

AKSHITA NANDA

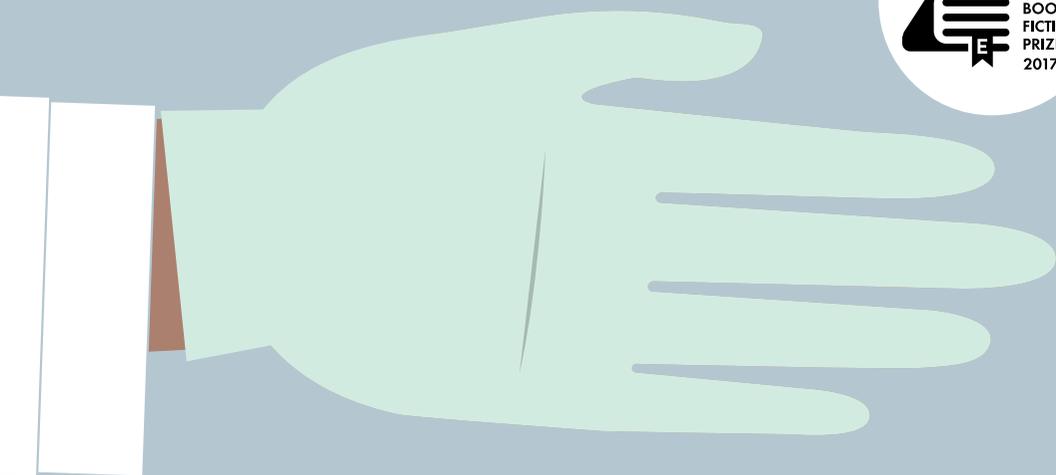


Nimita's Place

FINALIST



EPIGRAM
BOOKS
FICTION
PRIZE
2017



A NOVEL

**NIMITA'S
PLACE**

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A NOVEL

AKSHITA
NANDA



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

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Cover art and design by Eng Chun Pang & Yong Wen Yeu

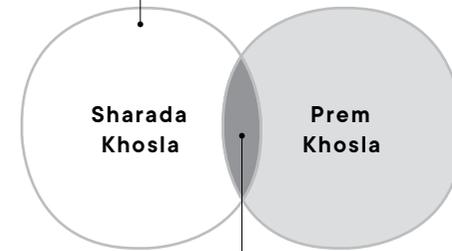
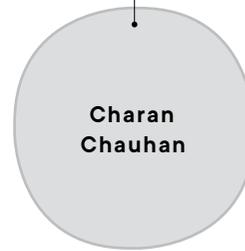
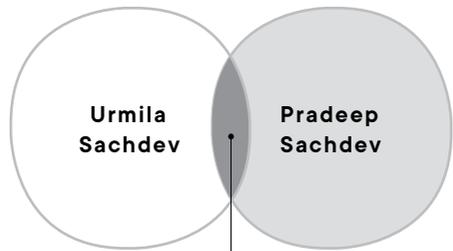
National Library Board,
Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name: Nanda, Akshita, 1979–
Title: Nimita's place / Akshita Nanda.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2018.
Identifier: OCN 1037022282
ISBN 978-981-47-8576-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-47-8577-8 (ebook)
Subject: LCSH: Arranged marriage—India—Fiction.
Immigrants—Singapore—Fiction.
Women—India—Fiction
Classification: DDC S823—dc23

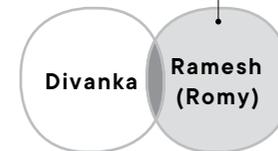
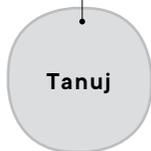
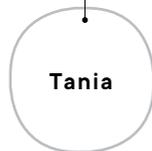
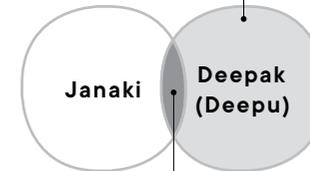
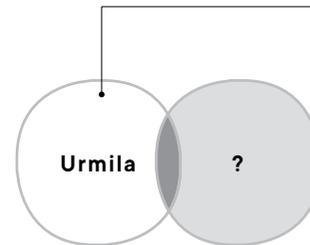
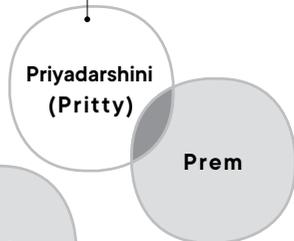
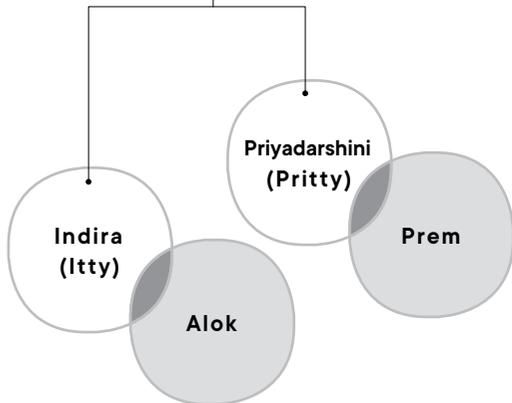
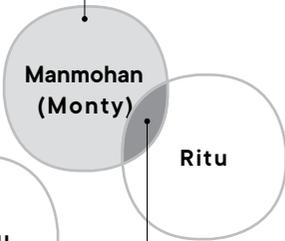
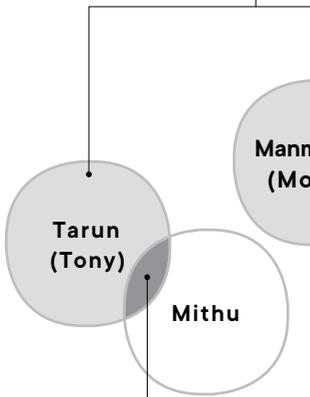
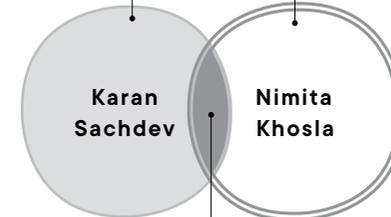
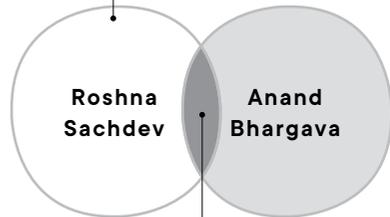
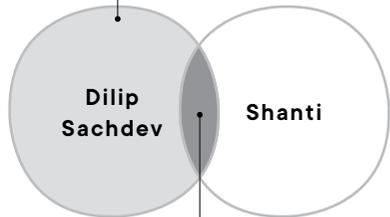
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First Edition: July 2018
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for Indira Tuli



Nimita's Family Tree





Part One
2014

1.

I SAY A kitchen must have a pressure cooker that whistles, milky tea bubbling on the stove and mangoes ripening in hot straw or curling inside pickle jars full of mustard oil.

My friend and roommate Chia Ying says no, a kitchen must have large pots of slow-cooking soup, an old wok that smells of sesame oil and a tin of condensed milk dripping onto the counter.

Dr Alagasamy, my boss, looks like his kitchen would have a stone grinder churning out idli batter, stainless-steel tumblers for filter coffee and twenty varieties of sambar powder. Although, when he takes the research team out for lunch, it is always for Italian ravioli, Peranakan chicken or to this place on Neil Road which today serves soup-filled momos.

The momos burst as soon as I stab them with a fork. The meat juice hits Dr Alagasamy's spectacles. He wipes them, replaces them and delicately extracts a dumpling from the plate with his chopsticks.

"So sorry," I say.

"That's all right," says Dr Alagasamy. "So. You did good work with the Transferase-C project."

Yes, I did. I spent 12-hour days harvesting DNA from bacteria, seeding animal cells with that DNA and then delicately extracting Transferase-C protein from the animal cells. Thanks to me working overtime on weekends, boss could do the experiment that has been published in the top science journal, *Nature*.

But I don't say that. I say: "Thank you for giving me the chance to help."

The dumpling wobbles on my spoon. It's not bad. I dip it in chilli sauce.

"Your contract is up for renewal next year," boss says.

I sit up straight. Do I get a raise?

"You're a valuable member of the team, Nimita. I value your hard work. I really do."

A raise!

“But it’s going to be difficult to renew your contract next year.”

What?

“What?”

Boss shrugs. “I’m sorry. There are these new rules. We now have to give preference to Singaporeans and permanent residents for any job vacancy. I can’t keep you on unless you are a highly qualified foreign worker.”

“I *am* a highly qualified foreign worker!” I have a BSc and MSc from Pune University in India. I worked in Dr Savarkar’s lab, on the river pollution project that got 15 lakhs in funding and write-ups in three newspapers.

“I don’t know what to say. These are the rules now.”

The waiter puts down a steamer of green dumplings. I stab them with my fork but they are dry inside. Dr Alagasamy’s spectacles are safe.

He clears his throat. “These are quite tasty.”

You just fired me, boss. You expect me to eat?

I take a green dumpling to please him, but spit it into my spoon when he’s not looking.

How can he expect me to eat? My throat is tight. So tight.

It’s like I’m being choked by a thin wire, by a line I thought I had cut and escaped by coming to Singapore.



“Hey.” Someone shakes my shoulder. “You okay?”

I blink and focus. Red shirt, beige shorts, flip-flops and round eyes growing bigger under gold-rimmed glasses.

Chia Ying shakes my shoulder again. “Hello?”

“Hello,” I say slowly. It’s hot and steamy under the plastic tents of the night market. Stalls of toys and clothes and bags spin around for a second. I’m giddy, probably because of the heat, probably because I didn’t eat very much at lunch with Dr Alagasamy.

Chia Ying touches me for the third time. She’s too close. “I’m fine,” I tell her. “I’ll go get a drink. You go help Irving.”

I walk away as quickly as I can, leaving my flatmates behind. I want to go back to our place and lie down in my bedroom with the air-con on.

I’m almost out of the plastic tents, feeling cooler air on my skin, when I smell something and stop.

Mangoes.

There are proper mangoes in the bazaar. Actual Alphonso mangoes. The best mangoes in the world, all the way from India.

Not the watery mangoes that come to Singapore from Thailand and that are only a light yellow when ripe. Not the sweetish mangoes that arrive on trucks from Malaysia, which are too dark a yellow on the inside.

I can smell properly ripe Alphonso mangoes, straight from Maharashtra State, where I was born.

For the first time since lunch with Dr Alagasamy, I am hungry again.

These mangoes will be nicely wrinkled, yellow-green on the outside and a dark, intense orange on the inside. You can scoop out the flesh with a spoon or, as I was taught by Dadi, cut the fruit into three parts so there are two fleshy bowls and one section with the stone in the middle. Then, if you cut the surface of each bowl into a grid and push the skin upwards from the bottom, the flesh becomes a mango “flower” of bite-sized cubes. Sink your teeth in; each bite is just the right balance of sweet and sour, firm and soft, bursting in the mouth with the taste and smell of summer.

I have not tasted Alphonso mangoes for three-and-a-half years now because they don’t export well. The air-conditioned, super-expensive supermarkets near my flat sell Thai or Pakistani mangoes. Sometimes there are Amrapali mangoes from Delhi in Mustafa.

I have never smelled Alphonso mangoes here before.

Real mangoes in Singapore. Where could they be?

I walk back under the plastic tents. Nearby tables are stacked with fruits and vegetables. Ooh, bhindi! But the wrong kind, not the dark-green, tender ladies’ fingers from India that are exactly the size of a lady’s fingers. In Singapore you get only long, thick pale-green American okra. They look old and faded and tough, even if Chia Ying insists that is the colour they are when ripe.

I see bananas that are thicker or longer than you get in Mumbai. I recognise some as plantains, except they are red.

A pile of green spikes that looks like jackfruit. I don’t like it fresh but you can cook it like meat if you are vegetarian. People push in front of me to grab the jackfruit. The fruit seller splits one open; it is bright yellow inside. Not a jackfruit but a smelly durian, which Chia Ying loves like I love mangoes.

A huge gust of steam and I can't smell the mangoes any more.

Two stalls away, a dark-skinned man scoops out a heap of vadas from a kadai of boiling oil. Ooh, vadas with chutney. But no, these are being served with ketchup and I can see an actual prawn, giant-size—head, eyes and feelers all sticking out of the vada.

The seller looks Indian but what Indian puts prawns in vada batter? Vadas are dal finely ground with some onion and chilli. They don't have meat or fish or crustaceans inside, everyone knows that.

The stall even has the spelling wrong: vadai.

Forget the vadai.

Next is a stall of—are those bits of octopus being folded into balls of batter?

Takoyaki. The sign shows a smiling octopus.

Really? Bhajiya with octopus inside? In India we fold onions into batter and fry them to make onion bhajiya. Potatoes for potato bhajiya, spinach for spinach bhajiya, bhindi for bhindi bhajiya. I have had fish bhajiya once. Fish, okay, but octopus?

Irving should see this. Irving is the reason Chia Ying dragged me down to the night market when all I want to do is lie down in the dark and think.

Our new flatmate Irving Wan arrived from China just one month ago. His job is to post about food on his social media feeds: @IWan2Eat on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and on their Chinese versions, Weibo and WeChat. Chinese people do not always have access to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, Irving says, though there are ways around the government blocks.

Irving has half-a-million followers and a book deal from some hotshot publisher. One of the publisher's friends is the head of the English department at Nanyang Technological University. She offered Irving a writing residency in Singapore and a teaching contract. *Offered*. Irving didn't even have to apply for his job. I had two Skype interviews and one written round.

My stomach hurts again.

Irving is next to the vadai kadai, holding a handycam and talking to a woman frying burgers. His hair is so short he looks almost bald under the lights. I should tell him about the octopus bits.

But first the mangoes. I am a scientist, I can work this out.

The mangoes must be on that table with the bananas and the durian. That is logical classification, putting fruit with fruit. Also, the scent is strongest there.

Dark round fruit. The seller pulls one open to show white crescents inside a thick, purple rind. The juice stains his fingers purple. Not mangoes.

Dark red, spiky fruit. A customer peels one to feed a little girl. It looks like lychee but the skin is different from the rust-brown kind we get in India.

Small, yellow oblongs the size of my palm. Now that I look at them, they could be mango-shaped. Tiny, but mango-shaped. The skin is firm and sticky with sap. When I bend down, the aroma of Alphonso is strong.

The seller smiles at me and says something in Chinese. I can't see Chia Ying anywhere. I need her to translate.

I twist my wrist to make a mango flower of my right hand, the dance mudra that also means "how much?" Half a flower. My wrist doesn't turn that well any more.

The seller gets my meaning. He says something in Chinese and shows me five fingers. Twice.

Ten dollars? For how many? Or is he saying five dollars for five? That's a lot for tiny mangoes. Unless they taste like Alphonsoes, but how can I tell? Will he cut one open so I can try?

I make a sawing motion with a flat palm. The seller laughs and shakes his head. He does the five fingers twice again. So it must be the price.

I need Chia Ying to help me translate. Or—yes, Irving has finished with the hamburger lady and is leaning on a pole, checking his handycam.

I wave. Irving is tall for a Chinese guy, taller than me, and I'm quite tall for Singapore. He sees me over the heads of the crowd and waves back. "Anything good?"

"Oh! You should see this one." I pull him by the sleeve to the octopus bhajiya stall. "Do you have this in China?"

His eyebrows go up. "I'm from Hong Kong."

"It's in China, no?"

He looks at the stall, rubbing his hand over his buzz cut. One week into his Singapore life and he got a buzz cut. I also cut off my hair when I moved here. It's cooler.

"We have takoyaki in Hong Kong."

"Oh." I've never been to Hong Kong.

Irving's glasses mist. He takes them off, wipes them.

I pull at his sleeve. "Please, Irving, help me, na? I want to taste those small mangoes and maybe buy a lot. But he doesn't understand my sign language and I don't speak Chinese. Please, will you speak Chinese to him for me?"

Irving says: "I don't speak Chinese."

"What?"

"No one speaks Chinese, N. I speak Cantonese and some Mandarin but not Chinese. Look." He points at the vadai guy. "Can you speak Indian to him?"

"Don't be stupid—oh." I get it now. "Oh, okay. Sorry. Will you come see if he speaks Mandarin or Cantonese?"

We walk over to the fruit stall. The seller smiles at us. Irving says something and the seller holds up both hands, shaking his head.

Irving looks at me the way I look at Singapore bhindi. "That's not Mandarin or Cantonese. He's speaking—I don't know. Bahasa Melayu?"

The seller nods and says something in his language.

My face is hot. Too many tubelights and not enough fans under the tent. My shirt sticks to my skin. "Sorry." How was I to know the seller was Malay? He looks Chinese.

Irving walks away.

I need Chia Ying. She can speak to anyone. I wave at two strangers in red T-shirts, beige shorts and flip-flops before my flatmate sees me.

"Hey, durian! And pisang raja!" She points at the too-long and too-thick type of bananas.

"Is that good?"

"Durian is always good," she says. "But yeah, pisang raja is banana-licious." Chia Ying is Malaysian Chinese and likes all the bananas I find odd. "I'm going to buy it and fry it."

"Chia Ying, Chia Ying, will you also ask him if I can taste those mangoes?"

"Okay, hold on." She gets the seller to cut open a mango. It's so tiny, the two pieces just about spill over my palm. The flesh is a bright yellow, an intense yellow, not the orange of Alphonso.

But the smell, the taste. I nearly bury my nose in the flesh, then bite.

"Oh my God, try this!"

"Yah? Okay." Chia Ying bites into the other half, the one without a stone. "Wow, these are good. Yum-mango!"

"Ask him how much. And where these mangoes are from. And what they are called. And if he'll give a discount since you're also buying bananas and maybe I can also get some lychees but no durian, okay, please?"

"Hold on, hold on." Chia Ying laughs. "Breathe, Nimita Sachdev. Do your pranayama breathing."

I do pranayama breathing to relax but I am too excited. The mangoes are incredible.

Ten dollars a kilo, which Chia Ying bargains to half price because she also buys four bunches of the pisang raja and two full-to-bulging plastic bags of lychees. These are rambutans, she reminds me. We have eaten them before.

I buy three kilos of mangoes.

They are so small I can eat three at a time. Maybe four. I have to Skype my family in Mumbai and show them the Malaysian avatar of the Alphonso.

They are called apple mangoes, the seller says through Chia Ying. He drove down from Kota Tinggi with a truckful of fruits from his family's land.

"Where is Kota Tinggi?"

"It's in Malaysia. It's farther than JB and there's nothing there."

"How can there be nothing in Kota Tinggi? There must be something there."

Chia Ying waves her hand. "Farms, a lot of forest, some resorts, a waterfall. Not like KL."

Chia Ying is from Kuala Lumpur, which sounds like Mumbai. Kota Tinggi sounds like Lonavla, the hilly town outside Mumbai that we always visited over weekends. It is cool and green. Dadi owns a house there. She rents it out so we drive up to keep an eye on the tenants. My grandmother and I also talk about living there one day, perhaps.

Irving appears from behind us. "What's happening?"

"We're buying mangoes. And durian."

I groan and gather some of the bags. "Okay, but you carry the durian."

Chia Ying hands Irving the bananas and durian. "You will love it," she tells him.

Irving takes a bag of mangoes from me. My right hand feels better as soon as the weight is off. Seven years since the fracture, and my wrist still hurts if I overstrain it.

“No, don’t mix the fruits,” Chia Ying says when Irving starts tipping some of the lychees into a half-full bag of bananas. “I’m going to give that to Hafeezah. She asked me to look out for pisang raja.”

“What is she cooking?” Malay food is new to Irving. He has lived only in China and Edinburgh.

“Don’t know. Ask her.”

We walk back to our flat.

At our block, the lift opens and I hold my breath. Some of our neighbours keep cats and they sometimes pee inside the lift.

I exhale only when the lift stops at the ninth floor, then take the mangoes and some other bags from Irving. “I’ll go ahead and open the door.”

Hafeezah’s flat is on the way to ours. She’s already at the grille door, looking out for us maybe. Her tudung is in place, the lilac cloth framing her features. To me it looks odd, a Malay tudung around North Indian features. She has a sharp Sindhi nose and neatly threaded eyebrows.

“Sab theek?” she asks me in broken Hindi.

Hafeezah knows Hindi only through Bollywood movies. She has been trying to be friendly with me ever since she and her husband bought the flat next to the one Chia Ying and I rent.

“Sab theek,” I say to be polite, then lift the bags to show I’m busy. “Chia Ying found your bananas.”

“Thank you!” She says that to Chia Ying because I’m already walking past her, ready to turn the key in the lock and escape.

Hafeezah was born Rita Lalwani and into a Sindhi family that moved to Singapore in 1947, after India split into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Partition displaced her grandparents, just as mine left Lahore because of the riots that broke out after Hindus and Muslims moved into each other’s lands. When Rita converted to Islam four years ago and changed her name to marry Abu, a Singaporean Malay, her Hindu family did not like that one bit. Chia Ying says Hafeezah’s parents have not seen their daughter in three years now, not even after their grandson Altaf was born.

Hafeezah is no one of mine and I have nothing to say about how she leads her life. But sometimes seeing her face gives me a strange feeling in the stomach. It’s like looking in a mirror, except the person looking back wears a tudung.

2.

EVERY MORNING BEFORE Chia Ying turns on her Nespresso machine in the kitchen, I turn on the gas stove and use its flame to light a tealight to do aarti before the pictures on my bedroom shelf.

My stomach relaxes as I move the flame three times clockwise around the pictures of Shiva and Parvati and Rama and Sita and Lakshmana and the small statue of the elephant-headed Ganesha. Help me do this, I ask them. Help me stay in Singapore.

After aarti, I go to the living room area where my cellphone is usually charging. Scientific studies have shown that increased exposure to smartphone and computer screens leads to disturbed sleep and possibly increases the risk of depression and mental disorders. I keep my laptop and cellphone in the living area and stop checking both at least two hours before I go to sleep.

Irving comes out of his room in a singlet and shorts, earbuds plugged in.

“Mangoes?”

“I’ll film them later,” he says, putting on his shoes.

The door closes.

There are the usual eighty unread messages from family WhatsApp chats and one missed call from Dad in Mumbai. It’s only 6am there. My wrist aches as I press the call button.

“Good morning, beta, did I wake you up?”

“No, Dad, I’m awake. Is everything all right?”

“I should be asking you that. I heard about that earthquake in Indonesia. How is everything in Singapore?”

I switch the phone to the left hand. Not again. I do pranayama breathing to reduce irritation and cool the body, breathing out slowly through my teeth.

“Beta, can you hear something? Have you left the gas on?”

I stop doing pranayama breathing. “Dad, there are always earthquakes in Indonesia but what has that got to do with Singapore? Why should something that happens in Indonesia affect Singapore? How’s Mummy?”

“No, but beta,” Dad clicks his tongue, “if I knew Singapore was going to be unsafe like this, I would never have allowed you to leave Bombay.”

First of all, I found the job in Singapore. I am thirty years old and no one “allows” me anything.

“I’m fine, Dad. Nothing ever happens in Singapore.”

That is why I moved here, safest city in the world. Nothing ever happens. No robberies, no shootings, hardly any rapes. No one even honks in a traffic jam. In India, people spill out of their cars and trucks, shouting, but in Singapore, people sit quietly and listen to the radio.

As for marching on the streets, I have not seen one tamasha in public since I came here. Police will catch anyone doing a tamasha or morcha. It is actually illegal to march on the streets or to protest against the government without a permit. Even more unbelievable, people actually obey those rules. That would never happen in Mumbai, where nobody asks permission before creating commotion on the streets every second day.

“Dad, you are worrying about nothing. Nothing is going to happen. Now, how is everyone?”

Chia Ying comes out of her room. I finish with Dad and follow her into the kitchen.

“Who was that?” Chia Ying feeds a capsule into her coffee machine.

“Dad. Again.”

My phone vibrates and look, here’s a message from Itty-Bua. I take the mangoes to the table in the air-conditioned living room before reading it.

Dad’s cousins Itty-Bua and Pritty-Bua are the only aunts I have in the world. Mummy is an only child and Dad’s real sister Urmila-Bua died before I was born.

Itty-Bua and Pritty-Bua are older than Dad, so what they say goes in our family.

The buas came to visit me last year but it was during the haze, when forest fires from Indonesia send choking smoke over the seas to Singapore.

“So neat and clean Singapore is on the street, but too much pollution in

the air,” the buas told Dad and Mummy. “So bad, I tell you, I had to put my dupatta over my nose whenever we were outside. Poor Nimmy got an infection also.”

Immediately the tamasha started. Come back home and work, na, what is this? Why do you want to live in such pollution?

I told them to come and see how clean Singapore air is most of the year and they refuse. Too busy, they say, but I know it’s because they think it’s too expensive. Money is tight right now because of my brother Romy-Bhaiya’s mortgage in Houston. He lost his job a few months ago. All the good IT jobs are moving to India.

Itty-Bua and Pritty-Bua can afford to travel anywhere, anytime. Their husbands own properties in Bandra and Malabar Hill. My cousins have all studied and settled in the US and UK. The buas will never leave India, though, because they are famous Bollywood singers whose screen names are Gulshan and Gulshaan.

Also, the best parties are in India. The buas are very fashionable. Diamonds drip from their fingers and ears and their lips also, Mummy says. Sparkly and cutting.

What does Itty-Bua have to say this morning? “Good morning beta sweet child *muak* ❤️❤️❤️. How are you beta? I found this photo from our trip to Lonavla in January.”

In the photo, we’re all relaxed and smiling.

“Too short that trip was but so nice to see you. 🤔🤔”

The buas really do love me. I type back: “Good morning Bua. 🤔🤔 I miss you too!”

She replies immediately: “Remember when I took this photo of you in a sari? So gorgeous, God bless. 🤔”

She sends the picture.

“I think it’s time to change your WhatsApp profile picture na? 🤔” she adds.

My current picture shows me in a lab coat. Santha the lab manager helped me take it. I think it’s very professional and neat, but why not? To please Bua.

“Did you just change your WhatsApp profile picture?” Chia Ying calls from the kitchen.

“Yes. Just.”

“Nice sari.” She comes out of the kitchen holding two cups of coffee. “Irving?”

“He’ll film breakfast later.”

Chia Ying laughs.

Our landlord increased our rent by fifty per cent this year, because of the stupid property boom. So we advertised for a flatmate, posting on the Facebook page where Chia Ying and I first found each other in 2011. Her fiancé Raymond was being posted to Delhi for a few years and she needed help to split the rent.

Like me, Chia Ying also works in Singapore General Hospital, but as a radiotherapist. Her pay is good, but not enough to cover the full rent on a three-bedroom flat. Even a flat that is in Bukit Batok and not nearby Jurong East with the snazzy malls.

Chia Ying and I interviewed two girls before agreeing on Irving.

Irving came to meet us at the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf at West Mall. He wore white sailor pants and shoes with no socks. The first four buttons of his tight black shirt were open, to show a waxed chest. He was so totally a six that not even my buas could object to my sharing a flat with him.

“Six? No, he’s a seven, maybe eight on ten.”

“No, Chia Ying, he’s a six, like, six and nine, you flip them around and they look the same? Chhakka. Six. Like, one of those.” I made my left hand flop at the wrist.

“What? No!”

“He wears shoes without socks! His eyebrows are neat and did you see that shirt?”

“Woman, have you heard of metrosexuals?”

On the day he moved in, Irving wore grey slacks and a boat-neck white T-shirt with the lettering: “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun...Like Me.”

“No, lah,” Chia Ying said to me while he was setting up his PlayStation with our TV.

The next day, I was up earliest like always and saw Irving ironing his shirt for the day. It was light pink. “QED,” I said to Chia Ying, but she said: “Metrosexual.”

Wait till she sees the singlet he is wearing today. Metrosexual, my foot.

“You okay?” says Chia Ying, putting my coffee down.

“A-one.” I will be. “If Dr Alagasamy wants a super-specialised researcher then I will come up with a super-special research project for him. I have a full year.”

“Jia you!” says Chia Ying. I think it means “more oil” or “good luck”. “Want to watch a movie today?”

“Can we meet after four? I want to go window-shopping. You can come.”

Chia Ying shakes her head. “No, thanks. My window-shopping is at Kate Spade and Gucci, not showflats.”

Her loss. My idea of window-shopping is going to open houses and checking out flats to buy. Dadi likes to do this too. We would imagine how to redecorate the bedrooms and rate the kitchens on a scale of one to ten.

I double-check the open-house timing while taking a sip of my latte. A message pops up and I spit the latte back into the cup.

“What?” Chia Ying reads my phone upside down.

From Itty-Bua: “Lovely darling, so pretty you look *muah muah*. Btw you remember Gautam Bhatia from Pinky’s wedding? He’s coming to Singapore for some time. I gave him your number. 😊😊 He’s still single. Such a nice boy, such good family. 🙏🌸 Let me know when he messages you. You must meet him and tell me EVERYTHING OK?”

“Shi—”

“Shi-itake mushrooms,” says Chia Ying, who doesn’t like to swear. “Shiitake mushrooms, Nimmy.”

“Shiitake mushrooms.” My latte tastes really bitter.

Chia Ying takes my phone. “Who is this guy?”

I have no appetite now, not even for mangoes. “He’s one reason I came to Singapore.”

Actually it was my cousin Pinky who started me thinking about Singapore. It was at Pinky’s wedding where I told my family straight out that I wasn’t going to get married, was still forced to meet Gautam Bhatia and so decided to go to Singapore to work.

Chia Ying laughs over her latte. “It’s sweet. Your aunty is matchmaking you again.” She gives me back my phone. “So, this guy not hot or what?”

I do my pranayama breathing and think of how to explain it to her. She doesn’t understand. I left India to avoid this.

“Why not check out the guy?”

“I saw him once. Before I left India.”

“That bad?”

I push the coffee away and start cutting mangoes. “Not really.”

“Then?”

The apple mangoes are too tiny to make the flower grid so I eat them with a spoon. “You’ll have?”

Chia Ying takes half a mango. “Mm, yum-mango. So what’s the problem with this guy?”

My problem is not with the guy per se. My problem is with marriage.

“You know how much a wedding costs in India? I can buy one full flat here with that sort of money.”

A government-subsidised HDB flat, definitely.



In India, weddings are so expensive that banks give shaadi loans, like home loans and car loans. Punjabi traditions and Bollywood require a minimum of four celebratory days: engagement party, sangeet or dance-cum-henna party, wedding and reception. There will be hundreds of guests at each function, even if you invite only relatives, close friends and colleagues.

Expenses include clothes and gifts and invitation cards of thick bond paper with embossed seals of Ganesha.

There are other headaches beyond expense. Wedding invitations must be hand-delivered to family and close friends. If the family or close friend lives in another city or country, posting it is all right, but it must be followed up with a phone call. When Romy-Bhaiya got married in 2005, Mummy and Dad called and visited over two hundred people. It was funny because the wedding was held in Delhi where Bhabhi’s parents live, we were in Mumbai, but most of the guests we invited lived in Delhi anyway.

Delhi-ites are different from Mumbaikars. If Romy-Bhaiya’s wedding were an independent YouTube short film, Pinky’s wedding in Delhi was a three-hour Sanjay Leela Bhansali movie starring Aishwarya Rai Bachchan.

Dad and Mummy are not doing too badly. We are upper middle class. We have a house in Worli, even if it’s not sea-facing. It’s actually Dadi’s house, bought in 1960.

But Pinky’s father, Tony-Chacha, is the contractor who builds the houses of Delhi MPs. He and his mother, Shanti-Tayee, and his younger brother, Monty-Chacha, occupy multiple floors of a giant building in Vikas Kunj with their families. The building has two underground parking garages and a second-floor swimming pool. It looks like a small condominium, but is a family home.

Pinky’s wedding had four formal evening functions and four informal lunch functions, and everybody had to dress up, even for breakfast, because all two hundred out-of-town guests were being put up in the same fancy hotel.

It pinched me so much. Dadi, too, because at the breakfast table, she said: “You know, in the old days we would all be in the wedding house, we would be there to help. At a girl’s wedding, everybody must chip in, you know.”

And everyone looked at me without looking at me because at my wedding, everyone would have to chip in for the sake of family izzat.

I cannot afford to have a Bollywood wedding. Any wedding at all would bankrupt my family right now. Our accounts are low because the American economy has been down for years and Dad has to help Romy-Bhaiya with the house payments. “It’s for our holiday home,” Dad jokes, but the exchange rate kills him and Mummy. They have visited the US only twice in the nine years since Romy-Bhaiya settled there.

When we had to help Romy-Bhaiya for the first time, it was before Pinky’s wedding. Even Dadi, who loves Romy-Bhaiya like a flower loves rain, commented that our neighbour Mrs Mishra’s grandson, the investment banker, never asked his family for anything. In fact, he built his parents a nice bungalow in Bandra. But she handed over the rent from the Lonavla property for Bhaiya’s sake and spent 50,000 rupees from her own savings to buy us new clothes for Pinky’s wedding.

Fifty thousand rupees! That’s a month’s salary for a bank employee and I was making maybe 15,000 to 25,000 a month then, teaching high school students. I would have made more as a researcher, but I was taking a long break after my MSc.

When people asked why I wasn’t doing a PhD, I told them I was considering my options. Most then told me I had spent too much time

shut up in the lab at a young age. I should have been learning more about the world, they said.

I learnt a lot about our world because of Pinky's wedding. When we went shopping in Colaba before going to Delhi, I realised I couldn't afford most of the lehengas and salwar kameezes they were making me try on. Dadi said: "You're twenty-five and need to have some nice clothes."

When I brought out the saris Divanka-Bhabhi had given me five years ago, Dadi said: "You can't recycle what you wore for Romy's wedding. Everyone will remember."

"This is a Delhi wedding. You'll see," Mummy added.

I wore a new lehenga with a gold thread shawl and Mummy's Jaipur-set, uncut diamond earrings at Pinky's engagement party. Both Itty-Bua and Pritty-Bua came and tugged at my cheeks, said how nice I looked and then told Mummy: "Your earrings look so nice on her, na? How these children grow up."

We all live in Mumbai and they must have seen Mummy wear this set more than once. Fine.

When Mithu-Chachi, Pinky's mother, also recognised the earrings, I wasn't too surprised. We do spend a lot of time in Delhi.

Then Kitty-Aunty, who lives in Simla and is somehow related to Dad, also came up to say hello. "Your mother's earrings really suit you," she said. I had never met her before. Mummy says she met her once, at Monty-Chacha's wedding, back in the 1980s.

But that is how it is in Delhi.

Mummy and Dadi gambled that our Delhi relatives would not wear saris from South India for the wedding. So, they pulled out a Kanjeevaram silk with peacock prints, Pochampally weaves and special Chantilly lace from Dubai.

They looked so elegant, but our Delhi cousins stole the show with hotshot designer saris and lehenga skirts from Ritu Kumar. Some were studded with bright rubies, ropes of semiprecious stones and flashy cubic zirconia. Jhatak heart attack, so bright that I had to sit down during the strobe-light-disco portion of the sangeet.

At the end of the evening, Dadi and Mummy were feeling giddy too. Ritu-Chachi had told them there would be one extra function, a formal

meeting between the boy's and girl's sides of the family, before the wedding. Usually one goes straight from sangeet to wedding, but now there would be a brunch in between, because, her voice got lower here, it seems there is quite a lot of...interest, she said, looking at me.

Weddings are where other weddings are arranged. "I'm not going," I said in our hotel room, while Dad went off to Roshna-Badi-Bua's room to see if he could borrow a tie from her husband. Fine for the men, all they had to do was swap coats. We women could not do that. Everybody would know.

We had planned our wardrobes carefully. Four glitzy evening outfits for four functions. We had chosen less fancy but still stylish clothes like slacks and tailored Western tops or kurtis with mirror-work designs or Parsi embroidery for the breakfasts and lunches. Jeans not allowed. Matching earrings. Good shoes.

This extra brunch meant we were all one outfit short. We couldn't just swap saris, like I suggested. "First of all, the blouses won't fit, beta," Dadi told me before telling Mummy to call Roshna-Badi-Bua for a consultation. "We'll all go to Lajpat Nagar, quickly, first thing after breakfast tomorrow. The boutiques are all there. And maybe some of the tailors can fix something up quickly."

"I'm not going... I have a stomach ache," I said. Mummy just looked at me while dialling Roshna-Badi-Bua's room and Dadi clucked. "Beta, don't be so stubborn. We've come all this way, let's enjoy. What's the harm?"

What was the harm? Nothing, except another 15,000 rupees down the drain for a secret shopping expedition.

The Indian army's crack R&AW agents or the US Navy SEALs could not have executed a mission more efficiently. We ate and were out of the hotel by 10am, in Lajpat Nagar by 10.30am, were done trying and selecting by noon and back in the hotel just in time to bathe and primp before the brunch.

Despite the cost, I liked my new Lahoria-style fitted kurta split down the middle to show off the contrasting parallel pants. Dadi paid the asking price of 3,500 rupees without a murmur. Say "Lahore" or "Pakistani embroidery" and she will immediately fall in love with the outfit without even seeing it, but this time I approved of her choice as well.

Kitty-Aunty came up and said: “Haan, that mehendi colour really suits your fair skin, gori-chitti.” This is the top compliment for a Punjabi girl, and means fair.

“These Pakistani styles are the best, na?” she said. “I suppose you can’t get them in Mumbai, so good you went and bought something today. Do more shopping while in Delhi.”

It is bad manners to talk back to an elder. I was about to show bad manners when Mithu-Chachi came up and said: “Kitty-Aunty, so nice to see you!” Like Kitty-Aunty hadn’t attended every single function and tried every single sweet thing on offer while making a sour face about the lack of variety.

“Nimmy-beta, you look so nice,” Mithu-Chachi said. “You must take me to that boutique in Mumbai. Amazing, you know, Aunty, they’re getting all the fashions a month before Delhi! I should have done Pinky’s shopping there like Mummy was suggesting, but no time, no time. Haan, Nimmy-beta, come, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

At that moment, I would have promised to be Mithu-Chachi’s slave. So I smiled and made polite conversation even when she took me to where Dadi was talking to a couple I did not know. Next to them, a tall, fair guy stood holding a plate of biryani.

“This is Gautam, beta, he’s just finished double master’s in Singapore, IT and MBA Finance. Now he is working with Kotak Mahindra Bank. Gautam-beta, our Nimita has done her MSc in microbiology, you know, from University of Pune. And these are his parents, very close connections of ours.”

I smiled even as my stomach curled around the rotis I had been eating.

“So you did microbiology, beta?” Gautam’s mother asked me.

“Molecular biology actually, Aunty,” I said politely.

Microbiology is the study of bacteria and small organisms. Molecular biology takes apart the building blocks of life, engineers DNA, figures out the universal code that makes a plant a plant, an animal an animal and possibly how to transform one into another.

But what did anyone care? In the matrimonial market, my degree was like the gold foil on a chocolate coin. The real gold medal was an MBA, especially an MBA in Finance, which guarantees high-paying jobs in banks.

Gautam Bhatia was a double-gold-medallist, MBA Finance and MSc (IT). He was as good as Pinky’s older brother Rocky, who has a single MBA from Stanford. Pinky has an MBA too, from the National University of Singapore.

Romy-Bhaiya has a PhD in physics. Dad did his PhD in sociology and would have taught in Bombay University but the mills in Mumbai began to close down. Dada had to sell his textile business and Dad had to earn real money.

Luckily Roshna-Badi-Bua suggested Dad meet Mummy, who was designing leather bags and wanted to supply to all the big boutiques. Mummy had the craftsmen but no connections to enter the market. Dad had market connections, but no product to supply.

Their business partnership soon became a marriage partnership—“an arranged love marriage” is what they call it—but their bedroom still has fat sociology textbooks that Dad reads at night for fun.

Dad’s elder sister, my Urmila-Bua, also did a PhD, in Mathematics, and taught in Delhi University after marriage. We don’t talk much about Urmila-Bua, who died before I was born.

After the brunch, Dadi asked what I thought of that Gautam Bhatia, nice boy, very tall and fair, earning well.

“I’m not interested in marriage, Dadi,” I said. “I told you that time only, after my accident, that I was not going to marry. I want to concentrate on my career.”

Mummy stopped ironing her sari for the night. “So how are you concentrating on your career? Care to share your grand plans for the future?”

Mummy is really disappointed that I refused to do my PhD after MSc. She even went down to Pune University to talk to my supervisor, Dr Savarkar. I had a sick feeling until she came home, tossed up her hands and said: “Madam can do what she likes. Dr Savarkar also doesn’t know why you’re throwing your life away.”

Mummy has this way of speaking that sends me running towards Dadi. “I have plans for my future,” I told Mummy in Delhi.

She snorted.

“Is the iron free?” Dadi said quickly.

I had lied. I didn't have plans. Teaching brats to pass tenth-standard Biology was not what I was trained for. But I also could not even think of going back to Dr Savarkar's lab in Pune University, even if she said I could rejoin any time.

I was qualified to join the Environment Authority in Mumbai but it wasn't hiring.

I was overqualified to draw blood and run urine samples at a private hospital, though the pay would be slightly better than giving tuition. What else was there?

All I knew was, the "what else" would not be marriage. Marriage was not a good investment for my family or me.

"You need to think about your future," Mummy said, as I began ironing my blouse for the evening. A blouse which she had paid for, which I could not afford. "When will you settle down?"

What does "settle down" mean? In India, "settle down" means "find a job" and "get married". Indians are not adults until they "settle down". Perhaps I should get a job somewhere outside Mumbai. It would take some of this pressure off.

Abroad? Romy-Bhaiya loves the US but I don't know. The US can get cold and since I broke my wrist, the slightest dip in temperature sends shooting pains up the bone.

At the wedding, Mummy and I ate with Gautam Bhatia and his mother, while Dad did uncle-of-the-bridal things elsewhere.

"Congratulations," said Mrs Bhatia. "Pinky is a very nice girl and very qualified too. She studied in Singapore also, na? Our Gautam, he did a one-and-a-half-year exchange there for his MBA and MSc (IT)."

"Oh," Mummy said, deliberately not commenting on Gautam's education. For that, I gave her a secret one-armed hug.

"Singapore is a great place actually, lots of scope," he said. "I have a friend who did microbiology, just like you, Nimita. If you convert his salary, he earns almost as much as I do in the bank. As much as my junior does, anyway."

I did not ask Gautam how much he earned. I did ask him where this friend of his was working.

"Oh, he's a researcher at some place. Some hospital. There's lots of

money in microbiology nowadays, overseas. Kotak Mahindra invested in some of that," he said.

Singapore. Well, why not?

As soon as I got home, I did some research, took three deep pranayama breaths and called Dr Savarkar.

"Ma'am, I was wondering if you know anybody in Singapore," I said, after the hi-hello-how-are-you part of the conversation was done with.

"Singapore? I know lots of people," she said. "Why?"

"Ma'am, is it a good place to work?"

Silence. "You want to work in Singapore?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, knowing how rude it was. I had a place in her lab, the minute I requested it. But she knew and I knew why I wouldn't take it. We would never be able to talk about it, but we both knew why I wasn't asking for it.

"Let me make some calls," Dr Savarkar said.

"Ma'am, thank you, ma'am," I said. "Ma'am, I'm really sorry—"

"Just promise me you'll start thinking about your PhD," she said and cut the connection.

So that was how I heard of Singapore General Hospital and Dr K. Alagasamy. "He's an animal cell researcher," Dr Savarkar warned. "It's a whole different ball game. You'll start from the bottom."

"Ma'am, that's okay," I said. It was perfect. Animal cells, not plants, an entirely new type of tissue to work with. Familiar techniques would have to be relearned. There would be a whole different set of literature to read up on. "But ma'am, will he be okay with me?"

"I told him you were worth his time," said Dr Savarkar. "Start thinking about your PhD."

But I was thinking about something entirely different.

I was thinking about how much I could earn in Singapore and whether it might be possible to settle down there. Buy a flat and live in peace by myself.

In another country, I could "settle down" without having to marry anyone. I could concentrate on my career. I would be far enough away that my family would not constantly be sending me potential husbands.

The day I left for CSI Airport, Dadi cried a little as she fed me sugar and curds. "You know, I always wanted to study abroad," she said.

“I know,” I said. “Edinburgh.”

Mummy tapped the back of my head in warning. Dad had left the room long ago, pretending to get the car but actually to hide his crying face.

I was feeling emotional myself. Dadi wasn't helping.

“My little princess. How will you take care of yourself all alone in a foreign country?”

“She's twenty-six years old,” Mummy said.

“Already twenty-six,” said Dadi. “How time flies. You know, I was not even that old when I left my home, sixty years ago. During Partition.”

“This is different,” Mummy said.

Help me do this, I prayed to the pictures of Shiva and Parvati and Rama and Sita and especially to our little statue of Ganesha. With his elephant head and human body, Ganesha is the perfect god to watch over those who engineer DNA. Help me settle down and make a place of my own, I requested of them all, especially Ganesha.

Itty-Bua came to the airport to see me off. “Haan, but beta, what shall I tell that Gautam Bhatia's family?” she asked for the tenth time. Her husband is Mithu-Chachi's cousin so it was up to her to report back.

Mummy took charge. “What is there to tell? It is a good match but the girl has such a good chance to work in Singapore, na?”

So that was that, three-and-a-half years ago. Things had been good. Until now.

3.

TWENTY PEOPLE CAME to the first open house today. That's twenty people wanting to make their home in a flat where the ceiling paint is peeling, the bathroom is mouldy and the location is, as advertised, near an MRT train station, which turns out to be Khatib.

No mall, no nothing, only open fields and down-market shops. It is worse to live near Khatib than in Bukit Batok.

But the flat is so cheap. Only \$600,000 for an 850-square-foot condo. I could afford it with a bank loan, but just as I walk through the door, I see a couple hand over a cheque and letter of intent to buy the flat.

They fold their arms and look at me and all the others who come in, in the next few minutes. The agent has to show us all out, close the door and put a sign on it, saying: “Viewing closed”.

Next is a newer condo, near the Yew Tee MRT station and beside an air-conditioned shopping mall. A fight has already started in the first flat on view, on the 12th floor.

As I walk in, two buyers flap cheques beneath the agent's nose. One shouts, “800K!” and the other, “How can? I offer 780K, you call the owner already! How can?”

“Sorry lah. She made higher offer, I got duty to my seller,” the agent says. She doesn't sound sorry at all.

I walk out immediately and catch the lift going down with seven other people who all have the same idea—of quickly reaching the second viewing.

Window-shopping used to be fun. What's happening?

At the next flat, I use my phone to check out the vastu configuration. It is sensible to check the flow of energy through a home before deciding to buy it.

I wave my phone to calibrate the compass and bang it into somebody else doing the same.

“Sorry. Oh! Hi!”

Bala looks almost the same as he does in Dr Alagasamy's lab. Instead of a white lab coat, he is wearing a brown sports coat. His round face creases before remembering to smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Same thing you are." I nod at his phone. Samsung S5, latest model. "What does your app say?"

Bala claps the phone to his side. "Very bad, very bad. South facing. Terrible luck."

My phone beeps and the compass app shows a perfect north. Not as fantastic as east but not bad at all.

"Bala?" A tiny woman slides her very thin arm into his short, fat one. Bala takes in so much air he looks like a stuffed bear.

"This is Nimita Sachdev. My colleague from Dr Alagasamy's lab. The new girl from India."

New girl? I've been in that lab for more than three years!

"Nice to meet you." She smiles. "I'm Letchemi."

"Very nice to meet you." I shake her hand. "I'm sorry I missed your wedding."

"Oh!" She nods. "You were the one who had to go back to India because your grandmother—I'm so sorry. How is she now?"

The words are stuck in my throat. It is hard for me to talk about Dadi and the stroke that took away the woman who brought me up. A stroke which happened three months into my new life in Singapore, just when she and Dad and Mummy were planning a visit. All the air-ticket money—and more—went to hospital bills.

"I should apologise," I tell Letchemi. "You were newly married and your husband had to do all my work in the lab."

Naatak-baazi, play-acting like Dadi taught me. Social interaction is all naatak-baazi. Say the polite thing even when you know it was Santha, the office manager, who froze my samples and bacterial cultures. Bala took his marriage leave and honeymoon leave and let Siddiqui, our Pakistani colleague, pick up the slack on the Transferase-C project.

Siddiqui may be from a country that sends only terrorists to Mumbai, but before I left for India, he gave me a packet of ash from a holy place in his hometown. I had told him that Dadi was also from Lahore.

I put that ash on Dadi's lips, on her loose, silent face and after an

eternity she moved—so, so slowly—to lick it off. It was the first sign of movement since the stroke.

I smile at Letchemi until my face hurts. If I don't, I will cry. "I thought you had applied for an HDB near your parents?"

Housing is so hard to find in Singapore that even its citizens can't just buy any government-subsidised flat directly from the Housing Board. They need to apply for permission to buy. Sometimes they may not get it.

HDB flats are half the price of a condo, as low as thirty per cent sometimes. They are so cheap, each new flat can have hundreds of applicants. For fairness, there is a lottery-type system where those who want to stay near their parents get preference over other buyers.

Bala says: "Well, you know, we thought why wait for the ballot? Hundreds of people applying, you know, now that all the foreigners," his moustache quivers, "are taking citizenship and trying to buy HDB too."

"So many foreigners," Letchemi says. "Who wants to live near them? All those Chinese with no idea how to behave. From China, you know."

"And Indians also," says Bala, puffing up like a balloon. "So we thought why not upgrade with our first flat? We can both afford it. Letchemi teaches in Serangoon Junior College. She has two bachelor's degrees, you know."

Letchemi clucks. "One bachelor's in Science, one bachelor's in education. Very normal."

Bala's moustache dances with his smile. "Bachelor's from NUS, you know. National University of Singapore. Top ten university in the world, second in Asia. And she also studied at the National Institute of Education."

Yes, and you have your PhD from Cornell in the US and I am only MSc, that too from a little town in India. I know, I know. You remind me of it all the time.

"What about you?" Bala asks.

"What about me?" Is he seriously asking if I can afford this place?

"You are settling down? You are here with someone?" He looks around.

My arm grows cold. "No. Just me."

The agent comes up to us, beaming. "Ah, you're friends. You know each other! All from India!"

Bala's smile becomes a snarl. His moustache tips go rigid and he is steaming so much I can see the oil begin to drip from his hair. "I'm Singaporean."

"Oh, sorry, sorry. So how? Colleagues, ah, can compete or not? Who give me best price?"

Bala and I look at each other. Letchemi pulls at his arm.

"I think we'd like to think about it," she says.

"But—" Bala looks at her, then nods. "Yes, we'll think about it. So many options, you know."

The agent opens his mouth but Letchemi pulls Bala away. "We'll let you know," she says. "Nice to meet you, Nimita."

"Bye." I smile and wave as they walk out. The agent looks at me the way I look at Thai mangoes—hopeful but not expecting much.

I'm hopeful too. I'm hoping to get a good price on this place. Raymond's contract will be over next year, he will move back to be with Chia Ying and they will want to be alone in their home. I'll need a new place to stay. If I'm still in Singapore.

It hurts my wrist to think about this. "Six-thirty K," I say, starting low.

His hands come up. "Cannot, cannot. My seller don't sell at that price."

I bring up the PropertyGuru app on my phone and show him the monthly price trend. "See? Good price what."

"Cannot, lah! You give me better price."

"Come on"—what is the agent's name again?—"Alan. Come on, Alan. I give you a good price. Market rate."

He looks at his phone. "Cannot lah."

"Can, can." I sigh loudly. "Okay, for your sake, I'll offer six-forty K."

Alan looks up from his phone. "Cannot." His voice is firm now. He holds out the screen to show me. "See your colleague ready to top your offer."

Bala and Letchemi have sent him a message: "She sure won't offer high. Foreigner got extra tax. You tell me offer maybe I can top up."

Does Bala know about my contract expiring?

I do pranayama breathing but it doesn't help.

"You need water?" the agent asks.

I avoid his eyes and walk out quickly.

4.

"**YOU KNOW WHAT** you want?" asks the teenager wearing a green-and-white checked apron. She is standing behind a huge glass case lined with shelves of sliced cakes, tarts, puffs, cream rolls and three kinds of multicoloured buns.

"Vega-pure!" says the label on her apron. Vega-pure is short for pure vegan, which is even more strictly vegetarian than most Indian vegetarians. Vegans don't even drink milk.

"Kopi," says Chia Ying in what is Chinese—or is it Malay?—for coffee. "Kopi lagi best. It's bunbelievable."

"Bunbelievable?" Is she serious? "That's sillier than 'yum-mango' or 'banana-licious'."

"Nimita Sachdev, I am so serious I will treat you." She unzips her wallet.

"No, no." I unzip mine. This is zabardasti, the emotional blackmail I thought only parents and buas were capable of: making you do something by threatening to do it themselves.

Two golden one-dollar coins and a shining fifty-cent coin come out. That is almost how much I was planning to spend on lunch later.

Irving hands the teenager a red-and-peach ten-dollar note. "Three kopi buns," he says.

I try to give him the coins. "Claimable expense," he says and takes the bun tray.

While he begins photographing the buns with his fancy smartphone, Chia Ying pokes me in the shoulder. "Don't worry. She will love it."

I need the help of our lab manager Santha to design a research project to wow Dr Alagasamy. Santha is the second-most important person in the lab after Dr Alagasamy, even though, like me, she does not have a PhD. She doesn't even have a master's degree, only a life sciences diploma from the ITE polytechnic. Santha orders lab equipment and enzymes for every researcher. She does the prep work that keeps our lab running and writes

all the applications for grants. So she knows just what proposals will win funding and the boss' heart.

The quickest way to sweeten up Santha is to literally offer her sweets. She is a big foodie, but a pure vegetarian one. In the past, I have given her homemade pickles from India or mithai from Karachi Sweet Shop.

Last night, Chia Ying said she knows of a vegan bakery with the best buns she has ever tasted. So good they are "bunbelievable". "Santha will eat one and design a project for you in gratitude," she said.

Hearing this, Irving decided to make the store his project of the day. It is great because he's paying for everything, but also quite terrible, because he spends more time filming than eating.

"Can we eat now?" Chia Ying asks him.

Irving nods and sits on one of the high-legged stools around the round table. Chia Ying and he each take a bun in hand, then look at me.

"Lai, lai," Chia Ying says in Chinese—Mandarin? "Come, come, Nimmy. What's the problem?"

Once upon a time I had no problem with buns. I liked them so much that Dadi ordered one dozen fresh buns every week from Parsi Dairy.

Then I went to a university where the hostel food was watery dal and rice, and the cook threw chillies into everything. The only thing worth eating were the bun products, spelled "bum". Bum-vada, which is fried potato patty in a bun. Bum and jam, bum and cream, plain bum. I ate buns till I could no longer look at the Parsi Dairy buns at home.

Chia Ying is still looking at me. Even Irving hasn't bitten into his bun.

So I take a bite.

Then another.

And one more.

Then I lick my fingers.

Chia Ying smiles. "Yes?"

I put my hands together in the namaste mudra, which mostly means "hello" but can also mean "sorry".

"Sorry. You were right."

"Say it," Chia Ying orders.

I laugh. "Bunbelievable."

These buns are nothing like the thick, bread-like hot cross buns Dadi

ordered from the Parsi Dairy. These buns are soft brown domes that melt into an airy puff of fresh coffee and sugar in your mouth.

I lick my teeth and run my tongue around the inside of my cheeks. The only problem is that you can have five of these Singapore buns and still be hungry. One Parsi Dairy bun with real cream made from buffalo milk and you won't even want water, your stomach would be that full.

"There's a lunch set," Irving says. I look at the blackboard, which reads:

House sandwich/wrap + drink = \$12.50/\$14

Today's special! Spring garden salad with avocado

The sun beats into the air-conditioned café. The glass windows are dusty because of the construction around us, more tall buildings squeezing into an area already spiked with towers.

For lunch, we were going to go to Hong Lim Food Centre where I like the curry-chicken noodles. Only \$3.50 for a bowl of noodles topped with chicken curry that tastes almost like a Punjabi made it. One thing I love about Singapore is the number of small stalls selling cheap and good food, just like the handcarts on every second road in Mumbai. Like in Mumbai, there is Chinese food, Indian food and some fun combinations of both.

Unlike Mumbai, every stallholder has to display a cleanliness rating from A to C so you know the food is safe to eat.

The best and cheapest food courts in Singapore are outdoors, just like in Mumbai. The Hong Lim Food Centre noodles are delicious but so is the flow of air-con on the back of my neck.

I do the maths. The buns are \$2.50 each—the price of a set meal with two soft-boiled eggs, butter toast and coffee at the hospital canteen. I need to buy at least six for Santha. On my weekly budget, I can't afford a \$12.50 lunch.

I swallow my saliva and pat my stomach. "Actually, guys, I'm feeling full—"

Chia Ying says: "Irving, you're not in Singapore to blog about Western food, right? Come, we go to Hong Lim Food Centre. You will love the curry-chicken noodle."

"We have something like that in Hong Kong. Have you eaten at Chutney Mary?"

"Okay. Then you try the Hokkien mee or the char kway teow. All the

stallholders have been there for at least twenty years, you know. Your blog ratings for Singapore will soar.”

On our way to the food centre, Irving points at something behind us. “What’s that?”

I shift the box of buns from my right hand to the left. No plastic. Save the environment and save fifty cents by not taking a bag.

Irving takes the box from me.

“I can—”

“What’s that building?” he asks again.

“That’s Pinnacle@Duxton. Tallest HDB building in Singapore.” The HDB is a complex of several tall buildings, fifty storeys high, connected by bridges. From SGH, they look like silicon chips joined to form a giant computer, or a spaceship in a sci-fi movie.

“HDB?”

“Housing Development Board. That’s a block of flats built by the Singapore government, only for Singapore citizens.”

Pinnacle@Duxton is more up-market than most of the condos I can barely afford to buy. On the resale market, the flats cost one million each. The complex is the pinnacle of living for Singaporeans and completely out of reach for a non-Singaporean like me. I have always wondered what the flats look like from the inside.

“State housing doesn’t look like that in Hong Kong,” Irving says.

“It doesn’t look like that in India either.” The Mumbai government built chawls in the 1960s for workers in mills that were run by people like Dada, my grandfather. In chawls, families have one room to themselves but share a common toilet and sometimes even a kitchen. For an HDB flat to cost as much as a condo is like a one-room chawl in Mumbai costing as much as a studio apartment on the super up-market Nepean Sea Road.

I walk faster to catch up with Chia Ying, who has disappeared. There is so much construction on both sides of the road, so many tall wood-and-metal barriers, that it is hard to see someone even ten metres ahead of you.

Chia Ying reappears, pointing in the other direction. “Sorry, we go this way. This place keeps changing.”

We turn but the towers of Pinnacle@Duxton remain in view, above the construction safety walls.

At Hong Lim Food Centre, I buy my curry-chicken noodles. I reserve a table near the stall while Chia Ying takes Irving around. She comes back with a plate.

“He’s going for bak chor mee maybe. He says, start first.”

I pick up my fork. “Chia Ying, when I went to order, the uncle asked me: ‘Makan?’ but when you went, he said something else. What did he say?”

She takes the skin off her chicken. “‘Makan’ means ‘eat’ in Malay. He was asking you to order.”

“What did he ask you?”

“Same thing in dialect.”

“Malay dialect?”

“Chinese dialect.”

“Why did he talk to me in Malay?”

“A lot of older Chinese people speak Malay. Singapore was once going to be part of Malaysia, you know.”

Irving comes to the table at the same time the drinks stall helper does. I order in Singapore English—Singlish—which is the only language the helpers understand. I ask for “teh-o-kosong peng”, which is tea, no milk, no sugar, with ice.

Chia Ying orders calamansi, which is like Indian nimbu paani and made from the same small, green limes. Only, the juice is a radioactive green like the marker I use to check that my genetically engineered cells are expressing the right DNA.

Irving asks for mineral water. “You’ll die in this heat,” Chia Ying tells him.

He chases after the helper to change his order to ice barley. I quickly ask Chia Ying: “Teh-o-kosong peng, is that Malay?”

“Hokkien, I think. Some dialect. Why all these questions?”

“No reason.”

Irving sits down with a plate of red noodles. “Does this look authentic?”

“Compared to what?”

His lips turn up. “I was assured these were Indian noodles. Mee goreng.”

Haan, that misunderstanding. “No, there are no noodles in India except for seviyaan, which is a sweet dish.” Mee goreng is something Indians and Chinese people cooked up for Singapore. Maybe some Malay people helped.

“How about fish-head curry?”

“In Mumbai, we make curry from the actual fish. We chop off the head. Who wants to eat the skull and eyeballs?”

My bag falls off my lap. I pick it up and it vibrates. My phone is ringing.

“Excuse me.” It is rude to talk at the table, also the chatter at the curry noodle stall is too loud. I step away.

Private number. Romy-Bhaiya, at this hour?

“Hello?” I am holding the phone awkwardly and my wrist hurts.

“Hello, Bhaiya?”

“Hello, is this Nimita Sachdev?”

The voice has a pukka Indian accent. Romy-Bhaiya has a weird American accent. I change hands and my wrist stops hurting.

“Yes, hello?”

“Hi. I am Gautam Bhatia. We met that time in Delhi.”

“Gautam Bhatia.”

“Yes. We met at your cousin’s wedding?”

I say nothing.

“You don’t remember? Anyway, your bua said I should call you when I am in Singapore.”

“Hello.” I sit down on an empty stool. The fans on my back dry the sweat from my skin.

“How are you?”

“I am fine. How are you?” This is a Delhi person. Make some small talk.

“When did you come to Singapore?”

“Just one week ago. I’m here for some business meetings and staying with a friend at this place, Pinnacle@Duxton. Is that somewhere you know?”

“Yes, it’s a well-known place.”

“Oh, good, good.”

He is silent and so am I.

“I am here for some business,” he says again.

“Oh, so you are very busy.”

“No, no. What I mean is I am free in the evenings. When are you free?”

“Oh, in the lab we don’t keep office hours. We keep all odd hours.”

“You must get some free time.”

My ears are sweating. I can feel the phone surface become moist and slippery.

“Hello?”

“Hello, yes.” I must think. “Sorry, I am outside, it is very noisy.”

“Oh, okay. I was just wondering if you are free one of these days. To catch up.”

Itty-Bua’s face flashes in front of me.

I can’t refuse to meet him right out. So I say we will meet some time. Keep it vague.

Chia Ying and Irving look up from their noodles. Chia Ying is halfway through hers. Irving hasn’t started his.

“Who was that?”

I sit down. “Gautam Bhatia.”

Chia Ying drops her chopsticks in her bowl. “No! What did you say?”

“I said I was busy.”

“Woman, you did not say that.”

Irving picks up his fork and starts eating.

Chia Ying shakes my shoulder. “This man has been single ever since he met you once at a wedding. Isn’t it like a Bollywood movie? Where is your heart?”

“Stop it, Chia Ying, I’ll get curry on my shirt.” I pick up some noodles with my fork.

“You are so unromantic,” she says. “Don’t you think she’s unromantic?”

Irving shrugs.

He doesn’t join in the teasing, so Chia Ying stops moaning about Bollywood.

I feel a bit better. After half the curry noodles and all the iced tea, I feel a lot better.

After lunch, Irving heads home to edit his footage. Chia Ying and I walk back to Chinatown MRT, one stop away from our usual Outram Park. We take the long, shady road and cross a big green field where a crowd is standing around listening to some man talk.

Roadside tamasha is rare in Singapore, though it happens all the time in Mumbai. It is so rare here that Chia Ying and I stop to listen.

“Our government is courting new citizen votes so it will favour foreigner demands to stay in power. Favour foreigners even if it means taking the rice bowl from our own people!” the man says.

Many of the men and women around him clap.

“The government has sold us out! They bring foreigners to replace us! How many Singaporeans here are reporting to foreign supervisors now?”

Some people cheer.

“We have to fight back or become second-class citizens in our own country!”

Chia Ying folds her arms.

It took less than two weeks to get my employment pass after I got my job at SGH. The green card that is valid for two years shows that I am legally employed in Singapore and I can enter and exit Changi Airport through the automated clearance lane, without having to stand in immigration queues like the tourists.

The noodles burn in my stomach. My employment pass may not be renewed next year.

I tug at Chia Ying's sleeve. “Come on.”

It is hot and muggy and hard to breathe. I can see the MRT entrance now, promising air-con. There are a lot of people outside it, looking at the gathering in the park.

In fact, one face is very familiar. Santha, the lab manager.

I call her name. She jumps. “Oh, what are you doing here?”

I raise the box in my hand. “Shopping for tea time. Thought you will join me.”

Santha sees Chia Ying. “Oh, hello, you're her flatmate, right? Also from SGH?”

“Chia Ying, from radiotherapy.” I introduce them for the thirtieth or fiftieth time. Santha is bad with names. “She showed me these buns. You will love them. They are bunbelievable.”

Santha laughs so hard her eyes close. “Really? Come, come. Let's go back and work hard until tea time.”



At tea time, Santha wants to buy the drinks. I tell her, no, my treat. I open the box of buns. “Please have.”

“So nice. But I'm getting fat!” Santha says, touching her flat stomach.

“Rubbish, so thin. Look at me. Have a bun.”

She purses her lips. I know that look.

“These buns are pure vegan, you know. Vegetarian! I mean, pure vegetarian, from a bakery in Chinatown. Near the Buddhist temple.”

“Got tofu?”

“No tofu. Only ground almond and coffee and flour and cocoa powder and sugar.”

Santha bites into a bun, crumbs exploding all around her. I've got a pack of tissues ready.

Two bites. Three bites.

She licks her fingers and then looks at her hand like it belongs to an alien.

“One more bun?” I push the box towards her.

“Cannot!” She takes a second bun. Three left.

I tell her: “Take the rest home for the family.”

Look at her smile.

“You really shouldn't mind it,” she says, swallowing.

“Sorry?”

“Those people at Hong Lim Park. They are just talking, verbal diarrhoea. See, hardly anyone came today. Last time, there were six thousand people.”

I wave my hand. “Santha, I'm from India. Every second day some guy is saying some rubbish on the street.”

She nods. “They don't mean people like you, you know. Here so long in Singapore already, apply for PR, right?”

If I am a permanent resident, I will not have to leave Singapore even if I lose my job.

My stomach relaxes. Good old Santha. She's given me a great idea already.

Santha is a good person to make friends with. Her recommendation can make the difference between a B+ and an A rating in the annual appraisal, between Dr Alagasamy pushing HR to give you a salary hike and letting you get a smaller bonus.

Until 2011, Bala was Santha's best buddy in the lab. They should have become closer after his marriage because Letchemi is Santha's distant cousin. Then the usual thing that happens at Indian weddings happened. Santha's family didn't receive enough invitation cards, or they were invited only to the temple ceremony and not the hotel reception, or the other way around. So now Santha's side of the family is not talking

to Letchemi's side and Bala gets his reagents in boxes labelled "Bata". If he gets them at all.

"So how, your appraisal?"

Santha already knows so I spread my hands. "Bad. I really need your advice."

Santha beams. She likes it when people defer to her. Bala and Dr Alagasamy never do. She crooks her finger. "You read about Tan Ah Kow?"

"Who?" I read only the property section of *The Straits Times*. "What happened?"

It seems a famous billionaire has died and left a lot of money to the hospital for research. Every lab is going to submit proposals hoping for a million or two.

"Boss wants to do diabetes and cancer," Santha says.

Fifteen dollars wasted on buns. It is the obvious choice. The billionaire died of diabetes-related complications. One Australian lab this year found that diabetes can lead to more cancers than the obvious pancreatic tumours. Boss must be planning a follow-up.

Santha packs the buns into her handbag. "I told him, 'Boss, everyone will be thinking diabetes because of how that man died. Every lab, not only ours, will go on that track.'"

Good old Santha. I should have bought her more buns.

"I told him, 'Boss, do something with mass appeal.'"

She looks at me. I look at her.

She coughs. "My throat so itchy today. Got haze again."

I clap my hands. "Santha, that is so smart! Haze and tumour formation. Haze and throat cancer links."

Santha smiles. "Haze sure got mass appeal. It was so bad last year."

"Worse than Mumbai."

She looks at me. "Cannot be worse than Mumbai."

Yes, it was. Mumbai has smog and pollution from traffic and factories, which is why we always go away to Lonavla for the weekends, but the Singapore haze is something else entirely. I woke up one morning and the air was grey. Everything was grey because of the smoke and dust blowing in from Indonesia, where companies set fire to jungles so they can grow palm trees for cash.

Haze's effect on cancers of the lung, throat, nose. Link between particulate matter and tumour formation. Early-warning markers that can be detected from spit? So many ideas. I need a hospital computer to research. Not the lab computer where everyone can read the screen. The minute I finish today's experiment, I'm going to the staff library.

I can outline a proposal by the end of the day. I need to meet boss fast and impress him.

"Does boss have time to meet me this week?"

Santha looks at her phone. "This week, this week—oh."

I read the screen upside down. Today's entry says: "Review—Si." Tomorrow's entry says: "Review—B."

"Review—N" is for next week. I'm usually last because I'm the most junior.

I crinkle the plastic wrapper the bun box came in. "You want more tea?" I ask Santha.

She looks at her phone again. I pretend I'm not reading it.

"Tomorrow can?" she says.

"Perfect." I look at her as if she is a ripe Alphonso mango. "Sure you don't want more tea?"

When we return to the lab, Siddiqui and Dr Alagasamy have just finished their meeting. "Ah, Nimita," boss says. "How are things going? Good? Good. Listen, I'm leaving for Thailand day after tomorrow so we'll have our chat next week, okay?"

Santha says: "Tomorrow, boss. You're seeing her tomorrow."

"Really?" Dr Alagasamy checks his phone.

Hooray for Google Calendar. Santha has already updated it.

"Oh, yes, my mistake. Great, get your notebook ready." He turns to Bala. "Bala? Bala, listen, I have a meeting in Thailand, so we'll have our chat next week, okay?"

"You look very happy," says Siddiqui from the other half of our shared lab space. "What has given you such a big smile?"

"Buns," I tell him. "You have to try this vegan bakery I found today. Pure vegetarian, suitable for everyone. The effect is bunbelievable."

5.

AT 4.30PM, MY cellphone alarm vibrates. “Starbucks Clarke Quay 5pm!” it flashes again and again.

Santha passes by on her way to the sterile chamber. “Today’s the hot date?”

“Oho?” Siddiqui looks over.

“Just someone my aunty wants me to meet.”

“Oho!” Bala’s turn.

The three look at each other and wiggle their eyebrows.

Unbelievable! Bala has not even looked me in the eye for weeks, ever since I presented my ideas to boss about tracking methylated DNA in haze-related tumour formation.

“Not bad, Nimita,” Dr Alagasamy said then. “Real potential here. Write up an experimental plan.”

An experimental plan! Me! As if I’m a second-to-the-principal researcher, just like Siddiqui! Who, by the way, congratulated me on my success, unlike Mr Bala.

If not for this Gautam Bhatia, I would be a very happy person today. I do pranayama breathing on the train ride over to meet him. Scientific research shows that even forcing yourself to breathe slowly can calm the body.

Chia Ying is on standby even though she doesn’t understand why I’m so worried about tonight. “You’ve done it before,” she says.

True. I came to Singapore to avoid the bachelor parade but the first year, Itty-Bua’s best friend’s nephew, Satish Mehra, stopped by on his way to Australia. Then Pritty-Bua’s husband’s college friend’s son, Tapan Gujral, stopped by on his way back to India from China. Shanti-Tayee’s friend’s grandson, Bhushan Raheja, met me while in Singapore on a short-term project. I had to meet them all, otherwise people would comment.

All of them were Punjabi boys with post-graduate degrees and bank jobs. All were tall, fair, single and from good families. On paper there

was no reason to reject any of them.

In person—the best or worst was Bhushan Raheja. “You’re wearing a skirt,” was the first thing he said to me. “Do you have a car or do you go around on public transport in skirts?”

Satish Mehra said he liked movies but he hated *Pinjar*, which I think is Urmila Matondkar’s best film. He did not see the point of a movie about how Partition tore apart the lives of so many women. “Nothing nice happens. There are no item numbers also,” he complained.

Tapan Gujral showed me the photo of his Parsi girlfriend, which he secretly carried in his wallet. He wasn’t sure he could stand up to his family.

“You must stand up to your family,” I told him. “Love is the most important thing. If you don’t try, you’ll probably regret it all your life.” I then called Mummy on Skype and asked her to tell Pritty-Bua that her husband’s college friend’s son was in love with someone else. “Don’t worry, it’s a girl, tell her,” I said and Mummy laughed.

But this Gautam Bhatia... I avoided him by coming to Singapore and four years later, he’s still single and interested?

“Some people would find that ❤️,” Chia Ying texts back.

I reply with a 😊.

Gautam stands up when I reach the café. “Hey! How are you? Get you a drink?”

“Mocha vanilla frappe?”

He comes back with two. Mirroring behaviour, showing he wants to make a good impression.

That does not make a good impression.

“So you took my suggestion and came to Singapore,” he says.

My mouth falls open around the straw. *Your* suggestion?

“How are you liking it? It’s a very different environment.”

I close my lips around the straw and take a huge, cooling gulp of iced coffee. “It’s great.”

“Yeah, Singapore was really where I found myself, you know? It’s a great country. It’s a bit small but very Western.”

“Yes.”

We sip a while in silence. Then—how are your parents? Fine? Good, good.

How are my parents? Fine? Good, good.

You staying here long?

"Depends," he says, and leans forward. We are at a tiny table near the window. So many people are chattering around us that if I want to hear him, I have to lean forward as well.

"Actually, that year we met changed my life."

Cold coffee in an air-conditioned café was a bad idea. Now my wrist hurts.

"When I heard you were going to Singapore to find yourself—"

"I found a job," I say, but he isn't listening.

"When I realised you had the guts to follow your dreams and leave India, I thought: 'What is this job at Kotak Mahindra? Yes, I get 25 lakhs a year, company car and all but what is it really about?'"

About the price of a high-end flat in Colaba, or maybe that condo in Yew Tee Residence?

"So I also decided to follow my passion."

Gautam Bhatia is an IT nerd who hated his job in finance. "There was a fifty-hour work week, you can't imagine the stress, you really had to let your hair down afterwards. When I say let your hair down, I meant, you know, I don't drink. Not really. Just beer. Some whisky. I don't smoke, definitely."

In whatever free time he had left, he got a bunch of coders together to create a brand-new messaging app for the Indian market. Like WhatsApp, it allows free messages and telephone calls over wireless and data networks.

Unlike WhatsApp, it has an "old-person-friendly interface" with only four buttons. It also has videocalling, with better quality because of a new compression algorithm.

"I'm calling it Haanji. You know, haanji? Like your mom calls and you say 'Haan, ji?'"

Responding with a "haanji" or "yes, respected one" is a Punjabi thing.

"Okay, listen, you use Skype to call your family, right?"

"Actually I use WhatsApp calling."

"Oh, you have to try Haanji!"

He insists on installing it on my Xiaomi smartphone and then connecting to the Starbucks wifi connection so I can call him on it. "Android works best but we also have an Apple version," he says. "Okay, you go out of the door so I can't hear you."

"You want me to leave this air-conditioned place and go out into the heat to try out your app?" I ask him. It takes hours for Singapore to cool down, even in the evening.

"Yes, just outside. You can just stand outside the glass door. Turn your back so I won't see your lips move."

"I'm sitting against the wall. It'll be easier for you to move."

He looks at me. I look at him.

"Okay," he says, getting up.

I look at my phone. After a while, the H denoting his app begins to wiggle. I touch it.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you."

"Isn't this great?"

"Yes, very clear."

"Let me tell you about the other features. Now, if you look at your phone and press that V on the top, it turns on the video. Press V. I'm pressing V now."

I press V. Then M for mute and smile at him and just say "haanji" and "yes" whenever his lips stop moving. Finally he ends the call and comes back in.

"It's really hot out there," he says, wiping the sweat off his forehead with one of those brown recycled-paper napkins.

"Yes, it is."

He sits down. "So I'm staying with my friend. We're looking up a few contacts, investors, you know?"

"That's great."

"Then I will go to Australia to stay with another friend. I think Haanji is going to be big in Australia."

"That's great."

"There are a lot of Punjabis there and I have this marketing campaign that should really sell it to them."

"Okay."

"My dream," he says, crumpling the paper napkin, "my dream is to have Microsoft buy my app."

"Maybe they will."

"Yes! Because nothing is impossible if you say Haanji!" He brings out his

phone again. “Have I shown you my ad campaign? Here, it’s on YouTube.”

I check my phone while pretending to look at the video. Thirty-five minutes. “Where are you?” I type into the last opened chat window.

I look up from my phone. Gautam has put his phone away and is smiling at me.

“So what do you think?”

“Great ad,” I say.

“Haanji!” He does a little thumbs up at me.

My phone rings and I practically cry with relief. “Yes? Hello? Oh? Oh!” I sign off.

“So sorry, I have to go. Emergency at work.”

“Oh.” Gautam looks surprised.

“Lab work, you know, sometimes you have to do things after hours. Even on weekends.”

“Oh.” He nods. “I know, it was like that when we were developing Haanji. No rest, no time off, barely any time to meet friends. I completely forgot how to talk to people.”

I look at this man, this tall, fair Punjabi man from a good family who has spent forty of the last 45 minutes talking about his app and maybe five minutes asking me about myself.

“I guess after Australia you’ll be more relaxed.” Relearn social skills.

“Oh no, it’ll get even busier after that,” he says very seriously. “I’m hoping to do a TEDx Talk and work on more campaigns. Hopefully get invited to the US.”

“Sounds really busy.”

“It is,” he says. “You know, my friends are helping but mostly I’m running around until some big corporation buys Haanji.”

“I’m surprised you had the time to meet me, given your schedule,” I tell him, getting up.

He gets up too. “Well, you know. Like I said, na. That year we met changed my life.”

He grins and my stomach is a hard knot. “So your parents can send your patri to my parents.”

“What?”

“Your patri.” He’s smiling into my eyes. “I don’t believe in all this patri-

shatri, but parents like to do things the traditional way, na?”

“You—?” I can’t even say it. After one hour four years ago and this 45-minute meeting all about his app, he wants my parents to send my horoscope to his parents.

“If our parents are okay with it, I’m totally okay.”

“I’ll... I’ll talk to Bua.”

He tries to take my hand and the phone rings. God bless you, Chia Ying.

“Bye! Good luck!” I say, waving the ringing phone as I run out of Starbucks.

“Tell all your friends to use Haanji!” he says, smiling and waving back.

No way, ji.

Chia Ying is at the entrance to the MRT station with Irving.

“How was it?” she asks.

“Don’t ask.”

“I want to see.”

“Ssh! Chia Ying!” I try to stop her but lose my grip on her sleeve. My right wrist is throbbing.

“Relax, lah, I’ll be very discreet,” she calls over her shoulder.

I look at Irving. “How was your day?”

His face is red, the short hair on his head gleams. He didn’t spend the last 45 minutes in a freezing café. “I tried a different kind of durian.” He wrinkles his nose. “It was...powerful.”

“Right.” Chia Ying must be happy to finally have a flatmate who will eat that smelly fruit. She says that in this season, whole families sit down around one of the giant spiky green domes, break open the spines and suck on the yellow seeds. Just like mango season in India.

“Dinner?” Irving asks.

“What about dinner?”

“There’s a Hong-Kong-style dim sum place near here.”

“No, thanks.”

“You don’t like dim sum?”

“I like dim sum but that place is expensive. I’ll pass.”

Our phones beep at the same time. On the Flatmates chat group, Chia Ying has sent a sneaky picture of Gautam Bhatia with his head on his chin, sipping his frappe. “Not bad, what, can be Bollywood star” goes the caption.

Yes, he can be a Bollywood star. He is tall and fair and has those strong features like every Punjabi man.

I put my phone away.

What's taking Chia Ying so long? I walk a little way and see that she's in the queue to order.

I turn around and bump into Irving. "Sorry."

"There's a food court across the road. We could have dinner there."

"Okay. When Chia Ying comes back."

We wait in the heat. Come back, Chia Ying, before Gautam Bhatia sees that I'm still here.

"Not your type?"

"Sorry?"

Irving holds up his phone. "That guy's not your type?"

"I don't have a type." I don't. "Is he yours?"

He doesn't answer. I look up to see his eyes are focused on my hands.

How long have I been massaging the right wrist? It feels like ten thousand rubber bands are wound around the base of my palm. My wrist is tight and hot and ready to snap unless I press and press.



Part Two
1944

1.

NIMITA KHOSLA WAITS on the bench outside the principal's office, trying to ignore the bursts of chatter from the bottom of the stairs. Her friends are waiting below for a treat. Mummy is taking them all to Faletti's for a full-English tea to celebrate Nimita's birthday. Today she turns 17.

Nimita does not think she can eat. She is a Matric (Pass) topper and the best student at Kinnaird College for Women in Lahore. She is always first to answer questions in the English literature class taught by the principal herself. It is still a fearful thing to be called in to Mrs Dalhousie's office during final exams for the first-year BA cohort.

Mrs Dalhousie is Anglo-Indian and her skin is the soft cream of her Scottish father's. Her grey eyes, however, are from her Afghani grandfather, who joined the British army in the war that ousted Maharaja Ranjit Singh from Lahore.

When the door to the principal's office opens, Nimita jumps to her feet and stands straight. Mrs Dalhousie's eyes soften but Nimita's are fixed on the pursed lips.

"Come in," the principal says.

"Yes, ma'am. You wanted to see me, ma'am." Nimita enters the office she has only seen twice before. Once to receive a commendation for winning the tennis trophy against Khalsa College for Girls, another time to receive a commendation for her speech on the right of all women to vote, which won the college-wide debating contest.

Mrs Dalhousie nods at the chairs in front of her table. "Sit."

Nimita sits. She looks down at her lap, unable to meet her God's eyes.

"Happy birthday, Nimita," Mrs Dalhousie says, so gently that Nimita is surprised into looking up and smiling.

"Thank you, ma'am!" Her stiff shoulders relax. So that was why she was called in?

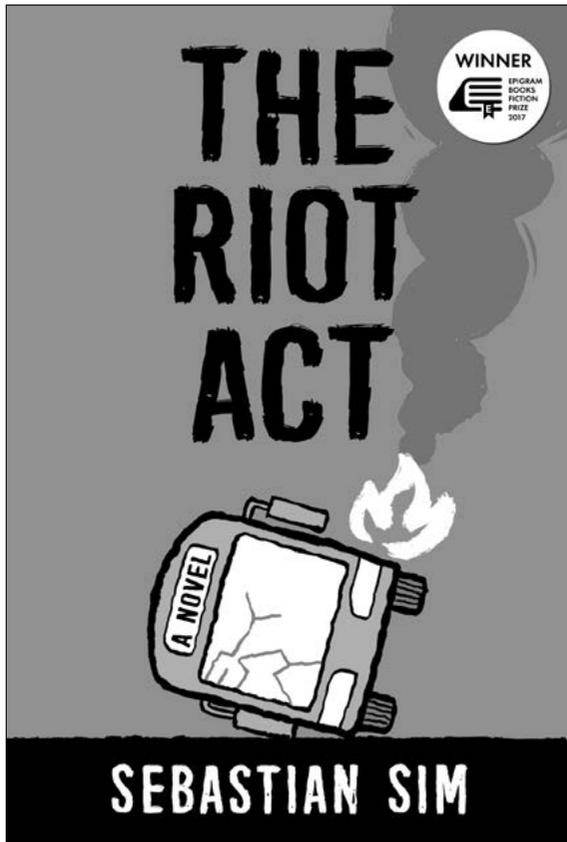
"You are seventeen now."



PHOTO BY ENG CHUN PANG

About the Author

AKSHITA NANDA was born in Pune, India, in 1979 and has lived in Singapore since 1995. She has a BSc (Hons) from the National University of Singapore and knows what to do with radioactive viruses. She has been in publishing since 2002 and joined *The Straits Times* in 2007, where she currently writes about the arts. *Nimita's Place* is her first novel.



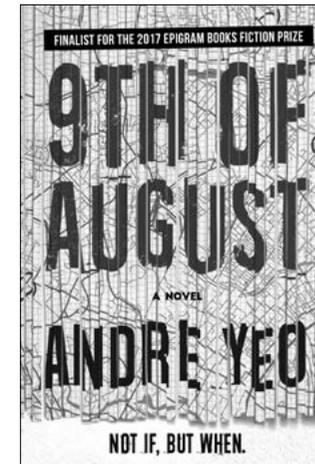
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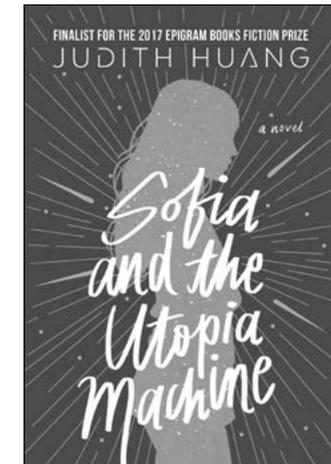


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