

LBRIS | We know
books

Western Lane

CHETNA MAROO

PICADOR

One

I don't know if you have ever stood in the middle of a squash court – on the T – and listened to what is going on next door. What I'm thinking of is the sound from the next court of a ball hit clean and hard. It's a quick, low pistol-shot of a sound, with a close echo. The echo, which is the ball striking the wall of the court, is louder than the shot itself. This is what I hear when I remember the year after our mother died, and our father had us practising at Western Lane two, three, four hours a day. It must have been an evening session after school, the first time I noticed it. My legs were so tired I didn't know if I could keep going and I was just standing on the T with my racket head down, looking at the side wall that was smudged with the washed-out marks from all the balls that had skimmed its surface. I was supposed to serve, and my father would return with a drive and I would volley, and my father would drive, and I would volley, aiming always for the red service line on the front wall. My father was standing far back, waiting.

I knew from his silence that he wasn't going to move first, and all I could do was serve and volley or disappoint him. The smudges on the wall blurred one into the other and I thought that surely I would fall. That was when it started up. A steady, melancholy rhythm from the other court, the shot and its echo, over and over again, like some sort of deliverance. I could tell it was one person conducting a drill. And I knew who it was. I stood there, listening, and the sound poured into me, into my nerves and bones, and it was with a feeling of having been rescued that I raised my racket and served.

There were three of us, all girls. When Ma died, I was eleven, Khush was thirteen, Mona fifteen. We'd been playing squash and badminton twice a week ever since we were old enough to hold a racket, but it was nothing like the regime that came after. Mona said that all of it, the sprints and the ghosting and the three-hour drills, started when our aunt Ranjan told Pa that what we girls needed was exercise and discipline and Pa sat quiet and let her tell him what to do.

That was at the beginning of autumn. The weather had turned from unseasonably dry and warm to humid. The air was oppressive and the streets smelled of decomposing food. In this heat, a number of days after Ma's funeral, we had driven four hundred miles to Edinburgh to have a meal at our aunt's home to mark the end of our mourning period, and Aunt Ranjan told Pa we were wild.

We were right there in her kitchen with her and Pa when she said it. Mona was washing potatoes in the sink. Her head was bowed and her sleeves were pushed to her elbows because she wasn't just rinsing the mud away. She was really scrubbing. Her ponytail swung over one shoulder. Khush was peeling slowly, staring out of the window. I was at the table seeding pomegranates. Aunt Ranjan had scolded Khush for wearing her hair loose in the kitchen, and then she'd turned to me and pulled up half of the white cloth and put newspapers down so I wouldn't get juice on her new dining set. It was a beautiful set, waxed and dark.

From where I was sitting I could see the gulab jamun Aunt Ranjan had prepared early that same morning. The dark-golden balls of sponge were already soaked in sugar syrup and piled generously in a glass bowl at the end of the counter.

Aunt Ranjan saw me looking.

'Gopi,' she said.

I froze in place, blushing fiercely at the sound of my name.

Aunt Ranjan stood up. She positioned herself so that she blocked my view of the sweets. I didn't know why but it seemed important to me that I not shift my focus, that I make it seem as if I'd been looking at nothing all along.

'Wild,' Aunt Ranjan said a second time, her eyes still on me. 'And it is no secret.'

Then she turned to Pa, and it was true that he just sat there looking at nothing, saying nothing.

Aunt Ranjan waited.

‘Well, I have said my piece,’ she said at last. ‘Now it is up to you.’

Pa raised his eyes to look at Aunt Ranjan for a moment, and there was a coolness in them that we were used to but Aunt Ranjan was not. Her cheeks reddened. The pressure cooker on the gas ring gave a thin, high whistle and the kitchen was suddenly warm with steam and the smell of overcooked lentils. Aunt Ranjan dabbed her forehead with a clean tea towel off the back of a chair.

‘I told Charu,’ she said. ‘I am not blaming her, brother, but I am telling you it is not too late for your girls.’

It was quiet. And then my sister Mona crossed to the worktop, removed the pressure cooker from the ring, and banged it hard onto the granite counter. The bowl of gulab jamun at the far end juddered and Mona stood with her potato-muddied hands on the lid of Aunt Ranjan’s pressure cooker, staring at Pa.

Aunt Ranjan turned off the taps that Mona had left running and went to her.

‘Not like that, child,’ she said to Mona.

Our uncle came in then, as if wandering into someone else’s kitchen. Maybe he would have gone right through into his garden but he looked at Mona, then Pa, and stood in the middle of the floor for a few seconds before approaching the table and sitting down between Pa and me. We liked Uncle Pavan. He was Pa’s younger brother and he

was big and kind and enjoyed smoking outside and thinking about the past.

Uncle Pavan was forty. Pa was almost forty-five. But everyone talked about how handsome the brothers had become as if they had only lately grown into adulthood. After Ma died, our aunties' eyes followed Pa from the dinner table to the sink or out into the garden. They were sorry for him, but they were also trying to get the measure of something and we knew it had to do with the space that had opened out in front of him.

It wasn't yet midday and it was already too warm for Uncle Pavan. His face was glowing and pink as anything. He put a hand on the table, tapped his four fingers on the cloth, all at once, and then moved his hand to his thigh. He needed a smoke. He glanced at Pa and clasped his hands in his lap, ready to talk. Khush had poured Uncle Pavan a glass of water, and seeing he was ready she placed it on the table in front of him and sat down to hear what he had to say. Uncle Pavan gave her a grateful look and began.

'It was the middle of a heat wave,' he said. He leaned towards Pa. 'Do you remember? The night you told Bapuji you were getting married. You were out late and Bapuji insisted we all stay up for you. We had to put boxes of ice in front of the fans and we couldn't move, it was so hot. When you finally came home, Bapuji told you to come in and asked you in front of everyone what you thought you were doing. You didn't hesitate. You stood in the doorway

and said it as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I am getting married. Like that. It was wonderful. I will never forget the look on Bapuji's face. You see . . . I . . . Charu . . . she was . . . she . . . ?

Uncle Pavan seemed about to choke on something inside his throat, and we could see that Pa wanted him to keep talking, but Uncle Pavan couldn't.

'It is no use dwelling on things,' Aunt Ranjan said. She put a hand on Uncle Pavan's shoulder. 'Come, Pavan. Bring two more chairs from the garage so we can all sit together.'

By the time we sat down to eat, it was four o'clock. The air was heavy and close and everything moved slowly in it. Aunt Ranjan, Uncle Pavan, Pa and I waited at our places while my sisters served the dinner. We each had a silver plate, onto which my sisters placed a small silver bowl of dal, a whole ladu, potato shaak, rice, puris, a salad of onions and tomatoes, and a second silver bowl containing three gulab jamuns. Khush's hair kept sticking to her forehead and to her hot cheeks and she kept pushing it back. When I saw Khush spooning extra syrup on top of the jamuns in my bowl, her hair almost dipping in the syrup, I made myself look elsewhere.

The door into the garden was open. There was no breeze. Aunt Ranjan talked about her siblings in Tanzania who had too many children. She ate carefully, taking small mouthfuls at long intervals, and we tried to do the same. When I had

finished everything on my plate apart from my three gulab jamuns, she looked at my full little bowl with all its syrup. I put down my spoon.

‘Brother,’ she said, turning to Pa, and I wanted to shout at her that Pa was not her brother, that Pa was Uncle Pavan’s brother. ‘Brother,’ she said, ‘a difficult time is coming for you.’

Uncle Pavan shuffled his chair closer to the table. ‘Ranjan,’ he murmured.

‘No,’ Aunt Ranjan told him. ‘He understands.’

She looked at Pa and began to speak in Gujarati, keeping her voice low and even. What she said was that she and Uncle Pavan had no children, that they loved their brother and they loved us as if we were their own. She said it would be easier on Pa if he allowed them to take one of us. You cannot look after three, she said. Three is too many. And when Pa was silent, she took it as a sign to continue. She said, People do this. No one would have raised an eyebrow had you done this even when the girls’ mother was alive. Then she said that her own sister had flown over two and a half thousand miles from Mombasa to Bombay to live with their aunt when she was younger than me, and we were only talking about a few hours in the car.

Pa was staring at his plate. He knew that we’d understood what Aunt Ranjan had said. That was why he didn’t look at us. We thought that he would allow her words to sit for a moment so that she would see for herself how she had

got things wrong, and then he would stand up and step out into the garden, telling us to get our things because we were leaving. But he didn't stand up, he didn't say anything, and in the end we were glad, because whatever Aunt Ranjan saw in his face frightened her more than any reply he could have made. Her own face turned grey and seemed to lose its firmness. When she picked up her glass of chaas to take a sip, her mouth sagged.

That was when Uncle Pavan's voice rose into the silence. It was slow and firm. Spring had come early this year. We should have seen the flowers on the horse chestnut tree. Like Christmas lights. And then there were the cherry blossoms: for one week, the whole lawn was white. We ate and Uncle Pavan talked, and one way or another things drifted into a rhythm that seemed ordinary. We felt a light breeze from the garden. Uncle Pavan wiped his hands on a cloth, stood up, and brought the gulab jamuns to the table to refill our bowls.

'Oh,' Aunt Ranjan said mournfully into her plate as we raised our spoons again. 'That day,' and she was crying. She took hold of the free end of her sari and touched her eyes with it. She turned her head to smile at Khush through the tears.

'I saw you,' she said, her voice lower still, claiming Khush, 'in the car park, after.'

She was talking about Ma's funeral, and Khush's crying silently when we were all lined up to greet our relatives as

they came outside. Aunt Ranjan looked at Khush with such sadness that we forgot everything. Khush put her hand on the table between her own plate and Aunt Ranjan's. Next to me, Mona's chair scraped the floor badly, and I moved my hand towards my glass of chaas but the glass was tall and it toppled and the chaas spilled, spreading into the tablecloth.

'Gopi,' Aunt Ranjan murmured. I blushed again at my name being spoken aloud, but Aunt Ranjan was not scolding. Her face was fixedly serene as she stood, as she came around to lift the cloth and fold it in, as she saw the chaas had gone through onto her table. I sat there while she moved around me, wiping and rearranging things.

Whenever we were staying in the house in Edinburgh, we each had our own bedroom, but Khush and I always dragged our blankets into Mona's room and slept on the floor. We propped the French windows open with our trainers because there was usually something going on outside. We listened until we were tired, and then we dreamed. That night, it was too warm for sleep. We were restless and sweating in our shorts and vest tops. We thrust our blankets off us and then we were nothing but hot, damp limbs; legs and arms thrown out any which way to try to get cool. Khush pushed herself up and went out onto the balcony. I followed. Outside, Khush reclined, half lying on the tiles, half leaning against one side of the window frame, a skinny arm stretched out across the floor, and I positioned myself the same way on

the other side. But after a while we both sat up with our chins on our knees and stared through the white balustrades into the garden. Since it was too warm for leggings or sleeves, I stank of citronella and got bitten by mosquitoes anyway. We knew that Pa would be getting bitten too. He and Uncle Pavan were talking outside. They were sitting right under our balcony, drinking whisky and smoking. Pa didn't drink or smoke at home, but he liked to when he was with Uncle Pavan. We could see the blue smoke from Uncle's cigarettes and hear their talk and the clink of their glasses. We could hear everything, even the creak of Pa's chair as he bent to lift or lower his glass or scratch at his ankle. And when we looked out we could see everything they saw: Uncle's rose arbour and his trees and the stone bench and glimpses of the railway track, grainy and dark.

It didn't matter to us what they talked about. Childhood remembrances of themselves and of their younger brother, who died early. The three of them playing racket sports. The three of them eager and happy. Pa surprising everyone because he, so mild, so unassuming in life, was brutal on the court. And later when Ma came along – seventeen, bright-eyed, self-conscious – Pa finding himself at a loss, touched by something he couldn't name. Uncle Pavan did most of the talking and Pa let him know that he had things about right. It didn't matter to us. We just wanted to sit above them and listen. Afterwards, when Pa and Uncle finished up and went inside, we stayed out. The morning

light was beginning to come up by then, a pale transparent blue, and the air was cooler and everything outside seemed close enough to touch. Khush's hair was loose so that it came down her back in soft waves and even in this light, it shone. We didn't go in until I started shivering. We pulled the doors closed behind us. Inside, we climbed onto Mona's bed. Mona groused at being woken, but she shifted and we got in close under her blanket, and told her everything. It was Khush who did the telling. When something happened, even if everyone was there, it was always Khush who would tell it. She'd wait until we fell silent, and begin. She was good at telling. She remembered things we didn't think of.

Much later, Khush would say that that night was really the start of it, of Pa's thinking about what he would do with us. It wasn't Aunt Ranjan. It was Uncle Pavan talking about the past. But I think Pa told us himself what moved him. He sat beside us one morning on the bench outside the squash court and said, 'I want you to become interested in something you can do your whole life.'

Aunt Ranjan had orange juice and pancakes with lemon and sugar ready on the table for us in the morning. She said nothing about Pa and Uncle Pavan sitting out drinking and smoking all night. She made them coffee and stood near them so she could refill their cups. Pa spoke kindly to her. Outside in the driveway when Uncle Pavan was closing