

FINDING HOME:  
A CHARACTER'S QUEST FOR EQUILIBRIUM

By  
SACHI KANEKO

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Associate Dean Louise Bishop

In an attempt to make sense of the vast cultural differences, and systems of sexism, racism, and Westernization, that the author has experienced within their life, they have decided to write a small compilation of short stories. The essay dissects the relationship of character and self to place. The essay outlines the five basic plot lines that a place story models itself after, as well as the undeniable presence of culture within place stories. The three fictional stories following the essay concern a character's conflict with either their own culture, or an encroaching one, as well as issues of individual autonomy within that culture. The first story follows the inner turmoil of a young woman arranged to be married to a man she does not love. The second story reimagines the life of a Nissei couple decades after Internment. The third story retraces a young man's history as an attempt to explain the rape he has committed. All stories, and their characters, are entirely fictional.

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Craft Essay:  
The Connection Between Place, Character, and Sense of Self in Relationship to Culture

My three stories, *Arpita the Dutiful*, *Rooster*, and *Tsering*, focus on the relationship between place/culture and a character's sense of self. Each of the main characters must simultaneously represent a cultural group, as well as an individual self, in order to create a believable place. These stories follow two general plotlines in their construction of place: a character is conflicted with their place, or is nostalgic for a past place.

*Arpita the Dutiful* follows the story of a young Indian woman who, instead of expressing her sadness through tears, finds a magical outlet in the making, and consumption, of food. Arranged to be married, she attempts to repress encroaching Western ideas of feminism and the idea of a "love marriage," in order to remain faithful to her own family and culture. This story draws on the Magical Realism genre in order to better highlight the main character's repression.

*Rooster* is about a middle-aged, Japanese-American man in the 1960s. The story uses the symbolism of a pet rooster caged in his backyard as a parallel to the man's past experience within a Japanese internment camp during World War II. These two instances of feeling trapped resonate with the man's confined feeling of living within mainstream "American" culture.

Finally, *Tsering* follows the story of a young Indian man who discovers that he is a rapist. An affluent man, with ready access to technology, a decent education, and strong morals, he scrambles to understand what led him to this horrifying act. The reader accompanies Tsering as he sifts through past memories, realizing the modernized

exterior that Tsering presents encases a number of misogynistic tendencies stemming from a sexist culture.

In creating place for these stories, I took into consideration Barry Lopez's claim that there is a dyadic nature to landscape or place. That is, that there are "two landscapes[/places, present within a story]- one outside the self, the other within" (Lopez 272). One refers to the physical external landscape, while the other elaborates on the socioeconomic, historical, ritual, and religious culture attached to a certain location that would affect a character's point of view.

Lopez defines this second landscape as "a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape" (Lopez 272). Characters' point of views can be used to project their internal selves onto the external landscape. Therefore, the examination of place can also serve as a mirror to characters, reflecting character interiority through a relationship and perception of place.

Culture is integrally connected to place, and puts a similar force on all the characters that claim an identity with that culture. The presence of a specific religion, history, language, ritual, and even socioeconomic class are dependent on the place the story is set in. What characters experience in the place they inhabit directly informs, or is related to, their sense of self. Yet, this sense of self, is not just as an individual, but may also incorporate a cultural, group identity. In many cases, culture is a common perception from the interior, shared by many. Due to the collective faith in it, culture can become the external law of a landscape, but equally, is unavoidably an interior manifestation.

Manipulating a character's relationship with place can provide two different basic story tracks with which to model a plot line after. The first track is when characters develop conflicting feelings toward a place and/or culture. An example of this is if characters love a place, but are alienated from the culture, and vice versa. This creates a disjointed feeling within the characters, as they attempt to reconcile conflicting emotions within themselves.

The second scenario is one where characters are haunted by nostalgia for a place. It is through characters' memory that certain places are of importance to them, either through a change in culture, or a physical move from place. This creates tension within the story as these characters long for something that is no longer a part of the reality of the story. Instead, the character long for a false place, for a culture that is no longer in existence.

*Tsering* and *Arpita Never Cried* best embody the first story line due to the way both main characters begin to feel conflicting emotions for the culture or place around them. Tsering has to confront a part of himself that was, in some ways, formed through the system of sexism present within his culture. Arpita suddenly feels conflicted about her culture after being forced into an arranged marriage. *Rooster* best fits the second storyline. Although Mike is not nostalgic for a place that he has once been, the main character longs for a cultural environment that is not a reality around him. Therefore, communicating this longing will use similar literary techniques.

In order to write any story on place one must establish the culture of the place, as well as explicate the main characters' level of belief in the culture that surrounds them. Through setting, action, and dialogue, the author can establish the cultural norms



of *Arpita*, *Rooster*, and *Tsering*. How invested these characters are to the cultural norm, and how much they choose to align themselves with it, is the basis for a story about place. According to Lopez, “[e]ach individual, further, undertakes to order his interior landscape according to the external landscape” (Lopez 273). Characters’ desire to reach a kind of homeostasis between themselves, and their exteriors is what creates the plot for a place story.

In order to demonstrate these concepts I have pulled four place stories from the wider body of contemporary literature. Two of these stories deal with the first story track (a character in conflict with their exterior), and two deal with the second (nostalgia). All the stories demonstrate how a character may simultaneously be an individual and a part of a cultural collective.

*Sonny's Blues* follows the lives of two brothers who grew up in Harlem. As two young, black men in Harlem their prospects are statistically grim. One brother becomes a heroin addict, as well as a Jazz musician of some renown. The other, our first person narrator, becomes a teacher, has kids, a wife, and, while still in Harlem, has all the trappings of a successful and “happy” American life. The conflict in this story is the narrator's fraught relationship with his heroin addicted brother, but it is also the narrator's inability to understand why his peers have made the choices in life that they have.

With each incremental perturbation the narrator comes closer to understanding his brother's perspective. Through his brother, he is also able to gain a deeper perspective of the community that he has grown up in, but no longer feels a part of. Baldwin relies heavily on point of view, setting, and symbolism, in order to evidence

the narrator's discomfort in his own neighborhood.

Although the narrator was brought up in Harlem culture, he feels alienated from the place he calls home. This is shown by the character's distaste for the physical setting:

A few days after it was up it seemed uninhabitably new. Now, of course, it's already rundown. It looks like a parody of the good, clean, faceless life- God knows the people who live in it do their best to make it a parody. The beat-looking grass lying around isn't enough to make their lives green, the hedges will never hold out the streets, and they know it (Baldwin 43).

Landscape, point of view, description, and symbolism are all intertwined to create the narrator's judgmental tone. In this paragraph, the narrator is talking about the housing project that he inhabits with his wife and kids. The landscape is a housing project in Harlem, but the descriptors add an extra layer. “[I]t's already rundown,” the narrator tells us, informing the reader of what the building literally looks like.

After a general description, the author combines the narrator's point of view with description and detail, to turn the housing projects into a simile and symbol. “It looks like a parody.... God knows the people who live in it do their best to make it a parody,” the narrator bitterly tells the reader. The author uses a simile in order to make the connection of “it” (the projects) and “a parody.” The narrator's way of looking through the exterior to the tragedy underneath, the parody beneath it all, reoccurs again and again. The author's creation of a narrator who continuously tries to look for these things, therefore, becomes a theme in the short story, *Sonny's Blues*. The author uses point of view to evidence the narrator's looking deeper. He sees the child underneath the face of “semi-whore” (Baldwin 40) and he sees the “low ceiling” of actual possibilities for the boys he teaches (Baldwin 38). Thus, when the narrator turns the

same lens on his brother, he searches for traces of his brother's heroin addiction.

The narrator tells the reader,

Everything I did seemed awkward to me, and everything I said sounded freighted with hidden meaning. I was trying to remember everything I'd heard about dope addiction and I couldn't help watching Sonny for signs. I wasn't doing it out of malice. I was trying to find out something about my brother. I was dying to hear him tell me he was safe. (Baldwin 43).

The narrator feels fear, and furthermore, it is a fear borne out of love. The narrator continues to claim a deeper knowledge to the setting that he simply cannot truly know for sure. The narrator turns his condemning lens on his brother. The narrator subscribes to a practice of racial and class profiling, condemning those around him. Yet the narrator loves his brother too much to continue trying to sentence him to addiction within the narrator's own mind. He cannot objectify his brother into simply being a heroin addict, the way he objectifies many of the other characters.

How hard the narrator must fight from condemning his brother demonstrates how deep the condemning lens is embedded within the narrator, and therefore, how deeply it sits within the culture outside of Harlem. It is a culture that the narrator has spent a lot of his formative years in. It is shown most clearly through the narrator's inability to feel at home in his childhood neighborhood. Yet this story is the narrator's attempt to move closer to understanding those roots. In doing so, he shows himself to be an individual, freeing himself from forces of a particular culture.

Thus, for the narrator, Sonny is an aberration in the lens that the narrator has cultivated. Therefore, Sonny is a bridge for the narrator between his own closed off world, and the culture that he has grown up in. Sonny becomes symbolic in the greater

structure of the story. He represents the “dirtier” side of Harlem culture that the narrator condemns without an attempt of understanding. It is through Sonny, and his Jazz, that the story reaches equilibrium, and the narrator is able to reach a greater understanding of the culture that he lives in.

The second story that deals with a character's conflicting feelings towards their place is Eudora Welty's, *Where is the Voice Coming From?* Welty wrote this particular story as a way to envision the murderer of Medgar Evers. Evers was an African American man prominent in the Civil Rights movement. His death was a political act, and racially motivated.

*Where is the Voice Coming From?* is told by a first person narrator. The narrator is racist, unnamed, and recounts his murder of a black man involved in the Civil Rights Movement named Roland Summers. The setting here is distinctly Southern and set in the 1950s/60s. Instead of naming the place specifically, Welty relies on syntax, a regional accent, and events (i.e. The Civil Rights Movement) as markers. The narrator uses phrases like, “I reckon” and “tell'em” clearly bringing a Southern accent to the story (Welty 603). The unstable homeostatic system is the narrator’s unhappiness with the Civil Rights Movement, and his own lower socioeconomic class that he associates as being caused somewhat by the movement.

As in *Sonny's Blues*, symbolism features prominently in order to make the culture present within the story. Although Roland Summers is a person, he functions, within the mind of the narrator, as a picture more than anything else. “Neer seen him before, never seen him since, never seen anything of his black face but his picture never seen his face alive, any time at all, or anywheres...” (Welty 604). To the narrator,

Roland is a picture. He is a picture that represents the Civil Rights movement and the injustices that the narrator feels are caused by it. The death of Summers means that the narrator will “be ahead of [Roland and the Movement], and stay ahead” (Welty 604) “for good and all, for ever and amen” (Welty 607). According to Welty, the narrator kills Roland in order to help defeat a movement, not just the man.

The discontent expressed by the narrator is direct. The narrator tells the reader, “He's [Roland] out planning still some other ways to do what we tell'em they can't” (Welty 603). After addressing Roland in particular, the narrator quickly moves off into adversarial language: “us” and “them.” This evidences how Welty created her narrator to view the world in a dichotomous fashion. Roland is not a person to the narrator, he is the figurehead, and symbol, of a political and social change. He is a part of “them” for the narrator.

Thus, both *Sonny's Blue's* and *Where is the Voice Coming From?* have main characters who develop conflicting feelings towards an aspect of the place they are living in. Building on top of setting and main character point of view, both of these stories make heavy use of symbolism. The use of symbolism allows the author to write about larger cultural issues within the frame of individuals, creating a much more personal story. Therefore, stories containing characters with conflicting feelings towards the place they live in, use setting, point of view, and symbolism, layering one over the other, and constantly referring back to the larger context, in order to portray the individual viewpoint, in connection with place.

The second place plot track refers to the main character being haunted by nostalgia for a place. This refers to a character that attaches, special, symbolic meaning

to the landscape, and, therefore longs deeply for the place, more for its significance, than for the landscape itself. Two great examples of this nostalgia are: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and, Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two Hearted River," "Parts I" and "II."

*Beloved* is the story of a family that, having escaped from slavery, continues to try and escape from the memory of it as well. The story is narrated in third and closes the narrative distance on each of the characters at different moments. The conflict is generally the trauma of slavery, but more specifically, the discontented soul of Sethe's murdered daughter.

From the outset of the novel, Sethe's dead daughter is there, haunting the house Sethe's family lives in. Morrison writes, "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (Morrison 1). Towards the end of the novel this "baby's venom" has manifested into a young woman, Beloved, who is slowly sucking the life from those around her. It is a ghost specific to this house, and to the people living within the building.

In the book of *Beloved*, Morrison has created a culture that believes strongly in what mainstream American culture would call "ghosts." In the craft sense, *Beloved* is a symbol that becomes so strong in the minds of a character/characters that it becomes a part of their reality.

...I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go on. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place- the picture of it- stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world (Morrison 35-36).

In Morrison's world, within the world of *Beloved*, things do not go away once they die.

Once they enter the world of the living they are there to stay, in one form or another.

The differing perspective that the culture in Morrison's novel takes, specifically on the dead, pushes it into the genre of Magical Realism<sup>1</sup>.

For the characters in the story, their ghosts live off of them and their memories of them, yet are still separate entities. “She [Sethe] sat in the chair... while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” (Morrison 250). Beloved grows stronger with Sethe's attention and preoccupations. Beloved is simultaneously a character and a symbol. She has autonomy, and yet is bound to Sethe. It's not just Sethe's point of view that is creating this relationship, but Beloved herself, as an individual, and the culture of the story allows for this. More than that, these things are explicitly stated as a fact within the novel.

Furthermore, Beloved simultaneously functions as Sethe's individual daughter, and as a collective representation for slavery. From pages 210 to 213, Beloved is granted an interior monologue to express herself. The majority of the text follows a stream of consciousness style, and Beloved seems to go in and out of being Sethe's daughter's consciousness and the consciousness of a woman on a slave ship.

Beloved constantly refers to “the man on my face [who] is dead,” just after talking about a “she” who one can assume is Sethe, as well as declaring herself “Beloved” (Morrison 210). Within the former quote, Beloved is referring to being on a slave ship, and the experience of having the person on top of you die. Yet, Sethe's

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<sup>1</sup> I, personally, prefer the term, “Alternative Realism.” It acknowledges that for certain people/groups of people the aspects of the novel that deviate from 'normal' are not 'magic,' but the differing perspective of a culture. Things that the Western world might term “abnormal,” may simply reflect a different perspective. When Arpita eats her tears through her food, it is simultaneously a metaphor, but also a reality for her to eat her sadness as a coping mechanism. There would be no other way that she would describe this way of coping. It is projected as her reality.

daughter was born in the United States and would not have any of her own memories of a slave ship. Instead, *Beloved* is tapping into her abilities as a symbol, as a cultural collective, and as an individual who must carry a consciousness of these horrors with her, due to her race. Thus, Morrison writes a stream of consciousness expression that does not solely encompass *Beloved's* personal experiences. This creates a larger cultural context around all the characters of African descent within the story.

The second story that fits the plot line of a character haunted by nostalgia “Big Two Hearted River,” “Parts I” and “II,” by Ernest Hemingway. Here the main character, Nick, has returned to the landscape he is haunted by, in the hopes of escaping other haunting memories. Nick is returning to Michigan, a place that is prominent in Nick's childhood. It is a place more innocent. This is the landscape-memory that Nick is returning to. Nick's attempt to process or escape his experiences in the War is a part of the homeostatic equilibrium. As William Adair writes, “In a *Moveable Feast* Hemingway says of 'Big Two Hearted River' that 'the story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it’” (261). Although there is no mention of the war in the story itself, outside knowledge informs the reader of this fact, and this knowledge makes it all the more obvious how Nick grasps at his innocent boyhood through the Michigan wilderness.

“Big Two Hearted River Part I” begins with Nick stepping off the train in Seney, Michigan. Again, the reason for Nick's trauma is not stated, but the reader gains this knowledge through earlier stories in the collection of short stories *In Our Time*. The narrator is a third person narrator who seems to have limited knowledge of Nick's feelings. This was part of Hemingway's choice not to explicitly state Nick's trauma.



It's a specific writing style called the Iceberg theory<sup>2</sup>.

While Hemingway's stories do not specifically express a collective view within them, I think they demonstrate a group identity in how much they spoke to post-war America at large. It's why Hemingway garnered so much fame. This post war America is the group identity that is recreated within "Big Two Hearted River."

Instead of focusing on Nick, the story relies heavily on landscape to evidence Nick's feelings. Most of the time, Nick is looking out at the landscape, observing his surroundings, or merely blending in. When Nick first watches the trout in the river, his "heart tightened... He felt all the old feeling" (134). A little farther down the page, Hemingway writes, "[h]e [Nick] was happy" (134). Connecting these three quotes of emotion, it is clear that Nick is happy to be watching the trout in the river. Part of the reason for this happiness is the "old feeling" that it stirs up in Nick at watching the trout. Nick is happy, not just because of the setting he is in, but the "old feeling" he associates with a more innocent, pre-war time.

Hemingway uses both imagery and a focus on the natural world, in order to dwarf Nick's importance within the story. Nick talks about the trees above him, "The trees had grown tall and the branches moved high, leaving in the sun this bare space they had once covered with shadow" (137). The quote is told from Nick's point of view, as he walks into the copse of pine trees, looking up. It is through Nick's point of view that the reader views the pine trees, and it is from Nick that the feeling of being dwarfed is shown. Even though there has been no apparent shift from the third person narrator to Nick, the reader knows that the sentiments expressed are Nick's. This is called free indirect discourse.

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2 A minimalistic writing style, also called "Theory of Omission"

The feeling of being dwarfed is better explained in tandem with Nick's feeling that the outdoors are a safe haven from the rest of the world. "He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (Hemingway 134). Nick is attempting to literally lose himself in the woods, both physically and emotionally. Little details like how to fish, how to catch grasshoppers, and the familiarity with setting up the tent, tell the reader how at home Nick feels. Action, and the way that is related, is the main proof of Nick's familiarity with the setting. It's a return home for Nick, a place where he does not have to think about his haunting from the war.

Thus, both *Beloved* and "Big Two Hearted River," "Parts I" and "II," like the first scenario, rely primarily on symbolism as a way to filter a large cultural experience into an individual. How a character's actions interact with a landscape, combined with some direct exposition and point of view, create stories that can inform the reader of the cultural norms within a story, as well as the character's stance on them.

The author's style of communicating nostalgia of a place to the reader can actually become indicative of how the culture of the novel views these memories. Hemingway's Iceberg theory incorporates a minimalistic style that speaks to a character's own way of handling trauma through repression. Morrison's use of Alternative Realism portrays "ghosts" as real and normal, similar to how her main characters perceive their own reality. It is interesting how much the culture of the novel can actually shape the overall style of its portrayal as well.

Overall, place is established through the manipulation of character, self and place. Character is the physical manifestation of the character, self relates to character

interiority, and place referring to the setting, in addition to its related belief system, history, and culture. Both scenarios require the author to establish the place, as well as the character's level of investment or belief in the culture of the place. This can often be used through the manipulation or description of setting and point of view.

A piece of fiction that deals with a character developing conflicting feelings towards their place and/or culture uses symbolism as the primary way to simultaneously tell an individual story, while incorporating the weight of the socioeconomic/cultural background. Similarly, a piece of fiction where the main character is haunted by nostalgia relies on symbolism to layer the setting with the ghost of memory. Yet, the style of the fiction differs greatly depending on the beliefs in the story portrayed. Therefore, how the author attempts to structure their story, and the amount of exposition needed, greatly differs. It would be an interesting topic to do further research into. Yet, for this paper, I leave a more open-ended conclusion, allowing for a number of factors to influence a place story. The essential part of a piece of place fiction is the establishment of place and a character's relationship to it, as well as a certain amount of symbolism in order to individualize larger themes.

## Arpita the Dutiful

Arpita never cried. Instead she would fry her tears, pressure cook them with salt, boil them with carrots and sugar, bake them on flat iron pans, and eat them. When her Uncle Ashish died, leaving four young children and a wife unfit for work, she ate a plate of kitchidii. When her best friend began spreading rumors about her to their schoolmates, leaving her lonelier than ever, she drowned her sorrows in Kurkure chips. When her sister ran away with another man, leaving Arpita with three wailing nieces who missed their mother, she ate the left over subje and chawal in the kitchen at midnight. Always, always, the food was salted for her sadness, each bite laden with the taste of a bitter ocean.

When Arpita was first born, the Singhs had nearly nothing. Reduced to eating roti and chai for meals Arpita's father, Arjun, began beating his wife, the stress of his ever growing family of women gnawing at him. Arpita's mother would cry after Arjun went to bed in the evenings, holding the newborn infant to her chest, as the baby nursed. She would try to coax milk from her breasts to feed the new baby, as her eyes leaked tears. Her breasts remained dry. Still she tried to feed her daughter. Arpita fed off her mother's tears, held her sadness, and because it was given in such precious confidence, was unable to express it.

It was not even four months after Arpita was born that Arjun won a lottery ticket by some incredible, unlikely good luck. The bulk of the money was put away to help with Arjun's daughter's dowries. Arpita was lucky.

As a baby, Arpita disconcerted her neighbors. Wide Indian eyes stared out at the world as she quietly observed what went on around her. As Artpita was the third child in a family of six, her mother expected a certain amount of fussing from the baby. That this was not forthcoming, bothered her. She raised this worry with her husband one day.

“Arre! You finally get a child that doesn’t keep you up all night and you’re complaining. She’s good luck,” he exclaimed. Firmly believing in this statement; Arpita’s father carried the strangely quiet child zipped up in his coat, showing off the soft fuzzed head to his friends.

Slowly, the silent baby grew up, and the tears built up, while she stoically bore the pangs of getting older. The unshed tears bloated her, turning her from a healthy teenager to a solidly fat young adult.

As the eldest unmarried daughter, it was Arpita's job to tend the home, while her mother and father worked at the general store they owned in town. The entrance was small, but extended far back into the building, displaying rows of mustard oil, packaged and dried foods, and hair care products. Individual serving sizes of packaged chips and chewing tobacco hung in long inch and a half wide strands over the entryway like beaded curtains. Each packet was connected to the other with small perforated lines. There was no door to their shop, only a sliding garage-like wall that could be locked at night.

Early mornings were busy for the Singh parents: opening the shop, sweeping, and dusting. Evenings were the same, but the middle of the day was slow, so painful that the Singhs moved their single television from the house to the counter of the shop. It helped distract Papa Singh from money problems, as his five unmarried children ate

the money up. They cooked it, and washed the laundry with it, and demanded new clothes, and school fees, with the rupees. Still, two daughters needed to be married.

Arpita was the earliest to rise each morning in order to make breakfast. The tabletop gas stove would *whoosh* with sound when the fire was lit, and in a pot she combined chai patti and cheenee. While the tea boiled Arpita mixed flour and water in a large flat-bottomed bowl, turning the mixture into dough. She moved with practiced hands, the right hand nails trimmed and short, while the left remained long and painted.

The texture of the dough was relaxing as it squelched under Arpita's additions of water and knuckled kneading. Tomorrow, she would get a break from her usual day of chores. She hummed lines of a song from “Jab Tak Hai Jaan.” Tomorrow she would go to the movie hall with old school friends. She would have to wash her favorite pair of jeans for the occasion.

It was Yash Chopra's final film, starring Katrina Kaif and Shahrukh Khan as the heroine and hero. Meeting in their early twenties, the two find true love in England, until they are ripped apart by family obligations and hasty promises. Twenty years later they reunite. The forces pulling them apart are still present, but there is the hope of them reuniting.

Arpita turned down the flames on the stove, added milk to the chai, and began making the flat bread.

Arpita's elder sister had been married as soon as the dowry was ready, at twenty one years of age. Her Jijajii<sup>3</sup> had married her sister despite his family's protests. Pinky was so beautiful. She was also an unhappy young wife. She ran away from Arpita's Jijajii with another man, deserting her three young children to Arpita's care. In the end

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3 Elder sister's husband

Pinky and her husband reunited because Jijajji was still so in love with Pinky. Another timeless love. Now her sister drips with gold.

Arpita pinched off a small piece of dough between thumb and forefinger and then returned it to the larger dough ball, making an offering to the Gods. She continued to hum. Arpita hoped that her future husband would love her that strongly someday.

There was a flurry of flour and the sound of thumps in the bedroom as the rest of the family awoke with the smell of chai in their noses, emerging from the single bedroom at their leisure.

Arpita's father and brothers were served first- three to five roti stacked in front of them, which they dipped into a cup of chai. Her mother helped ferry the hot bread from the stove to the mouths of her husband and sons. She still walked with a near imperceptible limp from when Pappa had beaten her. Arpita looked down, focusing on her hand's work. Arpita hated seeing her mother so battered after the episodes. She would do anything to stop it. Pappa had just been so stressed when Arpita's elder sister had run away. He had turned to drink that week.

Arpita hated when he drank. He wasn't her Pappa then. He was mean and he would unfailingly end the evening by beating her mother. One could always tell when Pappa came home drunk because the outside gate would clank and shudder uncooperatively. Mommi would have to go open it for him. When this happened, Arpita's elder sister used to gather her and her younger siblings up and ferry them into the bedroom. She directed them to hold their hands over their ears so they could not hear the *smacks* Pappa delivered to Mommi. Now it was Arpita's job to hide the children under the covers so Pappa would not find them.

Yet, her father loved her mother, Arpita knew this for sure. The next day, although he never expressed it verbally, he was always sorry. He would not eat until Arpita's Mother sat down next to him in the morning, and would partially refill Mommi's chai cup from his own, conciliatory.

Arpita finished flipping the roti and joined the rest of her family on the floor, bread and chai clutched in both hands. She kept her eyes on her own food. Typically, each family member would try to avoid the eyes of the other as Arpita's tears slipped from their eyes. They tried to catch the sadness from her food in their chai cups, re-salting the tea. Arpita's father had long since given up trying to beat the sadness from his daughter's food.

"Larki," Arpita's mother said, interrupting the eating. "Remember the picture of the young boy Deepak, the most recent one? His family would like to meet you. His family owns a small hotel in Dehradun. Here is the picture." Handing over a small two by one photo, Arpita looked at her potential husband.

He was handsome, that was sure. Fair-skinned and dark eyed, he faced away from the camera, looking off to the side instead, as if he didn't quite know how to pose. The extra fat he carried on his body only served to accentuate the sweet dimples in his cheeks. He slouched a little, hands in the pockets.

Yet, she did not like his look. She wanted Arun as her husband. She wanted the man she loved to be her husband.

"Today, you will make him and his father lunch." Arpita looked quickly to her father. What if they cried? Maybe that was good. Who would want to marry a woman who made you cry?



“This will be good for you, beti. You will be taken care of if you make this match.” Her father dispensed one of his rare smiles. “This would make me happy.”

“There is food in the refrigerator,” Arpita’s mother said. She patted her daughter on the head.

“Yes, Mommi, Pappa,” Arpita dutifully replied.

Before they were slated to arrive, Arpita cleaned. The floors were swept and scrubbed, the chair covers shaken out, and the children sent off to school. Yesterday’s wash that had been soaking in a bucket overnight was draped over lines on the roof. Their family had once been wealthy. They still had their own home, and their own land because of this. Her father, Arjun, lay in the yard and smoked. Her mother maintained the shop, so that her father could chaperone and negotiate the hoped for engagement.

While on the roof, Arpita called Arun. She had a cell phone in case she needed to call her parents at the shop, but Arun lent her money so she could call him.

“Hi Moti,” Arun answered the phone. Arpita feigned anger.

“Shuttup, sidi! It’s a good thing I’m not there with you. I would shove this phone so far up your ear all you would ever hear is my anger.”

“Your nagging, you mean?”

“Very funny, stupid. Good thing I won’t have to marry you!” The line crackled quietly in Arpita’s ear.

“Who’s the behenchod this time?”

“Arun-”

“Didn't you tell your parents you didn't want to marry him? I can take care of you, Arpita. Really, I have been promised a steady job in Pune. They shouldn't have any objections.”

“But you're Garwali, Arun. I'm Punjabi. My parents want me to marry a Punjabi boy.” It had made them smile so, at the idea of Deepak as their future son-in-law.

“Please Arpita, just ask. Please.”

When Arpita entered the kitchen, her shoulders relaxed. Deepak might not even like her. There had been others before him, who had declined to marry her. Maybe Arun would be the only one in the end. Her parents would have to let her marry him.

She began to prepare lunch. First she washed her hands, scrubbing under the nails, and opened the fridge door, enjoying the cool rush of air that blew from the refrigerator.

It wasn't guaranteed that she would marry him though. She hoped she would love her husband regardless. It could still be Arun. Not time to give up hope. On the top shelf of the refrigerator she found okra, loki, ginger, chillies and tomatoes. She took out the loki and washed it thoroughly, her hands sliding over the transparent sides of the vegetable. She couldn't imagine touching a man on a marriage bed.

Next she removed a handful of potatoes, garlic, and an onion from a basket on top of a chest, as well as chillies and ginger from the fridge. She peeled the potatoes, washed them and then sliced the tubers before setting them aside. The starch covered her fingertips, a grainy texture rubbed between fingers. Arpita wondered if it felt good.

It didn't sound like it, but she knew it was a big deal. She hoped that she would love him.

She would be faithful regardless. Pinky's home had been a mess before Pinky had run away: the floor unswept, the dishes unwashed, children's clothing, along with her sister's discontent, scattered throughout the rooms. Her absence hadn't changed much in the feel of the home. Jijaji's anger had only expanded to fill the place his wife's physical bulk had inhabited. It had been an angry, sad house. It was the reason Arpita would have to find a husband outside of Rishikesh. Arpita had the same blood as her sister, people talked that Arjun's second daughter might also run away. Arpita peeled the onion and garlic with a paring knife and sliced them into chunks, leaving her fingers smelling sharp and fragrant. She would have to be far from her family.

Arpita pulled out the karai and drizzled it liberally with oil. Turning on the stove she began to heat the pan, throwing in spices and the chopped ingredients once it had become hot. She let it cook in just the oil briefly, before adding water and covering the pan with a lid. She left it to cook. Jijaji loved her sister a lot.

Rummaging through the kitchen she took out three cups of white rice from the large bag that sat next to the potatoes. She found a pressure cooker in one of the cabinets and rinsed the rice two times inside of it, filling the pot with water from the bucket on the kitchen floor, and then draining it. Then she covered the pot, snapping the handle into place, and put the pressure cooker on the stove.

The creak of the gate heralded unfamiliar voices outside the kitchen window. Arpita nervously began straightening her clothes. She peeked out the window, the grating keeping the three men's image fuzzy as they laughed together. Behind her, the

pressure cooker steamed, hissing out a cloud, before quietly bubbling again, startling her.

The three men walked into the living room.

“Arre bhai, still looking so young with all that smoke.” The two older men laughed together. “I hope your son will also look so good at your age, otherwise, arre! My poor daughter.”

“Speaking of your daughter where is she? Does she really exist?”

On cue, Arpita stepped out with three plates of rice and subje in her hands. Keeping her eyes down, she set a plate in front of each of the men, only to glance briefly up to take a look at the youngest man at the table.

He avoided her glance, looking instead out at the mango tree in the yard. He was chubbier than he appeared in his photo, but it was likely he thought the same about her. His hair was combed neatly down the middle and the striped, collared shirt he wore, made the lack of a smile more severe.

“Now look, don’t they make a nice pair?” Arpita’s father laughingly gestured in the direction of the two shy children. “Deepak and Arpita Singh. Perfect height, I think.” His eyes flicked rapidly between the young man before him and his daughter.

The men ate, while Arpita feasted in the kitchen alone. The spices stung her mouth deliciously, as she kept an ear out for the men’s call for more. In the meantime she mixed the subje and rice with her hand, scooping bits into her mouth.

Abruptly, the laughter in the living room was cut off.

“Arre!” Arpita’s father said. “My daughter loves her spicy food. It makes so many tears in the rest of us.” A slight sob was quickly turned into a cough. Ashamed of

their sudden desire to cry the two guests quickly agreed to Arjun's diagnosis of their tears.

“Such spicy food!” Deepak’s father said. “But even with the spice it tastes delicious!” Arjun took that as his cue.

“Larki,” her father called through his tears. “Challo, lets have more food. Young men like to eat.”

Quickly Arpita wiped her hands on a handkerchief and gathered the pans. Coming out with the pressure cooker of rice in one hand and the karai in the other, she set down the karai on the floor, before serving out spoonfuls of rice.

“Bas, bas,” Gopal gestured with his hands. “I will become too fat.”

“You’re already fat,” Arpita’s father laughingly told the other man.

Ladling food to Deepak, Arpita stole a quick glance, so surprised to find him looking at her that she immediately dropped her gaze. Trying again, she stared back at him. They locked eyes until she stuck out her tongue, just for a second. He looked surprised. A blush threatened to overtake her cheeks and she quickly retreated to the kitchen.

That night Arpita’s father praised his daughter, her cooking, and how taken both the visiting men had been with her. Her Papa would begin finalizing the engagement.

Arpita was walking. She had planned to visit the temple her mother made pooja at once a week, but couldn't stop. She tried to avoid the looks of people who stared at her, wondering why a young girl was wandering alone. She passed honking cars, hole in the wall general stores, and the occasional cow that bobbed its head as it walked

along the main thru-way. She touched her forehead in passing, glanced inside the temple, but something made her keep moving. Her feet itched.

She ate golgapa in the market, gulping down the hard shelled crisps to swallow down the watery filling. The liquid made a mess in the bottom of the silver-lined paper bowl. It shone. Arpita lifted the bowl to her face and drank the rest of the salty liquid. The damp edges of the bowl left two wet, curved lines on her cheeks.

She paid the man twelve rupees for the snack and continued on to Triveni-ghat. She walked towards Ganga. Beggars sat in shawls with outstretched, cupped hands they lifted in supplication, or huddled on blankets displaying legs stricken by polio, and other deformations, with alms bowls in front of them. Arpita walked past them. She had spent her pocket change. The rest of her money must go to laundry detergent, and the potatoes that had gone up in price.

She stared at Ganga a while. Around her, people made pooja or sat in couples. Boyfriends and girlfriends with no other place to meet would meet here. She and Arun had met for their first time here. She had wanted to slap him for being so presumptuous, for thinking that he could ask her to meet him, and tell her he liked her, and then expect her to accept. Just like that. But it had gone that way, just like that.

She loved him a lot.

Without her assent, without any desire for it, Arpita's engagement rolled forward. She prayed everyday and made extra poojas in the hopes that she and Arun would be united in marriage, but the goodwill from Deepak's family never faltered. To her parents she didn't protest loudly, or really at all. She had no knowledge how to. Her

father had always known what was best for the family. The gods knew what was right for her life. How was she to go against them?

Gopal-ji, Deepak and Deepak's mother, Lakshmi, had come from Dehradun once again to finalize the engagement. Arpita's mother was in the kitchen pouring chai out into small ceramic cups with tiny handles. Arpita's father had hit her mother the other night, so her mother wasn't speaking to him. In the excitement for the engagement, the ritual between her mother and father, the aftermath of the beatings, the sharing of the chai, was not enacted. Her mother had muttered to herself all morning in the kitchen, and chai was on her breathe.

“He will remember that he should care for me,” she would say adamantly to Arpita. “Why won't he share his chai with me?”

Arpita had thought with the engagement moving forward that her Pappa would not-

All this was with Arpita as she served the Deepak's family tea in the living room.

“So, what do you think?” Arjun began, opening his hands in question. “Your son and my daughter. A beautiful match. They will have an incredible wedding. Anything they want for it, I will take care of.”

“Wonderful,” Gopal nodded. Over the sweet chai and dry biscuits the two elder men talked and laughed together, as Arpita and Deepak got closer and closer to engagement.

“So,” Gopal began, clasping his hands together, “shall we give them some space for a few minutes? Let the children decide if they would like a marriage together, now that we are both agreed.”

Nodding, Arjun stood up, followed by Gopal, and they both walked out, followed by Lakshmi and Arpita's mother. They walked out the front door, and closed the curtain over the entryway that lead outside, giving the two a semblance of privacy.

The two sat silently.

“So,” he spoke hesitantly, “would you like to marry me?”

“Yes,” she replied.

The wedding was small. Arpita was the second daughter of three and each one of them needed a suitable wedding. Dowrys were high, and with the sole responsibility of the wedding in Arpita's father, there was only so much he could accomplish for his second eldest girl.

Red velvet carpets lay out under the canopy of two adjoining tents. Food for forty people piled and fried in silver platters. Rasgullah from cans and over fried puri were markers of Arjun's budgeting.

The bride and groom sat in red velvet thrones upon a raised dais, frozen looks of terror and exhaustion preserved in the photographs taken by the photographer. For three days before the wedding, Arpita was consumed with poojas, ceremonies, and trips to the beauty parlor. She didn't have time to think about leaving her family, about leaving all of her things behind. She would be adopted into this new family, unable to keep anything from her old life.

Close female relatives from Poonjab bused in, determined to help with the wedding, towing along small children, and bags of saris. Arpita was exhausted, but felt special with all the fuss. It hadn't quite hit her until this moment that she would be leaving Rishikesh behind with a new husband.



The holy cows with their distending bellies shoved their way through the gaps in the tent sides nosing through the trash that had been hastily discarded onto the floor of the tent. The yellow turmeric, brown of garam masala, and spots of bright red chillies mashed onto the carpeted floor in bright splotches as the cows lipped at the unfinished food.

Music blasted from the speakers, although not many people danced, the dance floor too small to get the festivities going. A photographer walked around snapping pictures. A crowd of the uninvited gathered outside the tent, neighbors who were attracted by the noise.

At ten, the wedding finished and Arpita was herded into a car by her new family. Her sisters, Aunts, nieces, and nephews wailed outside the tents, the tears smudging meticulously done make up. Arjun turned away to wipe tears from his eyes before they could fall. Arpita watched the tears from her family members, from the people whom she no longer shared a last name with, the people with whom her childhood, and all its things, would be left with.

There, behind the crowd of bystanders that lacked an invitation, stood Arun. Arpita had stopped answering his phone calls, had stopped any contact with him. He had shown up to her house with his mother to plead his case and Arpita had fled while her younger sister served them tea. The wrappers from the chips Arpita ate fluttered to the floor from the bed, as Arpita consumed her sadness after Arun and his mother left. She had tried to cry at that point, had wanted a release, but she could only keep chewing.

Arpita sat in the back seat of the car between her new sister and her new husband. She was not Arun's wife. She would never be Arun's wife. The car doors slammed on either side of Arpita and she was smashed, claustrophobic, in the back seat. She would never be Arun's wife. She would never really talk to him again. She would never live with her family.

Arpita took one last look out the car window, at the mob of people that had gathered to see her off. She watched her Mommi walk towards her Pappa with that limp, her sari glittering as she went.

The bond between her and her mother snapped. She was no longer a part of the family that had raised her. She was no longer required to silently bear the weight of her mother's sadness, the sadness of generations of women before her. Arpita collapsed into tears.

Her mother watched her daughter's head bow in the car, and knew how her daughter would learn to love her husband. Knew that her daughter would never forget her birth family, but would learn to love her new family as a woman. There was something great in learning woman love. It was hard to leave one's family, but marriage, and the subsequent children, was the greatest joy one could find.

## **“Executive Order 9066: The President Authorizes Japanese Relocation”**

“In an atmosphere of World War II hysteria, President Roosevelt, encouraged by officials at all levels of the federal government, authorized the internment of tens of thousands of American citizens of Japanese ancestry and resident aliens from Japan. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066, dated February 19, 1942, gave the military broad powers to ban any citizen from a fifty- to sixty-mile-wide coastal area stretching from Washington state to California and extending inland into southern Arizona. The order also authorized transporting these citizens to assembly centers hastily set up and governed by the military in California, Arizona, Washington state, and Oregon. Although it is not well known, the same executive order (and other war-time orders and restrictions) were also applied to smaller numbers of residents of the United States who were of Italian or German descent. For example, 3,200 resident aliens of Italian background were arrested and more than 300 of them were interned. About 11,000 German residents—including some naturalized citizens—were arrested and more than 5000 were interned. Yet while these individuals (and others from those groups) suffered grievous violations of their civil liberties, the war-time measures applied to Japanese Americans were worse and more sweeping, uprooting entire communities and targeting citizens as well as resident aliens.”

- History Matters: The US Survey Course on the Web

### Rooster

It was a Sunday. Late afternoon and a slight breeze blew in from the gap in the window, clacking the yellowing venetian blinds against the window frame. They cast barred shadows onto a sunlit rectangle, cutting stripes into the pea green carpet that lay below. The sound of clucking chickens blew in through the window before dissipating slowly into the living room air. Mike sat in a large chair in front of the TV. The chair was overstuffed, squeezed at the sides and threadbare. The angles were frayed and on the verge of leaking the padding out.

Mike watched the news, letting his body rest from the morning work. He had turned the garden beds this morning, shoveling the dry dirt up and over itself again and again. His back had ached badly, but he had needed to plant the peas in the ground. A homemade trellis constructed from twine and wood, worn with use, marked where the peas sat in the ground. He had readied the rest of the garden afterward, turning dirt and sowing fertilizer. His back ached.

In the kitchen, Mike's wife, Kimiko, made bustling sounds: dishes being washed, running water, and the shuffling of slippered feet against linoleum tiling. At the table his two youngest children, Anna and Sharon, sat doing their homework. An occasional giggle came out of one or the other.

“An, what's black and white and red all over?” Sharon's voice asked.

“A newspaper,” Anna replied. Delighted Sharon laughed- more to make noise in the nearly silent kitchen, than finding the joke funny. It sparked a laughing fit between the two of them. Their mother let it go a little longer, and then reminded them of their work.

“How much homework do you two have left?” their mother, Kimiko, asked. The giggling ceased.

Sharon was the youngest, sweet, and often used those charms against her father. Anna had calculating eyes that took note of her father's occasional favoritism. Both were stellar students, pushed by their mother to study at the kitchen table instead of playing outside. She always reminded her children to do the best they could. Gambatte. That it didn't matter how you were ranked, as long as you put in your all and everything, and her children did.

In 1942, more than fifteen years ago, the Japanese firm that Kimiko had worked for on the East Coast had shut down because of 9066. On the West Coast, all the Issei and Nissei were put in camps<sup>4</sup>, and with the end of her job she returned home. The day the Order was released, February nineteenth, they showed up at her house and took her father away as an “enemy alien.” That meant that they had been ready to take him before the Order was released. That way no one could protest. Sometimes you tried

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4 Internment Camps

your hardest, and things still don't work out. But you at least had to try.

Mike was watching grainy, black and white footage of the Vietnam War on television. Settled back in his chair, he felt a deep sympathy for the troops that had been sent to rid Vietnam of Communist powers. The television showed blurry running. Caucasian- American soldiers running. Vietnamese, black hair, fleeing, falling. Mike had almost served in World War II, after having been confined to the Minidoka internment camp. There had been a strong division amongst the younger men. Some held a muted fire, a desire to prove their American birth, their patriotism, despite what the government would define them as. The majority rejected the idea of serving. Why should they fight at all when this country did not even see them as her citizens? Fortunately, unfortunately, the war ended too soon and Mike's regiment was never deployed.

A crowing was heard through the window. Damn rooster. Every morning, just before the alarm clock sounded at six, while confined to its cage, that damn rooster crowed. Mike had built the rooster's enclosure right up against the white-washed West wall of the house, hoping to prevent the early morning crowing with the shade. Instead, the rooster's voice had easier access to Mike's bedroom, and the living room right by it, angrily learning to scratch the white-wash exposed within his cage, as he searched for insects. He probably does it on purpose, Mike had thought that morning, checking the clock. Fifteen more minutes until he had to get up. Damn rooster. Somehow his wife had managed to sleep through the crowing. She always managed to forgive the animal's mean habits. She had a lot of forgiveness in her.

Half dozing, he returned to wakefulness as the alarm went off, and watched

Kimiko through half closed eyes. The night dress she wore went down to her petite ankles and up to her determined wrists. She wore her hair short and allowed the graying without any fuss. Her stomach and breasts had long accepted their droopy age, and it had reminded Mike that theirs had been a marriage of convenience. They had both left the camps at age thirty one, almost too old for marriage, and had scrambled to make a normal life for themselves. Their parents had been friends first.

“Mike,” Kimiko had gently shaken him. “Ohaiyogozaimasu. Time to get up.” She was already dressed.

“Yeah, ok.”

A bright commercial about Heinz ketchup came on the television distracting Mike from his thoughts about that morning. A large glass bottle bounced across the screen. Mike put the commercial on mute and stretched his legs, a slight pop audible as he straightened a knee. The sound of cabinets loudly opening and closing came from the kitchen. One cabinet had begun to squeak. He should fix that. Maybe he had time before dinner.

On top of the television were pictures of his children, Anna, Sharon, and his eldest, William, at various stages in their childhood. They were well-groomed with bangs and white teeth that contrasted sharply against their black hair. It was only until the most recent pictures that the children evidenced any real individuality from one another. Anna coughed in the other room, rattling dishes drowning her out. The silverware drawer slid shut.

The drawer to the left of the silverware was full of things that Kimiko would compulsively collect. Most people would have thrown away such things: ketchup and

mustard packets, hand wipes, twist ties, and leftover napkins from fast food restaurants. It had been a habit she had acquired during the Depression.

Mike stood up to go to the bathroom. He would go to the shed afterward to find something to oil the cabinet hinge with.

On his way, he stopped briefly in the kitchen, only to find that his eldest child, William, was also home. He stood over the sink with a bowl of cereal. He would be leaving for college within a year.

Mike stood in the kitchen doorway. The linoleum flooring in the other room was slightly water damaged from a leak in the roof a couple of years ago. Mike thought about getting a small carpet to cover up the water mark. Next weekend. He had to buy seeds for the garden anyway. He still had to clean out the car today.

William continued to eat, eyes never leaving a light stain above the sink.

“You can’t sit at the table and eat with the rest of us in a couple of hours?” Mike asked.

“Gotta go,” William said, in between bites of cereal.

“Do what?”

“Basketball. Michael's picking me up soon.”

The sound of a car honking outside caused William to drop his bowl into the sink and start towards the door.

“Clean your bowl,” Kimiko said, looking through a recipe book. She left the regulation of William to his father. Mike was silent. William spun around, hurriedly swiped the bowl with a sponge, rinsed it, and then ran out the door.

“Bye!” William called, before the door slammed shut.

“He’s always so busy,” Anna said.

“And so are you,” Kimiko responded. “Finish your homework.”

“Dad, will you come see my play next weekend?” Sharon asked.

“He needs to learn how to appreciate his family,” Mike said to Kimiko.

“Of course we’re coming,” Kimiko said to Sharon. She shifted her body and turned to Mike. “He does.”

“It’s Sunday at seven,” said Sharon.

“I want to come,” her sister said.

“No, he doesn’t. He needs to learn the importance of sitting down with your family before he leaves for college,” said Mike.

“We’ll all go,” Kimiko said tensely to the two girls. “Now, shizukani shite kudasai.” Both girls returned to their work. “Ok,” Kimiko responded to Mike.

“He can’t be running around with his friends all the time, all right?” Mike said. William would be leaving for college soon, he would have time for his friends then. Right now, he still had to be a part of the family.

Kimiko nodded and buried her head within the refrigerator. “All right,” Mike said again. He left the kitchen. He could hear Sharon’s voice echo down the hallway as he made his way to the bathroom.

“We’re doing the Wizard of Oz,” Sharon said. “I’m the good witch so I have to wear this giant purple dress.”

“Ugh,” said Anna. Shutting the bathroom door cut off their voices.

Emptying his bladder was satisfying. He zipped up his fly and turned around to wash his hands. His reflection in the cracked mirror was somber and distinctly of



Japanese descent: black hair, high cheekbones, a clean-shaven face with severe lips.

He looked a lot like his father. He had been a quiet, serious man, who had done his utmost to provide a good life for his family. First, by moving them to the US, where there were far more jobs, and far more opportunities, if a rampant racism that had not been accounted for. Mike had been born here in California, as his father worked making and repairing shoes. Those first ten years were hugely successful for the family, if difficult.

Mike's mother moved back to Japan with her daughter ten years after she first arrived. She had grown up in a time of many changes, almost too many. She missed her home. Mike joined them in Japan during the latter part of his teen years, studying in school. After all, it had never been his parent's plan to stay in the United States, but they had created businesses, a livelihood, and finally, had children.

In his early twenties, Mike decided to move back to the United States. His time in Japan showed him that he was not Japanese. He was an American.

The Depression hit soon after Mike moved, and Mike and his father struggled to make ends meet. They grew closer with the Japanese-American community there. At a point when Mike stood closest to his family and community, he was forced to enter the camp in Jerome, Arizona. For three years “home” had been old army barracks and the things they could carry with them. Even when they managed to escape the internment camps they were still pointed back in, pointed out as “Japs.” The family lost everything in the three year interim except for a stash of money sewed into the lining of four different suitcases.

But the worst was the barbed wire fences. The first week, Mike had stalked the

circumference of the camp fence, cautious around the manned guard towers, but angry, spiteful. He had almost hoped the guards would do something, wanted to find a way to push their buttons. His father had cautioned him, charged him with the responsibility of the larger community, so Mike got a job driving jeeps in the camp for twelve dollars a month.

Warm water washed across his hands, cleaning them of soap. He pushed his wet hands through his hair, slicking it back neatly. Work had been normal all week. He was a quiet, hard worker, often escaping the notice of his bosses. He worked in an assembly line, in a factory that made fighter planes. He and another man moved large near rectangular sheets of metal from one machine to another. Over and over again on opposite sides of the same sheet, they mechanically lifted and deposited, only occasionally making eye contact. They had had some conversation in the fourteen years Mike had worked at the factory, but all Mike could distinguish about the man was the large nose that dominated his face, and the blonde hair on top of his head.

After fourteen years at it, Mike felt tired over his lack of promotions. His boss had never done much to indicate his notice of him. If only he could get rid of that damn rooster's beak. He'd have so much less stress. It was only five months ago that the thing had begun to regularly crow, later than most of the roosters Mike had encountered, but it had always been mean-spirited. It would stride around the edge of the cage, streaks of red highlighting its feathers. The rooster guarded his hens, spiteful against those who would try to take their eggs.

Sometimes, during the day, Mike would get a momentary twinge of sympathy for the animal as it stalked the perimeter of the chicken wire. It was trapped after all. But then it would open its beak and crow. It had been Kimiko's idea to get the chickens. There happened to be one rooster in the batch of chicks that they bought, and, unable to get rid of it, Mike had to endure.

Mike went back out to the living room footage of Martin Luther King Jr. flashed across the television screen. Equality for blacks and whites. Mike turned off the television and walked out the back door. He passed by the chicken coop. The rooster pecked and scratched at the ground, kicking dust through the hexagonal holes in the chicken wire. The hens moved about him, but made sure to leave some space between them. He seemed in a particularly ornery mood today, pecking at them if they moved too close.

Mike walked into the back garden shed. He could hear Sharon and Anna were laughing in the kitchen. They would grow up and leave too.

He heard the screen door open and close as Kimiko exited the back door to feed the chickens. When their children left it would just be him and Kimiko.

A short yell was heard from outside. Mike started towards the kitchen and out the back door. Both Anna and Sharon followed him outside to the chicken coop where their mother sat, a hand clasped to a bleeding ankle. The rooster's beady eyes gleamed from behind the chicken wire. A section of it was crumpled from where Kimiko had fallen back over it, out of the rooster's domain. The rooster watched as Mike approached his wife.

"What happened?" Mike asked. Kimiko grimaced.

“The rooster. He must be feeling especially territorial today.” Sharon walked over and tried to get a look at her mother’s ankle. Moving her hands away. Kimiko winced. As long as Mike could remember Kimiko had a stoicism about her, a capability that he had often envied. Watching her in the dust of the yard, with blood around her ankles, infuriated Mike. He fixed his eyes on the rooster that ruffled its wings and began to preen. It was all the damned rooster's fault. The thing had been causing trouble from the start, unsettling Mike on his days off. The creature puffed out his chest, trapped behind his enclosure, too proud to run from Mike's apparent rage.

Mike strode into the cage, grabbed the rooster by its feet.

“Dad-“

He had killed chickens as a teenager in Japan, a time sandwiched between visits to the United States. Mike gripped the feet in his left hand and then nestled the body against his own. The rooster tried to peck him, attempting to flail his wings in Mike's arms. The reddish-brown feathers ruffled up behind his neck, a protest. Mike grabbed the feathered head of the rooster with his right, pulled down, and then sharply back up.

Sharon began to cry.

The bird tried to thrash, feathers ruffled, and several fell to the ground. The chicken twitched as Mike released. He slowly became aware of his daughter’s horrified faces.

“Damn rooster deserved it,” he said. He looked down at Kimiko. She had let go of her ankle and sat looking at him calmly. The blood was smeared in a wide swathe across the bony, back part of her ankle. “Here,” he said. He offered her a hand, pulling her to her feet, then wrapped a hand around her waist to steady her. Their two daughters

trailed behind them.

Mike half turned from Kimiko, who was partially propped up against the kitchen counter. He turned to Sharon.

“Grab a chair for your Okaasan,” he said. Sharon left to do what he said.

“Sharon!” Kimiko called. “Don't bother. I'm fine.” She looked Mike squarely in the eyes and repeated herself. “I'm fine.” Mike still held the small of her back, unsure. She was bleeding. “Go get the rooster outside,” she told him. “Don't want to waste it.”

Two hours later, Kimiko set the table, the rooster a morbid center piece. What Kimiko had originally made- miso soup, rice, and veggies, sat to the side of the roasted rooster. Both daughters refused to touch the chicken, pushing it to the edge of their plates. Kimiko took delicate bites of the flesh, encouraging her children to do the same, until Anna tentatively took a bite.

Mike, after observing his family members, speared his own piece of chicken, brought it to his lips, paused, and deposited it back onto his plate. It smelled delicious. The skin was crispy, the inside remained moist. A pool of hot grease lay like a moat around the rooster. He would never have to listen to that damn rooster crow. He tried once again. He brought the meat up to his lips, then feigned a coughing fit and put it back down. Mike removed the piece of meat from his fork. He met Kimiko's eyes across the table. She smiled at him softly.

## Tsering

Tenzin Barongpa married Sonam Punzhok on the fifth of December 1975, in Sarchu. They had six children together, all of whom they sent away to live with their Uncle in Kullu around the age of three. There, the children had access to an education unavailable to them in the more remote areas of the North.

As each child was introduced to their Uncle's house, they spent a month of midnight tears for the move, missing their parents. When they got older, some found reconciliation, and forgave their mother and father for the abandoned feeling they were left with. These children eventually moved back to the village they were born in, to help their parents in their old age. It was a halfhearted attempt to reclaim a childhood.

The other children stayed away, and sometimes felt an ugly thread of relief at their alienation when their father called, yelling and drunk.

For Tsering Barongpa, second eldest son and child, life was a series of being cared for and taking care of the women in his life. He had been raised by his grandmother, and it was her illness that had chased him into the cricket yards after school. While waiting for a thrown ball to meet the end of his bat, Tsering caught a thoughtless peace, that in its absence would send him running back to his grandmother's bedside. It took four years after she became bedridden for her to finally die, and Tsering was present for the whole of it. He moved soon after to Leh.

Then there had been Tsering's ex-girlfriend, whom he had talked to on the phone every night for nine months. They had talked marriage until her parents arranged a marriage for her with someone else. He had begged her not to, but she agreed to be married to her parent's choice. So they had broken things off.

Then there had been Tsering's girl-cousin, who he helped care for from her infancy. She was the centerpiece to his life.

So Tsering sat confusedly amongst a ruin of bedding and clothes realizing that he had broken something inside himself. Or that something had broken loose.

It was the middle of the night, and the room was nearly black, except for the moonlight. Heavy curtains were drawn to either side of the window, a hint to the deathly cold winters that made every available opportunity at indoor insulation of the utmost importance. Shadows were strong. The faint outline of dragons, carved on the short tables, could be seen if one stared through the darkness long enough.

When she had said, “no,” said “stop,” Tsering hadn't had the power to. When she had begun to struggle and push him away, instinct and alcohol moved Tsering to hold her close, soft, warm, and sweet-looking. Her attempts to buck him off her seemed more invitation to than refusal for sex and a hand, his hand, pushed the back of her head into the pillow.

She had cried afterward. Really cried, like Tsering hadn't heard anyone over his young cousin's age do. The dark of the room swallowed her tears so the only signs of her sadness were the small cries she uttered into the pillow.

Tsering felt loose and fuzzy with the alcohol in his system, and a queasy feeling laid itself into his stomach. He cried with her, and it was as much for an innocence lost in her, as in himself.

“Dadi-chod, dadi-chod, dadi-chod! Fucker still sleeps with his grandmother. How gross is that?” A barely pubescent dark skinned boy stood with his hands on his hips. His puffed out chest lay bony below a dirty yellow tank top stained with sweat

from the Indian sun. “Where'd you get that chocolate from Tsering buddy? Huh, tsi-tsi? Your grandma?”

Tsering stood, just outside the school gate in Manali. He had, in fact, gotten the coveted chocolate from his grandmother, but had no desire to share it with his childhood bully. Raja had often heckled Tsering on his way home from school when he was younger, before he showed any kind of proficiency in sports. Now, since he had started playing cricket in the school yard, he had a number of older friends that lent him a protective barrier Raja was usually conscious of. Today seemed to be an exception.

“Hey, dadi-chod! You listening to me? I'm saying you fuck your grandma. Now where'd you get that chocolate?”

Tsering peeled off pieces of the gold foil, under the plastic Cadbury package, and dropped them to the ground. They fluttered, hesitant to land.

“Yeah, it was from my grandmother.” He spoke slowly to buy himself more time. It had been a birthday present. The only one he had received that day.

A small spot of dark chocolate at the corner of Tsering's mouth contrasted with the lighter coloring of his skin. He was a Ladakhi boy, short, compact, fair, and more Tibetan looking than Indian. He was well groomed by his uncle's family, the bright red school uniform containing several well-defined creases. But Tsering had loosened his tie and spiked up his hair with the sweat that had accumulated in it. Bad boy style.

“Aw, how sweet,” Raja was continuing. “What a sweet little couple. Come on Tsi-tsi, let's learn to share you grandmother's gifts.”

“Behenchod, no. And shut up about my Amma<sup>5</sup>.”

“Sure?” Raja asked. Despite Tsering's new found athleticism, Raja was still two

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5 Affectionate term for grandmother in Hindi



years older and more experienced in school yard fights. Still, Tsering stood his ground glaring at the bully. Raja walked up to him, planted two hands on his chest and pushed. Tsering stumbled back a little.

“Sure?” Raja asked again. Tsering looked to the side of Raja. If the boy just gave him a little more space Tsering could dart around him. The Ladakhi boy was definitely faster. Before Tsering could make a move either way a voice heralded them from behind Raja.

“Hey, how's it goin?” A tall stocky boy joined them. He played catcher because he was wide enough a ball could never get past him. Although, it wasn't just sheer physical bulk that won him the position- he was a talented player, and worked hard at the sport. He had dark skin, almost black, was originally from the South, and had short, straight, black hair. Two younger boys followed behind him. Raja took a look behind. Recognizing quickly that he was outnumbered Raja skulked away.

“Behenchod coward,” Tsering called after him, satisfied.

“Was that gandu, bothering you?” asked Deepak, the leading member of the group, pinching Tsering's cheek. “It's just cause you're so wittle.”

“Bastard, leave me alone.” Tsering jerked his face out of Deepak's hand.

“Where were you guys today?”

“We skipped,” Deepak answered easily. “I wanted to catch Anshu on his way home. Make sure the kid knew he couldn't tattle on me in class.” Deepak grinned.

“Yeah, we got him good. I think he's bringing us lunch tomorrow,” Rangu said. He was usually one who agreed.

Tsering laughed. “Good, I'll make sure to get him in class too.”

“I guess it was fun,” Sachin said sullenly, the last member of the group of boys. “But next time I don't want to leave at lunch time. I was so bored waiting for Anshu to show up.”

“Shuttup, ghandu,” Deepak said, who had fallen two years behind in his schooling. “You would be bored in class anyway.”

“At least this way you don't have to pretend to be interested,” Rangu chimed in.

Tsering nodded, absentmindedly watching a group of girls buy sweets at the general store just outside the school gate. Kushi was in the group, the back of her pigtails waving as she shook her head.

“Well, make Tseri come next time. Then we could at least get a decent card game going,” Sachin said. Tsering tore his eyes away from the girls and returned to the conversation.

“Yeah, thanks a lot for letting me know you were skipping, guys. We had English class today. I was bored out of my fucking mind,” said Tsering. Bastards, leaving him alone.

Deepak slung one arm over Tsering's shoulder, pulling him closer, and then ruffled his hair. Keeping one arm around Tsering he reached his free hand into an inside jacket pocket. After making sure there were no teachers close by, he pulled out a DVD case, showing it to Tsering.

“Don't get all butt hurt, Tseri. We weren't just harassing Anshu. We had to make sure you'd get your birthday present.” Tsering looked at the cover of the DVD. It was a blank white.

“What's that?” Tsering took the DVD case and opened it.

“Oh, got you a porno,” Deepak said. He smiled. Tsering closed the case and shoved it hurriedly back towards Deepak.

“C'mon, we're all going to Sachin's house to watch it. His parents won't be home,” Deepak said. He wouldn't take back the DVD.

When Tsering sat next to his grandmother, side by side, on the bed, it would be after he had helped her to the bathroom, and before the need to leave the proof of her declining health hit him. Her breathing was always labored from the short trek to the bathroom, and she leaned with her side against the white wall, eyes closed.

In the beginning, he had asked her questions, wanted her to tell him if she was in pain, wanted her to reassure him that she was alright, but he had long since stopped asking her such silly questions. Now, he just waited quietly until she was ready for him to help shift her again so she could lay back against the pillows.

She had on brightly colored socks today. They alternated between green and yellow, and were patterned around the ankle portion. His Abi<sup>6</sup> had knit everyday before the arthritis had completely taken over her hands. On better days she would still pick up her needles, but the results were almost always too lumpy to do anything with. She would have Tsering undo her snarled socks and tangled head scarves.

“Make it lie flat!” she would urge him, gesturing with her elbow up, a jerking, smoothing motion with her hand. Tsering would pass a hand over the untangled yarn in an attempt to make the skeins lie straight, but once his hand left the wool, the pieces would begin to curl and the tips twist. Hurriedly, he would wind the yarn back onto the larger ball, and tuck the whole thing back into the basket. Stay.

When he was much younger he used to watch her knit with alacrity. It had

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6      Ladakhi for grandmother

always impressed him how she could create so many small neat rows into such useful things as socks, hats, and sweaters. If no one else was around he would lay his head in her lap.

Most people in the house had been too busy to notice the small boy when he had first arrived at the house. His Abi had seen him, and seen his loneliness. He had slept in the same bed as her while growing up, past the age where it was acceptable, really, but he had needed to be there. He needed to know that she wouldn't leave him, or abandon him, or push him off. She just sat through the confusion of it all, with him.

Yet, they had never spoken much. He didn't know much about her really, except that she knit, made round roti, that her husband had died years before Tsering was born, that she had had five children that survived, and three that had died as infants. These were the woven patterns of her life.

Abi tapped him on the arm to signal her readiness. Tsering stood up quickly, supported her back with one hand, and placed the forearm of the other arm in the space at the back of her knees. Both of her hands held onto the sweater he wore, as Tsering rotated his grandmother, lifting her slightly. He settled her back onto the pillows and pulled the covers over her. When that was done, he tried to adjust some of the pillows behind her to a more comfortable position, but she waved him off, pushing his hands off from around her.

Tsering smiled at her.

“Did you need anything else?” he asked. She waved him off again.

Her movements were jerky from the arthritis. Tsering smiled at her again. His Abi turned her head to look away from him. She didn't like to be trouble. She was

embarrassed to be so old and weak. It did not help that the rest of the family treated her this way. It was only Tsering and his Uncle that consistently cared for her.

“I’m going to play cricket with Deepak, Sachin, Rangu, and some other boys from school. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Call me if you need anything,” Tsering said, pointing to the cell phone that sat on the dresser next to the bed. She didn’t respond, but Tsering knew that she had heard him. He left, jogging to the park.

Tsering felt his muscles tense and relax, palms squeezing and then loosening around the cricket bat in his hands. A muscle just above his left knee twitched. He scuffed his left foot against the dirt, trying to shake the jitters out of his body. It was better when he didn’t have to think.

“C’mon!” Deepak hollered from behind him. “Challo bhai, challo!”

Tsering blew a breathe of air out, cheeks growing big for a second before deflating. He sank his body into batter stance and focused. The ball flew at him. *Wap!*

The moon had risen overhead, and the boys could see its faint outline through the foliage. Tsering, Deepak, Rangu, Sachin, and two newer boys, Sunny and Hariom, sat around a fire. The fire was smoky, the wood was still wet from the rainy season. It created black plumes that rose above them. Tsering played with the label that was slowly peeling from his warming beer. Deepak would go to Delhi to join his father next week. Tsering was leaving for Leh in a month. The rest of the boys would be staying in Manali. They had all finished their schooling earlier in the summer, and would either continue on to a higher education or begin working.

Tsering had never been talented in school, and his family didn’t have the money to send him to University, so he would be put to work instead. Another Uncle of his

owned a paint shop in Leh and just had a baby girl. Tsering would go live with his Uncle, work in his shop, and help care for the new baby. Tsering drank from his beer. It was his last bit of freedom.

Deepak threw a bottle cap at Tsering and hit the bottle Tsering held with a soft *plink*.

“Don't worry, you'll see me again. Can't lose my fastest runner in cricket, now can I?” Deepak said.

“Behenchod, I wasn't thinking about you,” Tsering said. He smiled, and then rooted around the leaves near his feet. He tossed the bottle cap back at Deepak. It hit the other boy on the nose. The week before, as a final hurrah, one of the boys had found a prostitute, and they had all lost their virginity together in one of Sunny's father's hotel rooms.

“Ghandu.” Deepak laughed. Deepak found the bottle cap again and tossed it at Sunny.

He missed Sunny's beer bottle, but hit the boy's chest. It had been a contest between the boys in that hotel room- see who could last the longest!

“Arre, behenchod.” The bottle cap bounced from boy to boy several more times until it got lost in the dark, thrown too far and too hard. She had been high class.

It got quiet and the boys drank from their beers. It had brought them all closer, a shared experience before they parted.

“What are you doing after this, Sunny?” Hariom asked.

“I'm going to hotel management school. I guess the plan is to take over one of my dad's hotels. It's on the hill up to Vashisht.”

“Ugh, I'm so glad I'm not doing more school,” Rangu said. “I'm going to make money, have a girl, get to control my life a little more.”

Deepak snorted. “Yeah, as a shop assistant?” Deepak asked.

“Whatever,” Rangu said. “You're just bitter because your dad's making you go to University.”

The boys lapsed into silence again. They drank from their beers. The fire died down.

Leh was much smaller than Manali, and became even smaller when the tourist season was over. It was close to a ghost town in the Winter time. Half the houses were vacated, and all the hotels emptied. Those who did stay, were forced inside most of the time by the frigid weather.

Then the summer would come again and the city bustled. Street vendors and mehendi tattoo artists opened their carpets of wares and designs. Hotel gates unlocked, the Leh-Manali highway re-opened to allow tourists to flood into the city. Trekking guides and climbing guides and chefs infiltrated the area.

Tsering spent the majority of his time in his Uncle's paint shop, working. Their home was above the paint shop. Besides paint, they sold small household items and materials for pooja. He had a two hour break in the late afternoons between work and caring for his cousin where he would have a chai with some friends. In the summers he would go play cricket on empty festival grounds, and had made an eclectic group of friends through the sport.

He was closest to Bharat, a lawyer from the Lucknow area that worked at an NGO in Leh. Bharat was always crazy for girls. He was the guy who would start

conversations in restaurants, sit next to women in coffee shops, and have long discussions with the interns. Tsering found it mostly entertaining to watch. Sometimes it meant they had a couple foreign wallis to spend time with, to take to Tsomoriri or Lamayuru or one of the many other tourist spots around Leh.

Mostly, Tsering just worked. He stood at the counter and watched the tourists and locals that walked down the main street of the town. He cleaned counters, and occasionally tried to organize the haphazard collection of goods that sat on shelves. He answered the occasional question from a tourist as they confusedly wandered up and down the main road. He lifted heavy boxes and transported goods. On his weekends, he often went with the truck to pick up piles of dirt for the old-style toilets or he'd watch his cousin-sister. He didn't have to think much about what he wanted because nobody really cared, and anyway he was luckier than millions of others in his country.

He and Bharat were meeting for a chai break at Gizmo. They served chai in glasses, and the workers liked Tsering and Bharat. Bharat was sitting with two foreign women at a table outside the cafe.

“Hey, yaar, you're late!” Bharat called.

“You had company,” Tsering said.

“Well, yes, these two nice ladies and I got to talking while I waited. This is Sarah, and the other one is Megan.” The girls nodded in turn. “This is Tsering.”

One of the waiters poked his head out of the restaurant.

“Do chai?”

“Do chai, bhai-sub,” Bharat said, tilting his head slightly from side to side. The waiter disappeared. “Megan and Sarah were telling me why they had decided to come



to India,” Bharat said, after a slight pause. Sarah cleared her throat.

“I had just finished University in the US. Then I decided to come to India. Why not?” Sarah said. She shrugged, smiling.

“I wanted to travel and see the world. I finished University in the US, and this was the next thing to do,” Megan responded.

“No jobs or anything you had to attend to?” Tsering asked.

“Nope,” Sarah answered.

“Must be nice to be able to go where you want, do what you want,” Tsering said.

“It can be a lost feeling too,” Megan said.

The girls didn't leave right away after they finished their chais. Tsering and Bharat learned that they were both from the East Coast. They had met in high school and gone to the same in-state college. Sarah had studied Psychology, and Megan had studied Anthropology. Megan talked about her future goals of graduate school.

Bharat told them about his days playing cricket in University, and he and Tsering joked about who they played cricket with in Leh. They agreed to meet tomorrow for dinner.

The next week they all went to Tsomoriri together. Bharat told Tsering that Sarah might have a crush on both of them. Tsering said that Megan might also like the both of them. Both Sarah and Megan would be leaving Leh in two weeks.

One night after several bottles of Godfather and some rum, Tsering ended up at Megan's guesthouse. They slept together.

The next night, Tsering was once again invited back to Megan's guesthouse. Halfway through, she said, “no,” had said, “stop,” but it was as though he hadn't heard her. It was as though she weren't struggling. It had been so easy to do. It was so easy to remember one's own strength. He couldn't think straight. But that didn't change that he had done the unthinkable, the unmentionable. It didn't change the fact that in the aftermath of his fantasy-addled brain, Megan was human.

“Why?” she had asked him the next day, in the sunlight. He had slept in a corner on the floor, his head pillowed on his right arm. It was the first thing she had said to him since the sun had risen. She stared at him from the bed. He had not been able to answer. Instead, he stood up and took a couple of steps forward. He paused, confused, just out of arms reach from Megan.

“How are you?” he asked her. She snorted, and then choked. She turned her head away from him. She looked so sad. “I'm so sorry.” A deep hole opened up in his stomach as he watched the side of her face. “I'm so sorry.” Tsering emphasized different parts of each word every time he repeated himself. He hoped one of them would get his feelings across. “I'm so sorry.” She looked so small.

“Sorry? You're sorry? That's it?” Megan began crying. “Well, I guess it's all right then, isn't it? You bastard.”

Tsering hung his head, his eyes burned. What does one say to that? “I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I-”

“Shuttup!” She choked on her own sobs as she tried to fill her lungs with air at the same time. “I can't believe-. You-. God! I-.” Megan pulled a pillow from the bed, clutched it briefly in both hands, and then threw it at Tsering.

Tsering covered his eyes with one hand. The pillow hit his head with only a light impact. His face was wet. He was crying. Megan stood and pushed Tsering from her with force. He stumbled back, avoiding the low tables.

Megan pushed at him one more time, and instead of pulling her hands away from him, collapsed onto them. Tsering took one step back in order to brace himself. Megan clutched at his shirtsleeve, and cried, silently screaming into him. If Megan was really human, then he, Tsering, was monstrous. He held onto her to remember his own humanity.

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