a dozen of the other, mates' rates, don't fancy yours much, ee by gum!* Most mornings, the engine refused to

start, until George learned to bleed the radiator and seal it with his lips to blow out the air bubbles.

They had no set plans for that holiday, and they wasted a good deal of time asking what the other wanted, tossing their choices around like work colleagues on a business trip: *Shall we eat in a pub tonight or a restaurant? There's an Italian down the street, or would you prefer something light? I was going to get another pint, but I don't have to. Would you join me? You don't have to. Well, I don't mind. Whatever you want. It's fine, that's fine with me. Are you sure?* Often Viji wished George would just order for her, and George wished Viji would get an opinion of her own. Surely there were things she hated, but he had yet to find them. The only thing she'd refused was the kidney pie he'd bought from a farm shop. She'd even eaten the black pudding that came with their hotel breakfast. "So tasty," she said, stabbing the black congealed disc with her fork. "Like nothing I've tasted." She stopped suddenly. "It isn't beef, I hope."

"No," George said. "No, not really."

She resumed eating, chomping happily. "How do they make it?" A herd of sheep roamed by their window, and George managed to skirt the question.

He found that he liked her voice. They had talked some in Madras, but not much, and it wasn't until now that he truly learned how she sounded. She spoke with an accent that he recognized as educated, a voice that wrapped around the language and stretched it out like taffy. She turned words into intimate things; she spoke with an affection for the syllables themselves. The hours spent driving passed easily with her, conversations drifting in and out the car window.

From Ulverston they drove to Lake Coniston, and from there to Windermere. Everything around her was green, Hollywood green, as green as Scarlett O'Hara's ball gown, soaked with pigment by the months of winter snow and spring rain. Driving with George through the countryside, Viji felt she didn't know him at all. The few scraps of intimacy they'd collected during those hectic nights in Madras had vanished. Now he was a man with light hair who gripped the steering wheel tightly, his jaw set. He pointed to streams that ran between the fields, and to flocks of sheep and cows. He named the massive hills towards which they drove. They stopped in towns with bewildering names like Tintwhistle and Penistone, bought eggs and bread from farm shops. She felt obligated to compliment the scenery whenever possible, and took every opportunity to be awed by the land of which he—of which all these English—seemed so very proud.

Around them rolled the valleys she'd seen in paintings. They planted a warm ache inside her. Fields of tiny yellow buds spread as perfectly rectangular as if a servant had clipped them back with shears. Around her, all was beauty—fenced in, trim and sedate. Every blade of grass looked like every other blade of grass, as if they'd all had a meeting and decided how to be. Blankets upon blankets of miniature flowers, atop the greenest green. Nowhere could she see the dusty roadsides or pointless rock piles of home. The English countryside was like English desserts: custard on pudding, cream on cake, sweet smothering sweet and holding at bay the salty bits of life.

George bought a bottle of sloe gin from a local farmer.

Viji asked him how much it cost. This was a habit of hers, he was beginning to learn. He wouldn't tell her, and they had their first fight. He had his reasons for buying that particular bottle on that specific day. The price didn't matter. Besides which, it cost far more than he could afford, and he preferred not to remind himself of this. He would save it, he said, for a special occasion. It would get better with time.

They picnicked at the southern edge of a lake one muggy afternoon, after George had bought some elderflower wine and oatcakes and cheddar. By the time they'd finished half the bottle, George's words were slurring and Viji had fallen into a warm haze. When George wandered off to piss in the bushes, Viji lay on the lakeside, her head resting on her forearm. The world was in a stupor. She watched, for what seemed like hours, the water's hot fast ripple, perfectly silent. Drunken geese flew in a teetering V over the tree line. On the opposite shore were some ducks, gliding smoothly across the lake's surface, showing no signs of the frantic churn beneath. She thought of her uncle's village house, of the river that ran past it, bordered by arid dirt and cut by a bridge. She missed the creek behind her home in Madras. She missed the fried fish her mother's cook would make. She dozed. Not even George's footsteps woke her. She woke when his lips brushed her neck and, sleepily, she unbuttoned his shirt. They made love there on the hard, grassy bank. On the main road above, a tractor rattled by but didn't stop.

It was a sordid business, this luring of females to his bedroom. It was such an obvious sort of game, mired in

nervous dialogue and badly worded invitations. George wished for a way around it, but there was none. With Viji, the game troubled him more than usual—he somehow felt guiltier with her than he would have with someone English. It wasn't just that startled gasp of pain when he entered her, the sudden rigid clutch of her body under his. It was more the sense that he was a predator, and she his prey. *Nonsense*, Victoria would have said. *That little thing is more predator than you'll ever be.*

They slept in his old bedroom at his parents' house in Sneinton, a neighborhood at the eastern end of Nottingham. On a twin mattress hardly big enough for both of them, they slept against each other, locked in like pieces of a puzzle. Often he woke in the mornings with his feet on the floor and a cramp in his lower back. Viji's brown legs wrapped all the way around his waist, and her soft sheets of hair snuck into his mouth.

George felt little need for sleep. And he was glad, at least, to not have to watch her leave. No longer did he lie helplessly as she wrapped her sari around and around, carefully tucking the pleats into her waistband, her face drying into a tight mask of worry and guilt. And she was happy to be here with him, or so it seemed at night. During the days, she spent long hours gazing out the window. During the days, he wasn't so sure.

Still, there were times when the very existence of Viji—in his mother's kitchen, standing next to him at the cornershop, dreaming in a window seat—sucked the language from him, left him verbally bereft and unable to work. Sometimes he wondered what she would do if he left her somewhere, at the supermarket or the post office

in town. Would she find her way home, making her quiet way down the pavement, or would she simply vanish? Would she find a job in a bakery and a flat in the city center? He could only watch her and wonder how she'd ended up here, with him, on this pockmarked strip of England. There were moments when he despised her for it, the way she'd mutely latched onto his life, wandered into his bed, then into his world, and forced upon it an outline. He'd preferred it shapeless.

One summer afternoon, she sat staring out the window, past the murky pane and beyond the rain to some point far in the distance. Her silence was a maddening static that filled the room and made it impossible to think. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

She turned to him. "Pardon?"

"What are you doing in England, here, with me? You hardly know me."

She stared at the carpet for a few minutes, thinking. Then she shrugged, "It's what I was meant to do. It's what my mother wanted." How sluggish she was, with her languid blink and her swaying foot, how like a cow. He expected her to flick a fly away with her ear. Instead she turned quietly back to the window.

He shook his head. "Rather *obedient* of you, isn't it? Not exactly twentieth century." He thought of Victoria, who would never have let herself be married off like this. It felt mean but he didn't care. "It's not something an adult would do, is it? To pick up and leave because Mummy tells you to? Mummy says, you obey, that's how it works with you, isn't it?" No answer came. "*Isn't it?*"

She whipped around to look at him. "You did it. You

married *me*. Mummy said, *you* obeyed.” She looked straight into him and shook her head. “She wasn’t even your mother.”

He opened his mouth to argue, to pick away at the first tender scab he could find, but stopped himself. “Why did you do it?” he asked.

“No George, why did *you* do it?” The question hung between them like the mist outside, and Viji turned back to the rain.

They spent nearly three months with his parents as George submitted and defended his thesis. In that time, Viji took easily to the role of dutiful daughter-in-law, helping Marla, George’s mother, with the laundry and the washing up. She liked Marla, who laughed easily and wore colorful headbands and strings of beads around her neck. Viji learned to use the kettle and made tea twice a day. She woke at seven in the morning and went to bed at ten. It was these minute scheduling points that gave her purpose during the foggy, do-nothing stretch of weeks.

In the kitchen, she watched as brussels sprouts were scored and chickens basted. The Sunday that Marla roasted a side of beef, Viji ate only potatoes and carrots.

“I’d love to taste your food, Viji. Do you cook?” Marla asked, eyeing Viji’s beefless plate.

Viji glanced nervously at George.

“Viji hasn’t cooked much, Mum,” he said. “She had a cook at home.”

“Well, fiddle-dee-dee,” Stan grunted.

“Stan.”

“Dad, it’s just the way—”

“I can cook,” Viji interrupted. She turned to Marla, who was safer than the men. “I can cook for us.”

That Monday Marla found an Asian grocer. She and Viji returned, arms resplendent with yellow and crimson sachets of powder, cinnamon sticks, and sacks of onions and fresh chilies. Viji smiled freely, like a child.

She began cooking early the next afternoon. The family had left her to herself, her only companion the cat, who normally padded at the feet of whoever was in the kitchen, its head cocked in a one-eyed search for chicken-fat drippings or a crumbled corner of cheese. But today, only a thin powdering of turmeric littered the kitchen floor. The cat sniffed it, recoiled and slipped into the corner.

For dinner she was making chicken curry, Madras-style, to be simmered for hours in a thick, peppery broth. She was making eggplant raita, for which the thin slices of eggplant had been rubbed with salt and fried and waited crisp-edged on a tea towel. From the corner of the kitchen, the single eye of the single-eyed cat flashed in the passing sunlight. It kept watch over her, suspicious as a nosy neighbor. She’d never asked what had happened to its other eye. Was it gone altogether or sealed beneath the soft black lid?

It felt good to hold a knife again, to wrap her palm around its wooden hilt and use it to slice and crush. To change things completely, simply because she wanted to—this was satisfaction. George came down once and said something about a walk. She ignored him. Before her waited a bouquet of garlic bulbs. She began with the onions, fast rhythmic slicing, pulling her fingers away

from the flashing blade as a hill of white grew upon the chopping board.

But it wasn't natural for her to stand at a high counter like this, her elbows splayed from her sides. A hot finger of pain slid down her back. She rolled her neck from side to side, but the ache only shifted and spread. Quickly, she gathered the chopping board, the knife, the onions, and placed them on the floor by the kitchen table. Here she sat back comfortably on her haunches.

Viji had spent her childhood on the kitchen floor, first watching Old Krishnan, then young Kuttima, chop and grind and fry. They kept the floor immaculately clean, and vegetables were kept in baskets along the walls. By the time she left Madras, she was immune to the lung assault of frying chilies and could mince six bulbs of garlic in under a minute. Soon she forgot about the ache in her back. She could no longer see the cat or hear the footsteps from upstairs. If she heard the knock at the back door, she ignored it. She'd been thinking of the first time she cut onions, how Kuttima had laughed at her, how copiously they'd made her cry. She didn't hear the door creak open or the offbeat tread of heavy footsteps that followed.

The door slammed and she dropped the knife.

"What the bleeding hell is this?" Stan's voice boomed through the kitchen. "What're you doing on the floor, you daft cow?" He leaned over, hands on knees, to peer directly into her face. "What the bloody hell y'doing?" he asked again. "The floor is not where we cut the vegetables." She could tell he was speaking slowly and clearly for her benefit. He paused between each word, as if she were deaf or old or merely stupid. "The. floor. is. not. where. we. cut. the.

ve-ge-ta-bles. The. floor. is. for. the. animals. You see?” He pointed to the cat, who flashed past them and up the stairs.

He was wearing his shoes indoors, and from them wafted the smell of something foul. “Do you understand? Are you an animal? Hey?” He stepped over her with his putrid shoes and moved to the stove.

Viji shook her head. She could only stare dumbly at him. What swelled inside her had no words. Stan lifted a lid to investigate the pot of yellow stew. Then he tapped the counter hard with his ruddy old-man finger. “*This is where we cut the ve-ge-ta-bles. You see?*” He examined her for several more seconds.

To her horror, she smiled. It was a feeble smile, quivering at its edges. She stood and replaced the chopping board. Her wrist shook violently and sprayed onion pieces to the floor. Stan sighed and picked up a garlic bulb, turned it over, and put it down. Her vision blurred but she managed to find her shoes. Slipping them on, she ran into the garden and slammed the back door behind her.

The house filled with new smells that afternoon. They were familiar to George but worried the cat, who whipped around his ankles like an agitated ghost. The day was warm, too warm to wear socks, and certainly too warm to be trapped in a kitchen. Earlier George had tried to take Viji for a walk, but she had refused to come. He’d found her hunched over the kitchen counter, her fingers coated in tomato slime. Her face was taut with concentration, and when Geoge spoke to her she stared up at him, ready to pounce, like a forest animal trapped in its burrow. For once she didn’t need him around—indeed, she didn’t

want him. The feeling, however temporary, left him sour.

Now the house was silent, and the silence saturated the air. He wished for a noise to break the heat, a thunder clap or a siren. He stopped by the mirror to fix his hair and found a thin film of sweat coating his forehead. It broke away when he touched it, like the shimmering skin that formed on soup. For weeks his internal thermostat had been running off-kilter, unable to reconcile Madras heat with the starchy English damp.

From the kitchen downstairs, he heard voices. First Stan, then Stan again, louder. He heard a clatter and the slam of the back door. He waited a moment, and heard nothing more.

“Dad?” he called. “Viji?” The house was quiet.

The kitchen was empty. The stove had been shut off and on it sat a pot of yellow liquid, mulchy and tired. Finely diced onions littered the floor and stuck to his heels like barnacles; in the corner, half-hidden by the radiator, was a chopping knife. A wooden chopping board lay in the middle of the work surface amid a heap of onion skins. “Viji!” he called again. Her shoes, usually waiting neatly by the door, were gone.

He found her in the garden shed. She sat perched on Stan’s drinking bench, hugging her knees to her chest, rocking from side to side. Behind her, a window opaque with cobwebs framed the looming dusk. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “What happened?”

She took a while to answer and this, he now knew, meant that the smallest peep would release a torrent of tears. At last she began to speak, her shaky voice patting itself smooth again. She’d been chopping in the kitchen

when her back began to ache; she showed George the spot. So she'd moved to the floor. Here, she said, she could chop comfortably. He saw her as she might have been at home, her body swaying in tempo with the knife, diced onion falling from the blade like snow.

"And then your father walked in," she said. George knew what was coming. The tremor crept back into her voice. "*What the bleeding hell do you think you're doing?*" he said. He scolded me for putting food on the floor. *That is where the animals eat*, he said. *Are you an animal? Are you a cat, too?*" She looked for George's reaction. "*What the bleeding hell*, he said. This is how he speaks to me?" New tears streamed down her face. How alone she looked on the bench, an empty whiskey bottle at her feet. She sniffed and caught her breath. "He can keep his bleeding hell."

*It's nothing*, George was about to say, *that's just the way he is sometimes*. Stan was a grizzly with no claws. But clearly, to Viji, it was something. And George knew precisely how his father would have barked the words, thoughtless as an old bulldog. "That's terrible," George said. He expected more weeping as he sat next to Viji and circled his arm around her waist. Most women fell to tearful heaps at the first sign of sympathy. But when Viji looked up, her eyes were steel. She was ready for a fight. "So what did you do?" he asked.

"Nothing." She shook her head. "I did nothing. I simply shut up like a deaf-mute. Like a stupid person."

"You're not a stupid person."

"I didn't know how to answer. What could I say?"

"So you waited for him to finish?"

"Yes."

“And then you came out here?”

“I had enough. He wouldn’t leave, like an old mother-in-law, sniffing and staring and lifting the lid on the pot. Shameless, wearing his dirty shoes in the house, bringing in the filthiness from the street. I promise you, I smelled some dog shits on his shoes. I’m quite certain!”

George laughed. “Poor Viji.” She stiffened, but let him take her hand in his. He pulled her face into his shoulder. “You daft monkey,” he said.

“He’s a daft monkey. I’m not a daft monkey,” came the muffled words. He kneaded his fingers into the sore spot on her back.

“Where have I brought you, hey?”

She softened in his arms, and his collar was soon wet. The tears, he realized, had little to do with his father or the onions. She wasn’t crying for Stan’s language, or for the smell of dog shit, but for everything that she’d wished for, and all that had been thrust upon her. “Where shall I take you next?” he asked. She shrugged, limp against his chest. “Hmm? Go on. Your choice this time.”

“Hawaii,” she mumbled.

In the waning afternoon light, George led Viji back to the house. In the kitchen he helped her finish the dinner, taking her instructions and chopping chicken pieces. She spoke calmly, passed him garlic cloves to crush, explained when to use fresh chilies and when to use dried. Now and then came a sudden sniff or a sigh, soft remnants of her injury.

That night they lay together on George’s twin mattress. Viji drifted off almost immediately, with her head tucked into his shoulder, but George stayed awake to

count off the hours and the sounds that drifted around them. At three o'clock, a ghostly sigh. Three forty-seven, a sudden jerk of her legs. He wondered if she loved him. She never said the words, exactly, and seemed to know instinctively not to. But she must have, to some degree—he sensed it in the way she slept, her head tucked against his shoulder, light with certainty and peace. He didn't love her, of course, no more than he would have if they were still in Madras, meeting in the evenings and parting wordlessly each night. This didn't trouble him. He loved her enough. It was easy to say these things in the dark, without the *buts* and *what-ifs* of daylight. He loved her enough for now, and the rest could come with time.

On the opposite wall hung one desultory football banner, red and white and pinned crookedly above his desk. George had never liked football. When he was fourteen he'd borrowed a book on Bauhaus from the Sneinton Library, and with a Stanley knife he'd extracted three prints from the book's binding. He worked surgically, leaving not a trace of the pillaged pages. And if no one had ever searched for those three Klee prints, then no one would have been the wiser. Two days after he hung them on his wall, he came home from school to find them gone. In their place hung the banner. He knew who'd done it, and he didn't need to ask why.

He sat up. "Viji, we've got to leave," he said. "We have to get out of here." The clock read 5:20. He woke the next morning to find Viji already awake and studying his chin. Often he'd wake to find her gazing sleepily at some quadrant of his face. It was a habit of hers that he was getting used to.

In the end, George had a choice of lecturing posts at two universities.

The first was in a northern city called Hull, which to Viji sounded like the unusable part of a vegetable. The second was in Sacramento. "It's California," George warned. "That's far from home, you know."

"I'm far from home already," she said. The choice was made. Two weeks later, they were gone.