

**THE  
PERMANENT  
RESIDENT**

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roanna Gonsalves came to Australia as an international student from India. Some years on she became a citizen and a recipient of the Prime Minister's Australia Asia Endeavour Award. *The Permanent Resident* is her first book.

**THE  
PERMANENT  
RESIDENT**

**ROANNA GONSALVES**



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*For*  
*my children, Kirk and Jady*  
*and*  
*my parents, Rose and Richard*



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## *Full face*

I broke up with my boyfriend because he was repeatedly unfaithful to me. So I left Bombay and got myself a job as a copywriter in Dubai. I was restless there, surrounded by real gold, fake snow, and men who looked but would not leap.

One day, running late for a meeting with my uncle Joe, I rushed into Café Eucalypt on Sheikh Zayed Road to get my coffee. Before I knew it, I tripped over a man tying his shoelaces, and heard the heave of his body insisting on an explanation.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said, in the scree of that afternoon.

But the second I looked at him, I was not sorry. I was light as an epiphany. His eyes were open upon me and in his gaze I saw a meadow of daffodils offering respite from a blissless solitude. Beside the lake, beneath the trees, the place it seemed was open to consideration. Wordsworth would not have approved, but I held my breath for the future.

‘It’s okay, don’t worry. I’m Anil, by the way,’ he said.

Anil was the Middle East sales rep for Juno Appliances, a company making air conditioners and air purifiers in Bombay. It was his first time in that café. Not being a coffee man, he had ordered tea and was waiting for it to arrive when I set in motion, inadvertently I must insist, events that would force our hands.

Anil and I met a few times for Mass, for tea and for dinner. In the air of permissiveness in Dubai, where trees could be uprooted from one end of the world and transplanted on its main roads like so many livers, where the laws of our homelands were loosened, and love and sex were twins mistaken for each other, we realised, separately, that we were weary of the chase. I was a woman who needed a bra. He was a man who put his mouth where his money was. It seemed logical to disarm and ride along together.

We got married in Bombay as befits tax-free Gulf money: our wedding invitations came not from David & Company but were designed by the art director in my agency, billed separately to my personal account. We overlooked our parish choirs, who suggested Ruth’s Song, ‘Wherever You Go I Shall Go’ for the nuptial hymn, and chose instead to hire a five-piece live band to perform Joan Baez’s ‘Forever Young’ in the crypt of Don Bosco’s Basilica in Matunga. A thousand guests came to our reception at Willingdon Catholic Gymkhana in Santacruz and showered us with biodegradable confetti, made from recycled waxing strips discarded by the beauty parlours in Bandra and sterilised by a charity working with street kids. We paid for my uncle Joe and his wife Aunty Marilyn’s tickets, Dubai–Bombay return, because I really wanted

him to raise the toast. For our honeymoon we didn't even consider an Indian destination, choosing Turkey instead. There, we restlessly drank tea in a café overlooking the Bosphoros, waiting to get back to the blue hotel and its sheets, the hum of grasshoppers in our ears.

Soon we both felt we should move on from Dubai and its silos and its visa expectations that must always be met. I wanted to stand atop a wooden box in a park and make change happen. I assumed Anil shared my zeal. After all, we had both been set alight by the grassroots Obama campaign.

Anil had often said at parties that Indians should stop having children and focus instead on bettering their own prospects, should live in the present rather than the future, should clean up their act. In general, I agreed. After all, I left Bombay to escape not only the mushroom cloud of a failed relationship, but also the swarming multitudes that had long outstripped the available loaves and fishes. I didn't think he meant that we ourselves shouldn't have children. It's not what I thought at all.

I had heard that Australia had the colour bar. However, everyone spoke English and that itself was good enough. None of this *habibi habibi* that goes on in Dubai, and none of the Hindi–Marathi we were forced to learn in school in Bombay. Once, at Café Eucalypt I heard one of the Indian customers demanding a serviette with his Earl Grey. Cathy, busy frothing milk behind the counter, said, 'Mate. Just help yourself. There's some in that corner over there.' And I was sold, then and there, in that unpretentious café with fresh sprigs of eucalyptus in a vase near the cash register, gleaming in a different desert, far from home.

Aunty Marilyn warned me that it was hard to get an Australian visa. She knew many at the bank who had tried and failed, many years ago. Yes, things had changed since then, with Australian call centres in India and all. But still, she said, they were afraid that Indians would take away their jobs. On the other hand, and when we were alone, Uncle Joe said, ‘Go and see for yourself. I’ll ask Gloria if you can stay with her.’

I knew that Uncle Joe’s concern about my accommodation in a foreign country was entwined with the urge to be close again to Gloria. It was true that Uncle Joe and Aunty Marilyn had just celebrated their Silver Jubilee, with the Bishop celebrating Mass and a special ‘Prayer of the Faithful’ that included a PowerPoint presentation about their twenty-five years of wedded bliss, complete with zigzag transitions from one slide to another. Their daughter, my cousin Bella, who also worked in a bank in Dubai, prepared it as a surprise for them. Aunty Marilyn told me that Gloria and her husband Tony had celebrated their own silver anniversary the previous year by going on a second honeymoon to one of those banana republics that surround Australia. Their son Scott didn’t go with them because he worked for the government in Canberra. They were all friends on Facebook – Gloria, Tony, Aunty Marilyn, Uncle Joe – and were always the first to like each other’s posts. But I could sense a current in Uncle Joe’s voice, suddenly loose, when he spoke of Gloria.

Anil considered Canada, but the thought of all that naturally cold and purified air put him off. He agreed to try Australia. Anil’s job as a salesman was not on the Skilled Occupations List, but copywriters were welcome and so we

got our permanent residency visas within six months. Aunty Marilyn ground some *xacuti* masala, sealed the aromatic powder in a plastic bag and stuck a very professional-looking label on it with a fictitious website and email address, saying ‘Chilli powder. Nut free! Gluten free! Organic!’ She even managed to paste a picture of a chilli plant on the top left of the label. The day before Anil and I left, in Uncle Joe’s presence, she handed me the *xacuti* masala, finely ground yet unmistakable in its defiance, made with her own hands, for a woman her husband had once loved.

Aunty Marilyn was a higher-up in the Bank of Dubai, and kept getting promoted higher and higher every three years. But I suspected that being first in line for work promotions could never heal the wound of being second in line for love. If twenty-five years of marriage had taught her anything about her husband, it was that he still nursed a fondness for the stylish Aussie. He married Marilyn only after he realised that Gloria had gone for good – there was no beating around the bush with that fact. Yet, here she was, the wife, sending with the homemade *xacuti* masala a hidden message that Gloria was just another fragment of the past. ‘Tell her she and Tony should make a visit here soon. They’re welcome any time to my house.’

Gloria had visited Bombay one Christmas when I was a mere schoolgirl, and Uncle Joe and Aunty Marilyn had not yet left for Dubai. It was her first trip back after migrating to Australia. I can’t remember much of what she said then, but I distinctly remember the two-pack of tea towels with a print of the Australian flag she presented to Aunty Marilyn, tied with red curling ribbon, a clip-on koala clinging to the bow. Her freshly manicured red nails

anointed this gift with glamour, with intelligence that soared out of the reach of our drab two-bedroom, hall, kitchen flat close to the grunt of the train station.

‘Throw away your kitchen cloths, Marilyn, this is what true-blue Aussies use,’ she announced. And then she laughed, exuding refinement with every lilt in her voice, with every gesture of those perfect hands, with every crossing and uncrossing of her stilettoed Sydney legs. Her knees were not scarred like ours. Gloria’s voice transgressed with confidence, presumed triumph, as Auntie Marilyn stood there with a bowl of wafers in her hands, not knowing whether to go around the room with the bowl or put it down on the centre table. There was a slight pause of confusion before all the adults laughed along with Gloria, without really understanding what they were laughing about, including Auntie Marilyn, whose laugh came out as a high-pitched shriek. It was the first time we had ever heard of tea towels. In my childish mind they conjured a particular English sensibility gleaned from reading too much Enid Blyton, of dainty teacups and cucumber sandwiches, and frilled-up men and women wiping their mouths, discreetly.

When I rolled her words in my head again and again, I realised that these tea towels were actually to be used to wipe dishes. I wasn’t sure if Gloria was serious or just teasing. After all, not only did the tea towels look so pristine, as if they were meant for the sanctity of altars rather than the residual grease of stainless-steel pots, but they had a country’s flag on them, a sacred symbol for us living in an India that had clawed out its independence, tricolour proudly aflutter, only a generation before.

I can't recollect Aunty Marilyn ever using those tea towels, but I was hooked by Gloria. To me, she was not an Indian any more, but had evolved into a foreigner, and therefore was a self-actualised being. She had an insider's intimacy with Australia, and could spout their shortcut words with ease. True. Blue. Aussies. Separately, those words were rivers flowing in different directions. But when Gloria said them together in one breath, they were a magical spring from which all that was good and right in this world originated.

I bought an expensive hand-embroidered red kurta and new black pants to wear on the flight to Sydney. I chose them in the hope that they would attract admiring glances in a Western country. But when we arrived at the airport and I first saw Gloria and Tony waiting for us in the arrivals lounge, I realised that I looked like a hippie. I was no match for Gloria in her silk leopard-print blouse and matching wedge heels, her tan handbag, and her gaze of liquidation.

The minute she spotted me she waved gracefully, the red on her nails flashing at me like beacons across the arrivals lounge, taking me back instantly to the time she gave Aunty Marilyn the tea towels. When we drew close she embraced me warmly. Then, as we drew away from each other, she looked at me and said, 'Welcome to Sydney, so lovely to see you! My! You're a picture of your uncle Joe!'

I felt calm then, submitting myself to her power. This gossamer welcome was a sign that I would feel at home in Australia, with the certainty of her toned body hugging mine, her shiny hair, smelling so Australian. I felt the need to say something, to nail that moment with words that

would be remembered. Something like, '*Mon semblable, ma soeur!*' I wanted her to admire my appropriately and cleverly adapted references to Baudelaire via T. S. Eliot. But I controlled the wave of exhilaration welling up inside me, calming myself down with the thought that I must not seem overeager and desperate to these sophisticated Aussies who used to be Indian. So I blurted out, 'You look as beautiful as the last time I saw you, twenty years ago, in Bombay.'

'Oh, thank you, darling!'

I should have left it at that but I said like a supplicant, 'Your skin, it's flawless!' She said, 'Oh, thank you, darling, you're very sweet.'

'No, really,' I said, unable to stop myself, 'your hair, your eyebrows, so beautiful.'

She didn't return my compliments, just collected my praise like a pay cheque, and examined my face. She said, 'I'll introduce you to Sheetal, my beautician. She'll be good for you. She has very soft hands.'

Soon I would realise that I had no way of telling the human from the non-human from the inhuman in this country where birds cry like babies, where prime ministers are swallowed up by oceans and deputies, and where 40,000-year-old living cultures have been fossilised in the space of two centuries. But that first day at the airport, as Gloria linked my arm in hers, I felt safely anchored to the airport bitumen that used to be red earth.

'And this handsome young man must be your better half,' she said, holding her hand out to Anil, and then her cheek to him to kiss. I struggled with my trolley, which seemed to have a wheel out of joint.

‘Tony will take that,’ she said, and her husband followed her instructions and took the trolley from my hands. As we walked to the car, I was conscious of the cab-drivers, the coffee-cart attendant, the security guards, and numerous people pushing trolleys all looking at us or, more accurately, looking at Gloria. Tony walked beside us, pushing the trolley, so much at ease with the attention his wife commanded from perfect strangers. *Such a self-assured man*, I thought. They were so secure, accepting the patterns that shaped their lives. Gloria walked on, filling up, it seemed, as if each glance directed at her energised her, like double shots of espresso.

In the car, as Tony navigated the Sydney traffic, trifling compared to the density of horn and brake in Bombay and Dubai, Gloria said we were so, so lucky to be living in Australia now. ‘It’s the quality of life here. You just can’t compare it to Bombay. I haven’t been to Dubai, but I’m telling you, this is the safest place on earth. Everywhere you go in the world there are racists. What do you think the Hindus are? How many Christians have they murdered, you tell me!’

‘True. Although that’s more about religion than anything else, not really race...’ I said.

It was as if she had not heard me.

‘They kill Catholics but they all flock to our Catholic schools. At least here in Australia everyone is equal. This is a Christian country.’

Years later, I would find an Aboriginal shell midden in my rented backyard near the Cooks River, the ancient compost of lives lived before the land was fleshed with whiteness, before it was quartered with Christianity,

refusing to fade away. But at that moment in the car, the weight of this country was not yet upon me.

‘There are racists everywhere,’ Gloria was saying, ‘Now, you tell me, you’re in Australia, you’ve seen the people at the airport, on the street. Are you scared? Do you feel threatened?’

Although I was a touch alert to the smugness in her voice, this self-defence didn’t bother me. In fact, I agreed with it. I had chosen to migrate here after all. I wanted some of her shine to rub off on me. I wanted to learn from her: how to carry myself, how to do my hair, what perfume to use for work and what for love, how to create something of lasting value in this new world.

I knew she worked in the Immigration Department. I’d built her up to be an intellectual, part of the avant-garde of Sydney, working from the inside for an overthrow of capitalistic, neoliberal governments, and the patriarchal, secretive Catholic Church, a modern-day female Shiva, destroying if only to renew with splendour. But I was surprised when I found out that she worked not in policy or management but as a client services officer, answering phone calls from the general public about contact details and forms and the easiest way to stay in Australia.

At the very least, after all the talk about the quality of life in Australia, I expected sophistication: ylang-ylang in the air, a red leather love seat under signed posters of Marx, or at least of a minor local revolutionary, with a garden full of wanton orchids framed by a French window. Instead, her house smelled of artificial lavender air freshener, freshly sprayed in an attempt to mask the unmaskable smell of fish curry. Instead of a red leather love seat, the living room

was dominated by a sofa set with flowery upholstery under a framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, high up on the peach wall, clearly demarcating the saviour and the saved.

‘Really expensive furniture. You know, Australia is the most expensive country to live in,’ she said. ‘See that sofa? It’s from the big furniture shop we passed on the way back from the airport. Did you see it? Quite exclusive. The Indians around here usually go for the cheap stuff from Fantastic Furniture. But no, I put my foot down. I told Tony, better to go for class.’

The back door was flanked by two large peach-coloured pots full of maroon flowers made of silk, and fern fronds made of plastic. They all looked so real I had to touch them to make sure they were not.

‘They look real, don’t they?’ said Gloria with satisfaction as she led me outside. By then it had dawned on me that she was just another Catholic Bombayite transplanted into Australia, still a sheep following a shepherd into a paradise that didn’t exist. Only the colour of her aspirations had changed.

In accordance with these realisations, I expected the back garden to be tame with roses and a curry leaf tree. It exceeded my expectations in all its domestic glory. Gloria pointed to a backyard completely paved in green granite. ‘See how vibrant it looks! Green creates tranquillity. You thought it was real grass for a second, didn’t you?’ she said with a gratified smile. As we went inside I couldn’t help being disappointed that I could very well have been walking into any old suburban Catholic home in Bombay, such was the abundance of predictability, the absence of

possibility. The only thing missing was Lynn Anderson singing ‘Top of the World’ in the background. Once again, it was as if Gloria read my mind, and she played exactly that song on her home theatre system.

Anil said he was quite jet-lagged and went off to sleep in Gloria’s guest room. I gave Gloria the *xacuti* masala and conveyed Aunty Marilyn’s wishes, as well as Uncle Joe’s excitement, with as much theatrical aplomb as I could, flailing my arms about, going down on one knee, changing the tone and volume of my voice. Tony clapped and bowed and laughed so much, his laughter and mine intertwined and echoed through the house. Gloria took the packet as if a transaction had just been completed, or as if it was an absolution bestowed upon her by a lover she had once ditched. Then, almost as an afterthought, she began to thank me profusely and implored me to convey her gratitude to ‘Joey and Marilyn’. Without even looking at it properly or asking what exactly it was, she immediately put away the packet into an empty box on the bottom shelf of the pantry, right at the back, behind the rice bags and the wheat flour bags, while instructing Tony to turn on the kettle.

That night, with Anil still asleep, Tony opened a bottle of wine and began to fill three crystal glasses. The tiny slashed surfaces on their bowls caught the light from the crystal chandelier shining above us like a faux desert sun. Gloria had her phone in one hand. She put it down, took the bottle from Tony, and showed me the label.

‘See, this is my favourite wine, Queen Adelaide shiraz, top-quality.’

I looked at the picture of a queen on the label, and summoned up the wonder that was required in my voice.

‘Oh, wow, looks very high-class.’ In different company I would have said this as a deliberate mockery of everything my Dubai colleagues and I despised, even though we all worked in advertising. We considered ourselves writers, and knew that advertising was only a day job to pay the bills and keep the visa. But on this occasion I knew it would be taken seriously. In fact, I sensed that such a response was expected and would be appreciated, soothing the insecurities of these people who after twenty years in this country were still trying to fit in.

Gloria’s phone rang, but she clicked ‘Ignore’. ‘I only drink this wine,’ she said. ‘It’s really smooth.’

Knowing little about wine, I took a sip myself and said without thinking, hoping to impress, ‘Yeah, it’s really sweet. Reminds me of Rooh Afza.’

Tony chuckled. Gloria said, ‘What’s Rooh Afza?’

‘It’s that red soft drink you get in Bombay, you know, herbal, cools you down.’

‘Oh, that! Our servant liked it, I remember.’ She took another sip, then continued, ‘This is actually quite woody, taste it again.’ I took another sip, slowly this time.

‘I can almost taste the barrel that this wine was matured in,’ she said, with sultry confidence.

‘Yep. Only three bucks a bottle,’ Tony said.

‘It’s the only wine I will drink, Queen Adelaide,’ Gloria repeated. ‘Really smooth on the palate!’

‘Yeah, just like freshly waxed pussy,’ Tony said, laughing loudly and looking straight at me as if for approval.

*Such insolence could only be permitted in jest*, I thought, something this Aussie couple was used to, I supposed. So, not wanting to appear rude, nor give the impression that

Bombay and Dubai were prudish backwaters compared to Sydney, I laughed and looked straight back at him, expecting Gloria to be laughing the loudest.

But Gloria was silent and in that microsecond of looking back at Tony I was startled by the desire in his brazen eyes. It was not approval he wanted but collusion. There was no mistaking that. I kept laughing, louder still, because it felt like the safest thing to do with my face, hoping it would openly show that I would have no part in any collusion, hoping it would mask my surprise, my pleasure and my guilt.

Gloria turned ever so slightly away from Tony and towards me, crossed her legs, and in taking another sip took stock of the situation. Suddenly the peach walls, the exclusive flowery sofa set, the green granite in the backyard, all looked to me like stuffing for a hole that kept getting bigger. Presiding over this abyss was the red heart of Jesus, offering one last lick at a quickly receding salvation.

Gloria's voice was breezy and sure, 'So, tell me, you must like living in Dubai. How's Joey doing?'

She meant to punish Tony with this question, but I personally didn't have a history with him that could justify any cruelty. So I provided a few generic details about Uncle Joe and Auntie Marilyn's life together, and then decided to ask her upfront about job possibilities for Anil and me.

'Uncle Joe suggested I ask you for advice, being a higher-up in the Immigration Department and all.' I tried to keep the tone light, respectful, a minion trying her luck in the durbar of a queen. But somehow it felt like I had suddenly become the queen. I could feel Tony's eyes on

me, poisoning the space between the three of us, sucking the air out of Gloria.

‘Sure,’ she said, taking another sip of her wine, trying hard to salvage some control, giving me power I did not expect nor want.

I dared not look at him again as we drank our wine. I didn’t trust my own attempts at artifice.

‘Sure, I’ll talk to a few people at work, see what they say.’

Gloria picked at her phone throughout the meal and soon enough it began to ring. This time she answered it. While she was on the phone, I tried to keep the conversation going with Tony, talking chiefly about the upcoming tour of the Indian cricket team to Australia. As soon as she put her phone down, I insisted that I would do the washing up, as a way of offering my subordination, and also, I have to admit, as a way of using her own tea towels, objects that held a special place in my imagination.

‘That’s Tony’s job,’ she said. ‘You go and have a rest, sweetie. You must be soooo jet-lagged.’

The next day we drove to Katoomba to see the Three Sisters, who had been petrified by a witchdoctor to protect them from men. Tony said he would find a spot to park, and Anil said he would go along with him. So Gloria and I strolled along and stopped at a flat spot under a scribbly gum. That’s when I realised the air was fired with eucalypt, a fragrance that had travelled all the way to Café Eucalypt in Dubai, the Nilgiri air that I had only this minute managed to catch.

‘Smells beautiful,’ I said.

‘It’s Dior. Got it on special at Myer’s.’

We stood for a moment on the flat spot, each admiring different smells. Then, with precise gestures, Gloria spread out a waterproof red chequered picnic blanket, working her way from left to right as she smoothed it out. I was used to straw mats or bright printed bedsheets thrown across the ground at picnics in Bombay. But here it seemed like the wicker basket, the plastic plates, glasses and cutlery, and the red chequered waterproof mat must all be arranged just so, a ritual that must be followed or else a price of some sort would be paid.

We sat down in silence and suddenly I felt a presence behind me. I felt two strange hands cover my eyes. I was startled at first but then soon realised that the touch was friendly and warm. I began to think of old schoolfriends with whom I had recently connected on Facebook who said they lived in Australia. ‘Maria!’ I yelled, louder and shriller than the situation warranted, unable to hold back my excitement and anticipation. The hands fell away and Tony leaped forward into my field of vision, brushing my neck, back and arms with his trailing fingertips.

‘Can’t be a Maria with hands like these!’ he replied laughing, holding his large workman’s palms open in front of my face for a second too long, as if presenting me with a crown. Then slowly, he retracted them, acknowledging that his gift would not be accepted.

I tried to make light of the matter by giggling like a pro. But I knew from Gloria’s silence that she and I could never recover that first, prelapsarian moment at the airport. It became clear to me that it was not self-assurance that allowed Tony to ignore the attention Gloria received

that day at the airport, but indifference, the sum total of a marriage that was long past its prime. I prolonged my laughter for as long as I could, hoping to conceal these thoughts that thrilled me yet also made me sympathise. With Tony. But also, especially, with Gloria.

‘Those cockatoos are so noisy today,’ Gloria said, her own voice drowning out my high-pitched laughter.

We had our picnic as we gazed out upon the old and certain earth, wind-dropped and pungent with life and ancient blue gums. Gloria passed the dessert around, a box of chocolates from Aldi.

Anil said, ‘These A-*bor*-iginals are like the SCSTs in India, right? They have reservations here for jobs?’

‘What’s SCST?’ Gloria asked.

‘Caste system. Hindu buggers,’ Tony said.

‘Don’t quote me on this,’ Gloria said, lowering her voice, ‘but they get a lot from the government. You name it they get it. But still they are not happy.’

‘Reservations, quotas are needed where there is a power difference,’ I said.

‘Reservations are quite unfair if you ask me,’ Anil said. ‘How would you like someone operating on your brain when he doesn’t really know what he’s doing, and he became a doctor not because he was smart but because there was a spot reserved for him?’

‘Come on! These people are not stupid. They can’t get to the top because the system is skewed against them.’

‘But just answer my question. Would you like someone doing brain surgery on you without being properly qualified?’

‘But they go through medical school, right? They are properly qualified,’ I said.

‘But will they be the best?’ Gloria asked. ‘I agree with you, Anil. Reservations, the quota system, they’re for the lazy ones who don’t want to work, want everything spoon-fed to them.’

I jumped in. ‘It’s hard for women to get to the top, too. Look at advertising as a case in point.’

‘I prefer to be proactive,’ Gloria said.

I should have known better, but all sense of obligation towards our hosts was leaving my body quickly. I judged her and I wanted to make it known.

‘I wish I could be satisfied with being in customer service, but I want to make a difference and I’m prepared to fight the system if I have to,’ I said.

The eerie stillness of the mountains in the late afternoon dropped between us like iron gates. I had displayed my sharpened knives.

She closed the box of chocolates. ‘It gets dark really quickly in the Blue Mountains. We better make a move,’ she said with finality.

I wanted to take my words back. I tried to be as subservient as possible as we packed up, as a gesture of apology. ‘Don’t worry, Gloria, I’ll pack everything away,’ I said, avoiding looking directly at her.

‘Oh, it’s not a problem. You are the guests. I’ve done this a million times for a million people,’ she said, refusing to look directly at me.

Gloria reversed exactly every action she had performed when we first arrived there. It seemed as if a ritual had just been completed, a duty done, and all that had just been said was being packed away, to be regurgitated in the future when the time was right.

Her phone kept ringing on the way home, and in between phone calls I tried to defuse the awkwardness between us with chatter about the traffic, the immigration rules that kept changing every month, and the vicious, swooping birds.

At dinner that night she finally said what I hoped she would say, in the chirpiest of voices. ‘Sorry, sweetie, I really have to be back at work, that’s what all these phone calls were about. Someone’s off sick all of a sudden, so I have to go back, so very sorry! I was hoping to have the week off to settle you in. Tony has to go back to work, too! Joey’s going to be so mad at me.’

‘Oh no, don’t worry. Anil and I can manage on our own.’

‘Oh, you’re a real darling, aren’t you! Here, keep a house key so you can come and go as you please. So sorry we can’t take you around too much. I feel really bad.’

Anil woke up at 2.00 am, surfed the internet on his laptop, then went back to sleep in the morning, just as I was waking up. I could hear Gloria calling out my name. There was an urgency in her voice that I couldn’t quite pin down. I jumped out of bed, worried she was in pain.

‘Everything okay, Gloria?’ I asked bursting into the living room.

There she was, every hair blow-dried in place, fishnet stockings indicating intention, red shoes that matched her red handbag. There was another woman in the room with her.

‘This is Sheetal. She’s the best beautician in the whole of Sydney,’ Gloria said.

I was immediately conscious of my nipples showing through my too-tight T-shirt, the crust in my eyes, the dried-up drool around my lips, my breath bilious. I breathed in through my mouth, hoping that the air I was inhaling would freshen my exhaled breath.

‘I was worried you had hurt yourself or something,’ I said to Gloria.

Her laugh was a snort and she said, ‘Don’t be silly. You can get your eyebrows done today. For free. I’ve already paid. I have to rush off to work.’

Then she turned around to Sheetal and said, ‘Very sorry, Sheetal, I thought I’d be home today.’

‘No worries, no worries,’ Sheetal said. ‘I will do eyebrows for her, threading I will do. Full face if you want I will do.’

‘Will you? Thank you, darling. She really needs it, just come from India. Thanks for helping us out. I’ll phone you and make another appointment. So sorry I couldn’t inform you in time today,’ Gloria said.

After Gloria had left for work, I excused myself to get showered, brushed and properly dressed. Then I came back to the living room, where Sheetal had spread out a large wicker picnic basket she had transformed into a beautician’s carry case. It contained a tub of wax, a little heater in which to heat the wax, wads of starched waxing strips, a bottle of talcum powder, little bottles of lotions, various spools of white thread, tweezers and scissors of different sizes, and a mirror I had seen in the Ikea catalogue online. Then I noticed Sheetal for the first time. She was tall, with long hair like a waterfall and Aryan skin. She wore a long-sleeved kurta with a stretchy

churidar and Nike running shoes. She had covered her bosom with a nylon dupatta. Unmistakably Punjabi. Unmistakably pregnant.

‘Come, madam, come and sit. I’ll do eyebrows for you.’

I didn’t particularly think my eyebrows needed to be done – I’d had them threaded just before we left Dubai – but I could not refuse her, especially now that she already had the thread stretching from her left hand through her lips to her right hand, ready to reshape me for Australia.

I sat down on a dining chair she had already pulled out for me, and tilted my head back against the top of the backrest.

‘You are also from Bombay, like Gloria?’ she asked me through teeth clenching thread, as she ran her fingers over my eyebrows to get a feel for their shape.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘And you?’

It turned out she was from Delhi, from Lajpat Nagar, to be precise, which was initially built as a colony for refugees after Partition.

‘But now I am living close by,’ she said, ‘only seven minutes’ walk. My son is going to school in third standard. I am going walking to leave him in school every day, and for pick-up also. In this condition I can’t do driving lessons.’

I heard the rustle of her kurta.

‘You have been in Delhi?’

‘Yes. I love the shops in Khan market.’

‘Why you go to Khan market? Very expensive. Better is Sarojini Nagar market, or even Palika bazaar is best. Khan market is only for big, big people.’

The summer sun streamed through the back door. She examined my entire face, gently moving my head a little

to the right and then a little to the left. The shock of her cool fingertips on my skin, which was still warm from my hot shower, were like an introduction to the snakes and ladders of a different world.

‘All my clients, I call them to my home. Next time you come to my home. I will make tea for you, masala chai. Only for Gloria I come to her house. She is a very, very kind client of mine.’

‘Thank you, Sheetal. Next time I will come to your home, no problem. Do you do leg waxing also?’

‘Yes, everything I do. See, here I have all waxing material.’ She held up a wad of waxing strips. ‘From India I brought. Now my mother is coming for delivery, I asked her to bring more of waxing material. Demand is there for waxing, face, body, back, front, everything.’

‘Face waxing?’ I asked

‘Yes, but I will say waxing is not good for face.’

‘Really? Why?’ I asked.

‘Wax is very hot and face area is very delicate. One client in Delhi, her skin was very sensitive, she got a burn on her upper lip.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Nothing happened to her. We put Burnol and she became all right. But after that I am telling all my clients that face area is too delicate for waxing.’

Instinctively I put my hands to my cheeks.

She said, ‘For you I will say threading is best. You will get a nice shape for your eyebrows.’

I let my neck muscles relax against the back of the chair. Sheetal took my hands and placed one above and one below my left eyebrow.

‘Hold please.’

I did as required, stretching the skin of my brow as tight as I could, to make it easier for Sheetal to begin threading.

‘Thick or thin you like?’

‘Just the same shape as now,’ I said.

‘This shape doesn’t suit you. Makes your face look too healthy and chubby. I will do a good shape for you. Don’t worry, I will not make them pointy,’ she said.

She worked on my eyebrows in silence because of the thread in her mouth. After a few minutes of work, she held up a mirror to me. ‘See in mirror, shape is okay?’

I took the mirror from her and examined my reflection. ‘Oh yes, very nice. Thank you, Sheetal.’

‘One minute. I will do massage. Then it is finished. If you want, facial I can do for you. Here air is very dry, so facial is a must for soft skin. Mini-facial is only thirty minutes.’

I checked the time. It was highly likely that Anil would sleep for a few more hours. The last time I did a facial was just before my wedding. ‘But Gloria has only paid for...’

‘No worries, no worries. Welcome gift. Your first time in Australia.’

‘Oh no!’

‘Nothing. Don’t worry. Just sit back.’

In the next few minutes, Sheetal cleaned my face with cotton balls dipped in a potion from her basket. Then she began to apply thick cream to my face. Her hands were very soft indeed, just as Gloria said, absorbing all toxicity.

‘I have put pack for you. After fifteen minutes I will wash off. Then I will do cleaning with eucalyptus oil. Very, very natural it is. Then I will do face massage.’

I tried to say thanks but was apprehensive of cracking the pack on my face. It had begun to dry and harden.

‘Hand massage you want while pack is drying? For free. I am just sitting. Why not I do hand massage for you? In this country air is dry. Hand massage is good for skin.’

I gave her a thumbs-up.

She brought her chair closer to mine and, lifting my left arm, she began to massage my hand. I felt the sluggishness of jet lag, the vestiges of Dubai leaving my body as she kneaded her own version of Australia through my flexors and extensors. The silence between us calmed me. Sheetal’s rhythmic compression technique on my arms with just the right amount of pressure, her scrimshaw work while waiting for the pack to dry, gave me permission to close my eyes and slowly fall asleep.

I drifted back into consciousness to see her smiling face bringing me back to reality.

‘Time to wash,’ she said.

‘That was so relaxing,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

‘No problem,’ she said, and began to wipe off the face pack with warm, wet towels. She wiped my face dry, then handed me the mirror.

I was expecting to see newness, morning dew on awakening skin. Instead I looked old. It was as if the mask had not cleansed but mined, right down to bedrock. My eyes closed involuntarily. My body let loose a shiver.

As she was packing up to leave, I opened my wallet to pay her. ‘Here, please take some money from me,’ I said.

‘No, no, Gloria will be very angry with me. You are her guest.’

‘Come on, please, you have done a lot of work.’

‘No, no, I cannot take money from you.’

‘Please, Sheetal, it’s only fair.’

‘I cannot take money. But one thing you can do. I have a parcel for Gloria. Please give it to her. She knows what to do.’

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘that’s no problem at all.’

She took out a small box from her basket that looked about the size of a block of Amul butter.

‘Is it food? Should I keep it in the fridge?’

‘It’s money – \$2200 dollars. I have collected it from all my work. Gloria will do money transfer to my mother’s account in Delhi. She knows about it.’

‘Oh,’ I said, a little hesitant.

Sensing my apprehension, she said, ‘It’s ticket money for my mother to come here.’

‘Sure, sure, I’ll give it to Gloria,’ I said.

‘Like that there is no problem. My husband is very nice. He has no problem with sending money for my mother if I request. But I don’t like to request him. He is working so hard in the shop and business is very down. He has many burdens on his head.’

‘No problem, Sheetal. I will tell Gloria.’

‘Gloria is very, very kind. She is the only client I can trust. I cannot drive otherwise I would do money transfer myself. Also in computers I am no good. Rate is good today. I checked. So please tell her to do today only. I also will text her. But you also tell her, please. Tomorrow dollar rate will go up or not we don’t know.’

‘Okay, no problem,’ I said, taking the package from her hands. ‘I will keep it safe and give it to Gloria. I will phone her and tell her also.’

‘Okay. You Bombay people are very kind. *Chalo*, next time come to my house, masala chai I will give you,’ she said, her basket now full again, ready to go.

When Gloria returned that evening I handed over the package.

‘Poor Sheetal,’ she said. ‘It’s the least I can do to help.’

She took the package from me and returned to her room.

Within a month, Anil and I found work at a petrol station in Marrickville, near the city, and so we moved into a share house. From there we earned enough money and goodwill to be able to rent on our own. We were lucky to find a house close to our petrol-station workplace. But before we left Gloria and Tony’s house, I made an appointment with Sheetal to get my eyebrows threaded again.

She lived in a block of units full of South Asians, only a seven-minute walk from Gloria’s house as she said, but officially in the next suburb and a world away. The red-brick units on her street were like the terracotta warriors of China, protecting kin and country in a tomb-like colonised afterlife.

The security bell wasn’t working and the entrance door to the building was held open by a stack of bricks. The moment I stepped across the threshold, I was hit by the smell of onions being sautéed, spices being roasted, the splattering of mustard oil. It was as if this block of units was trying to remind Australia of its blood ties to South Asia, reminding a daughter it was time to come home.

I rang Sheetal’s doorbell and she welcomed me in. She ushered me into a bedroom and sat me down on an office chair. ‘You can adjust,’ she said, and I fumbled around for the levers to increase its height.

On the bed sat a woman in a salwar kameez and a dupatta hanging loosely around her neck.

‘My mother. Last week she came from India.’ Sheetal left the room.

I said, ‘Hello, *auntyji*, *namaste*.’

Her mother nodded at me. Then she took a deep breath and, although her face was placid, tears began to trickle down from her eyes.

‘*Sab theek hai, auntyji?*’ Is everything okay, aunty?

Her voice was calm and sure as she spoke to me in Hindi. ‘Is it for this that we gave our daughter? Her arms so slender. She always covers them. Why? He has been hitting her every night. These carpets, these curtains hold her screams. At home our windows are always open.’

I was shocked into silence. She dabbed her eyes with a blue printed hankie. ‘She didn’t say a word to us, so far away, thinking we could only bear her happiness and not her pain.’

Sheetal came back into the room with two cups of masala chai. Sensing a shift in the temperature of the room, she hesitated a moment before giving me the tea. ‘Mama, be quiet, don’t annoy clients.’

‘I’m so sorry to hear all this, Sheetal. If there is anything I or Gloria can do to help...’

‘Na, na, no worries. You just relax. Full face threading you want today?’

‘Yes, please,’ I said, my needs so hollow in the presence of this destruction.

‘Very oily your face is today. *Ek* minute. One minute. I will bring towels to wipe.’

When she left the room again, her mother turned to me.

‘Do you know what his mother said to me when I told her what was going on? She said, “That’s what men do. It’s normal. He hasn’t killed her, has he? Then why are you complaining?” That’s what his battered mother said to me.’

I wanted to hug her but knew that would be selfish. What she wanted was for the word to get out.

‘We did not give our daughter for this.’

‘Have you contacted the police, *auntyji*?’

She dabbed her eyes with her hankie again. ‘From yesterday the police have AVO on him. He cannot come close to her. But she needs his signature on the papers. And he is phoning me and telling to me he will not sign. Where will she go in this condition? She doesn’t even know how to drive.’ The tears were steady down her face.

‘She needs the bond money back. The lawyers also want money. The lawyers don’t understand her English. Also, she cannot understand them. Big people they are. Their English is very good. Do you know any Indian lawyers? Do you know any Punjabi lawyer in Australia? A lady Punjabi lawyer? At least her son he must give back to her.’

Sheetal returned to the room with warm, wet towels and wiped my face clean. Her mother dabbed her eyes. Sheetal threaded my eyebrows quietly, her long sleeves brushing against my cheek like pleas for silence.

When she was done, she handed me a mirror. ‘Shape is okay?’

In the mirror I saw her eyes steady upon me. ‘Yes, very nice. Thank you so much.’

She massaged my forehead with her cool fingertips. They were like pricks to my conscience. To my eternal shame, I enjoyed the sensation, and waited until it passed.

As I was leaving, Sheetal said, 'Please, if you can help me, come back again for waxing. I also do haircutting and body massage.'

I hugged her. But hugs were not what she needed. Her body was stiff against mine. 'Thank you, Sheetal,' I said.

'Next time, come back for haircutting, and colour also.'

'I will,' I said, like Judas.

That evening I told Gloria about Sheetal's situation.

She said, 'Yes. Poor Sheetal. She's been through a lot. I will forward some numbers to her. Legal Aid. Migrant Resource Centre. Better not to get too involved. You know what these people are like. They take revenge.'

Anil and I liked our small home in Marrickville. Our landlord was a Greek–Australian man in his sixties who lived off the rental income from eight properties and did all the repairs himself. He spent his days playing with his pet snakes and surfing the net for bargain properties by the Murray River in Albury. 'That's going to be the next boom town,' he said. He wanted to be the first to catch the wave.

We lived in a little weatherboard studio in his backyard, which sloped down to the Cooks River. It used to be a shed. When the wattles were in bloom, casting yellow pearls along the river and the bike path, I could forget about Anil.

'Plato was such a great philosopher,' he would say aloud when hanging the washing on the line, pronouncing Plato as 'plateau'. He hoped to impress our next-door neighbour, a professor of philosophy at Sydney University. Except our neighbour's area of research was Aristotelian thought, and

she had a regular column in the right-wing publication *The Quadrant*. Even if Anil knew all this he wouldn't have cared. All he saw in his mirror was himself.

One morning he came home from a double shift at the petrol station and began to look at driving routes between Sydney and Adelaide along the Princes Highway and the Great Ocean Road.

'Planning a holiday for us?' I asked, about to beam with joy at this thoughtfulness.

'I'm buying a bike. Looking at routes. There's a biking group doing Sydney to Adelaide in May.'

'What about us?' I asked a big question, expecting an answer to reassure me about our world. I wanted to put down roots in this land, build something worth preserving for the generations yet to come.

'You're working those days, I checked the roster. I'll work double shifts and get time off.'

'That's not what I meant at all,' I said.

He turned to look at me. There was incomprehension on his face. I wanted to build a bridge before we were too far gone for even our fingertips to touch. I went over to him and sat on his lap. He licked my lips and sucked on my neck and slipped his hands into my pants.

'Just don't ask me for children,' he said when his mouth was off me.

I kissed him back, and now I see how he may have mistaken that bodily need for agreement.

That night he took care to make sure I came before he fell asleep. I should have been happy entwined in his arms. I looked back like Job's wife, and wondered what would have happened had I not gone into Café Eucalypt that day

in Dubai. I could feel we were both turning into pillars of salt, right before my wide-open eyes.

I found out I was pregnant the day after Anil left for his bike ride along the coast. When he got back, he said, 'One more mouth to feed in this godforsaken country and we don't even have citizenship.'

'Things will work out,' I said, turning away from my emails on the desktop.

'I'm not really interested in being a father.'

'You won't have anything to do. I'll look after the baby. There will be no difference to your life.'

The screensaver came on and its light flickered across his face like an omen.

We were both still working at the petrol station. I had long given up hope of finding work in advertising or journalism. I didn't have the Australian experience all employers asked for. And I didn't have the luxury of taking time off work to attend networking events in the city. I decided that I would enrol in a masters of education once the baby was born.

Things didn't quite turn out as planned.

The day my baby girl, Shakti, was born, Gloria came to visit us in the hospital. She sat herself down on the only chair in the room. I could tell she was trying to contain a swelling sorrow. She brought presents and I knew a ritual must be completed before the heart of the matter was revealed.

'I had no time to shop. You know how busy it is with work and all, no servants to do things for us.'

'You can get household help here but you have to pay a decent wage.'

It was as if I had not spoken.

‘Not so lucky here,’ Gloria said. ‘Have to do everything ourselves, as you have seen for yourself. Anyway, you know how busy it’s been. Had no time to shop at all. But here’s a little something for her, and for you.’

She opened the large plastic bag she was carrying. She had brought a giant plush koala for the baby and, of all things, a two-pack of linen tea towels for me.

Whether she intended to mop me back into domesticity I couldn’t say for sure, but her gift to me instantly took me back to those first tea towels she handed to Auntie Marilyn with her red fingernails. These new ones looked expensive, a kookaburra on a gum tree printed on white linen instead of a picture of the Australian flag, and a wooden tag engraved with a brand name instead of a clip-on koala.

I wanted to share the memory with her, thinking it might give our conversation a more genial tone. So I said, ‘Oh, how lovely! I remember when I first met you...’

But when I looked at Gloria as I spoke, I saw that she had no memory of that time, neither a flicker of recognition of the past, nor a spark of anticipation of what I was going to say. There was no acknowledgement of the refrain I was making this gift out to be. Just a cultivated stare of politeness, to signify that indeed she was now again the queen.

I didn’t bother with continuing my sentence as planned. Instead, I said what I thought she might like to hear: ‘You have such great taste. Thank you so much.’

‘It’s the quality of life here, you see,’ she said, satisfied.

I had not a clue in the world what she meant.

The nurse came in, checked the chart at the foot of the bed, and asked, ‘Everything all right?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Good. Let me know if you need anything.’

After the nurse left, Gloria blurted out, ‘You must have seen the news.’

‘No, I haven’t,’ I said.

‘You haven’t seen the news?’

‘No,’ I said, trying to attach Shakti to my breast.

‘Sheetal’s husband. Threw hot wax in her eyes and eucalyptus oil on her body and lit a match. He burned her full face. She went screaming outside. By the time the neighbours realised what was happening, she was charred. He didn’t stop there. He pierced her hands with scissors. They were sticking out of her palms. It was all over the news. The ambulance came and took her to hospital but she was dead on arrival. Her son was in school, thankfully. Not sure about the baby.’

‘Oh my God!’ I said.

‘She was smelling of the Blue Mountains.’

I couldn’t feed my baby. Not after what Gloria had just said.

‘I hope they catch that bloody bugger and hang him in jail, bloody Hindu terrorist,’ Gloria said, beginning to sob, her tears running down her face onto her silk top. She was wearing waterproof foundation and waterproof eyeliner. When she wiped her eyes dry she looked as fresh as an advertisement.

‘He ran away?’

‘He’s absconding. Poor, dear Sheetal. She had such soft hands.’

That year was hard.

I had stopped breastfeeding Shakti after a month because of issues with her latching on. My nipples were cracked, I had blocked ducts and I hadn't slept properly since her birth. I tried a plastic breast shield and that helped a little, but Shakti was still cranky after she had drained both my breasts. I had no option but to start her on the bottle. She began to put on weight after that, and began to sleep longer. The deep burp that her full tummy produced after every bottle-feed was the sweetest, most gratifying sound I have ever heard.

The night Shakti went onto bottle-feeds full time, I turned off the lights after tucking her into her cot. Then I let myself into our bed and sank back into the mattress. My milk ducts were still slightly blocked, my breasts still a little sore. I felt Anil's leg against mine. I began to stroke his thigh. I turned to him and put my mouth to his, my tongue finding his and tensing with pleasure for the first time since I fell pregnant, as far as I could remember. He slid lower and his fingertips found my nipples.

I began to feel the wetness between my legs. I tensed my pelvic floor, hoping for an orgasm before Shakti woke up. I guided Anil's hand down. His fingers found their place inside me. I pressed the heel of his hand down against me. I began to move as sensuously as I could manage. His mouth was at my breast. I heard him grunt softly.

He detached his mouth from my breast. I waited for him to latch on to the other one. I arched backwards, expecting to be electrified.

He sighed. Then he said, 'Deflated balloons.'

He withdrew his hand from me while I was still warm and reacting. His hands were wet with my desire. For months I replayed that moment over and over again. I wished I had been quicker than him, had yanked him out of me before he could do it himself. He got out of bed and I heard him shower for a long time. I stayed still on the bed, listening for some portent in the debris of the night. All that came to mind was the hum of grasshoppers on our honeymoon in Turkey.

He came back into the room.

By then I sensed that Shakti was stirring. So I gathered her in my arms, left the bedroom with him in it, and went in search of her bottle in the acrid, loosening night.

Two months later I showed him an ad for a job in Darwin. I wrote the application for him and he got the job. Anil moved there after we sorted out his financial contribution through the Child Support Agency. They said we could make a private arrangement or they could organise an official one. I said I didn't want to take any chances and would they please do it officially. Anil said I was cruel to treat him like a criminal, getting the government involved.

I said, 'Grow up, bitch.'

I wouldn't have believed that I had said this myself if not for the reaction of pure hatred on his face.

Gloria rang me for the first time since her visit to the hospital when Shakti was born.

'Did Anil ever hit you?' she asked.

'No.'

'Did he use Fs and Bs on you?'

'No,' I said.

‘Then why on earth did you leave him? Such a decent man.’

Shakti began to cry and I had to cut short our conversation even though I knew Gloria would think I was avoiding the issue.

The day Shakti began to crawl forwards, Aunty Marilyn passed away at her desk. She had just received her letter of promotion when she had a massive stroke and died without warning. In my first broken condolence phone call to Uncle Joe, I insisted that he get away to Sydney. I would pay for his ticket, I said, but he wouldn’t hear of it. It took him a while to accept that leaving Dubai for however short a time, choosing pleasure, didn’t mean he was being unfaithful to the memory of his wife.

His Facebook announcement about his trip to Sydney elicited more than a hundred likes, and thirty-one comments wishing him well, saying this is exactly what Marilyn would have wanted for him, for life to go on. *Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away to the next room.* Gloria and Tony both liked his post and publicly invited him to their house for dinner, through a Facebook post of their own.

Uncle Joe could only get time off work for two weeks. He planned to be here for Shakti’s first birthday. The day he arrived was the day Shakti began to walk unassisted. As I drove him home to my share house in Campsie, through the streets of Tempe and Earlwood, he said, ‘This place is like a graveyard. Where are all the people?’

He spent the first week getting over his jet lag, and visiting the Blue Mountains and the Hunter Valley with tour groups. I had planned to drive him to both places on consecutive days, but Shakti was projectile-vomiting and

had diarrhoea the night before the Blue Mountains trip. The only thing she could keep down was apple juice diluted to half strength with boiled water. With dried vomit on my hands, I managed to make a last-minute booking for both locations before I took Shakti to Emergency at the kids' hospital.

He was exhausted when he got back from both trips, and wanted to just walk around in the city by himself.

'What about going to see Gloria?' I asked him.

'When she invites me, I will go,' he said.

Gloria called him on the weekend and they spoke for an hour. After he had finished, he said, 'She has invited us over for dinner on Friday. You and Shakti, too. She said she hadn't seen the baby since the day she was born.'

On Friday morning, Uncle Joe woke up before dawn. I heard him because I was awake too, feeding Shakti. The first thing he did, before brushing his teeth, before even going to the toilet, was iron the formal beige shirt and black trousers he had brought along from Dubai. Later that morning he asked if I had any gift-wrapping paper. He had brought some glasswork cushion covers for Gloria and Tony and he wanted to wrap them up nicely. I gave him my best wrapping paper, handmade Japanese chiyogami, and the sun rose in his face.

'Do you think she'll like the cushion covers?'

'I'm sure she will,' I said.

He carefully cut out a small piece. He had begun to fold the paper around the gift when the phone rang. I answered. It was Gloria. She had to work late and had been called in to work tomorrow too. Imagine that, working on a Saturday! Would we be free for lunch on Sunday?

‘Sorry, Gloria,’ I said, my voice the hardest hail. ‘Uncle Joe’s flight back home is tomorrow night.’

Later that night, as Uncle Joe and I had dinner together while baby Shakti slept, he told me about the first time he saw Gloria. He was smiling as he spoke, but the charge had gone from his voice.

I decided I had to go back to Dubai for Aunty Marilyn’s first death anniversary Mass. I wanted to do it for Uncle Joe. Shakti was still under two and so I would save a little on her ticket. As we stood in the check-in queue, Shakti fell asleep in her sling against my breasts. I had just started reading again, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and was completely engrossed in its convolutions. Suddenly, there was a commotion at the top of the queue. I looked up from my book. There were cops all over the area. They were handcuffing a man, an Indian man, and taking him away with them.

Shakti and I were allowed to board first. I asked for and was given a cup of coffee while the others were still boarding. That’s how I got to watch the news. That’s how I got to know that the man who had just been arrested at the airport was Sheetal’s husband, her murderer. Poor, dear Sheetal.

The only person who would feel the same relief as I did, the same sense of justice achieved, was Gloria. I took out my phone. My gut reaction was to call her and cry. But then Shakti stirred, stretched, began to howl in her sling. The flight attendant said she needed to be put in the bassinet before take-off. In my agitation I knocked the coffee over and spilled its entire contents onto the food

tray. I tried to use the single paper napkin I had to mop it up, but there was too much liquid there. I fumbled around in my handbag for more tissues, but found none. Then I remembered Gloria's gift the day I became a mother. I had hastily stashed the tea towels, themselves given in haste, into the back pocket of my handbag just before we left home that day. Why? I cannot say.

I retrieved them. Then, hesitating just for a second on account of the superior quality of the linen, I proceeded to mop up the spill. They were more than adequate to the task. After I had finished, I held them both in one hand, a crumple of brown wetness where once there was a green gum tree. With the other hand I fished out the leak-proof vomit bag, stuffed the tea towels into them, sealed them tight, and put them into the net that held the inflight magazines and the emergency procedures card.

I meant to take them with me when we disembarked at Dubai airport. But in the rush to touch solid ground again, I forgot about them. I remembered only when, after scanning all the faces at Arrivals, all those touchstones that were not mine, I saw my uncle Joe.