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*A Burning*

A GUARDIAN  
AND A THIEF



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A GUARDIAN  
AND A THIEF

## A.

FROM THE STOREROOM HIDDEN UNDER THE STAIRS, MA FETCHED a cup of rice and a sack of eggs speckled gray like the moon, then cooked, standing before the stove's blue fire, her eye upon the window and its dusk, in which bats swooped and the neem tree shivered and a figure down on the road pedaled a bicycle, whistling, as if everything was all right.

Thief, thought Ma. Who else but a person who had chanced upon fresh vegetables or fruit would wander the city of Kolkata in this ruined year, the heat a hand clamped upon the mouth, the sun a pistol against one's head, and recall a song? She watched to see what the thief would do. He pedaled past. But Ma saw a different reality shimmer into being, in which he leaned his bicycle against the wall, climbed the pipes like a toddy tapper, and appeared at her window. In that picture, the thief was a collector of local information, dutiful in his neighborhood eavesdropping, shrewd in following what he heard about the bins of onions and carrots, the sacks of lentils and rice, the bags of raisins and cashews hidden in the dark fist of the house, stolen by Ma from donations made to the shelter where she worked, while the city outside wept for a handful of something to eat.

There was—in the label accepted by the region—a shortage.

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In the year prior to this day, farmers across the region had fallen, their bodies running fevers in air that no longer cooled. In the croplands, among stilled machines, pests had traveled from acre to new acre, savage in their feeding of grains. In the west a drought had cleaved riverbeds and in the east salt water had tainted the paddy fields. In the city, those who walked to the neighborhood markets with umbrellas in their hands and wishful lists in their pockets, broad corners torn from the newspaper with writing in Bengali—cabbage, ginger, lychees if they were good, ice cream, half loaf of bread—found the roads alongside which the markets usually sat, its baskets and tarps invading, rickshaws and cars sounding their horns, slow shoppers inspecting the purple shine of eggplant and pressing guavas hard as hail, instead completely empty, nothing but some onion peel scattered at the edges where the pavement gave way to earth, where on most days goats and cows might have nudged the soil for something to eat. But those animals were gone too.

It had happened before. 1770, when crops failed and smallpox plagued the enfeebled. 1876, when drought struck the Deccan Plateau and the British continued to export what grain remained. 1943. Those black-and-white newspaper photos, in which people appeared as sunken eyes and twig-thin limbs, facing a photographer who could do nothing for them, their fullness—their love, their humor, their annoyance, their preference—pared by the lens to reveal what remained, which was hunger.

The eggs clacked against one another in the turbulent water, the rice grew earthen and buttery, and Ma gathered in her hands a kitchen towel with which she would lift the pot lid before her, hot enough to pass for a weapon. But what would the thief have done had she, instead, glanced at him as if he were a returning member of the family, and told him with her mother's authority to

wash his hands and sit at the table? In fetching him a plate, who might she have become?

Ma shook her shoulders free of the distress. She did not need to put herself through such exercises anymore. She was leaving in seven days. Only seven days: It was close enough on the calendar to cast its glow over the whole week. Everything was in order. She had hired a new manager for the shelter; she had convened and concluded a final meeting with the board. The shelter, which had been her life for the past decade, would carry on without her, and she would begin a new life, perhaps at a new nonprofit, in Michigan. It was relief. It was even thrill.

After dinner on this day, she would go to the American consulate at the appointed time and collect the passports with climate visas inside, treasure beyond her greatest hope. And in seven days, she would be aboard a plane grading upward, its motion so beyond human comprehension that it would feel like stillness. Impossibly, the plane would speed through a night of sleep like sand blown in her eyes, toward a sunrise bright as iron poured upon the horizon, and finally, it would arrive in the United States. She knew plenty about America. Who didn't, given Hollywood? It was a country of grocery stores as large as aircraft hangars, stocked with waxed fruit and misted vegetables and canned legumes from floor to ceiling. It was a country of breathable air and potable water, and, despite a history of attempts to cultivate a poorly educated electorate, functioning schools and tenacious thinkers. It was a country of encompassing hope, sustained by the people despite the peddlers of fear and pursuers of gain who wore the ill-fitting costumes of political representation. It was a country of opportunity for her child.

Ma's husband had moved six months ago for a research position on mosquito-borne diseases at a laboratory in Ann Arbor.

While settling in his new position, contributing to a healthy savings account, and searching diligently for an apartment suitable for all of them, he had also put the paperwork in place to bring his wife, child, and widowed father-in-law over. He had purchased the plane tickets and helped secure climate visas, a long process of supplication in both America and India before various bureaucrats who believed themselves gods. Before such interrogation, his standing as an urgently needed scientist had favored Ma and Dadu; the family's middle-class savings and ownership of the house had favored them; luck had favored them. All Ma needed to do was survive these seven days.

When Ma brought the rice and eggs to the dining table, Dadu was seated, writing a poem in his notebook, which was a child's math book, pages turned ivory with age, grids holding not numbers but words written in the Bengali script that folded and straightened like caterpillars upon a stem. In this notebook he had written rhymes for Mishti, observations of the day, even an op-ed that had been published a few years ago. As he wrote, he spoke: "Every morning, mother crow / Looked for rice, high and low—"

Ma smiled. "Is this a new one?" She sat in her usual chair and put two eggs on a plate before him. "Eat."

He smiled, too, showing teeth crooked as gravestones. With one hand he brushed Ma's shoulder in thanks, the touch of his hand gentle, though the movement was clumsy. Then he capped his pen, tucked his chin, and regarded himself.

"I'm ready," he said. While she had been in the kitchen, he had changed into outside clothes, ironed pants and ironed shirt, sleeves loose about his thin elbows, and rubbed a sheen of Vaseline on his fish-scale skin. He had combed and parted his white hair. Dressing for the consulate was one way of asking for respect.

They ate.

In the living room, only a few paces from the dining table, were three suitcases, packed and stood upright, a Michigan address written on paper and sellotaped to each. Next to the suitcases, on the daybed, instead of the mound of pillows upon which Ma usually leaned to watch television, was a gathering of items that they could neither take nor bear to lose, items that awaited their fate in a land of indecision—a potted cilantro, a pressure cooker, a costly vacuum cleaner, and, most delicate and difficult of all, a dinner set and tea set, purchased decades ago in China by Dadu's grandparents. Other than these items, the room felt empty, its walls and shelves bare but for a few hardcovers fallen on their sides, surrendered to the termites that would eventually chew passageways through the paper. The entire house had been stripped. Objects that had rested in trunks and deep inside closets had been retrieved, dusted, evaluated. For so long these belongings had lived quietly in their spots, secured to Ma and Dadu by memory and the occasional cleaning, but now the objects were coldly separated from the people, and from the house itself, which seemed to bow its head in defeat, knowing its own burdensome immovability.

It was a good house, in a part of the city distant from the river, and on a nearly unnoticeable slope that nevertheless prevented rainwater pooling around it. In addition, Ma's own mother—Dadu's wife—had insisted on upgrades years ago, while she still had her vigor, and her salary, and now they benefited from her foresight. She had hired plumbers to set up a rainwater harvesting tank with multiple pipes and gutters feeding it, so that when the municipal water supply failed, the house still had plenty of water. She had hired electricians to install solar panels on the roof, and to connect the air-conditioning to the solar panels, comprehending that cooling would soon be not a luxury but a matter of survival, so that their house remained cool while neighbors

lay on their beds, fatigued, under fans that grunted and groaned, wearily completing their rotations. She had gotten these things done for the incompetents in her life, and then, Dadu said sometimes, with a small smile, dusted off her hands and made her exit.

Now Dadu pushed his chair back, brought the cilantro to the table, and gave it a little water from his drinking glass.

Then he called in the direction of the bedroom: "Mishti? O Mishti! It's time to eat. Then we have to go out."

Hearing her name, his granddaughter—Ma's daughter, two years old, glint of mischief in her eye—emerged from the bedroom.

"What were you doing there?" said Dadu. "Were you doing Scooby stickers? Or were you spilling water again?"

Mishti grinned, showing tiny teeth with spaces between them, and wide gums.

"Come, eat," said Dadu to the child, and Ma rose to put a towel on the spill.

In the bedroom, knees on the hard floor, Ma wiped from side to side and felt water soak through the thin cotton of her pants. When she found two damp stickers stuck to the floor, she scraped with her fingernail until they lifted, incompletely, then scrubbed the debris with the towel. Much of her life was a series of tedious acts like these, and yet the patience of performing them contained her love, less tender and often less tenderly shown than Dadu's, but steadfast in its plain truth. From under the bed, she retrieved a picture book about airplanes and took it to the living room. "I found it, Mishti. Under the bed this whole time."

Dadu took over the duty of reading, allowing Ma to return to the evening's tasks. He turned to the child. "Soon—do you remember?—we will go on an airplane, with wings and windows and a nose just like this."

Behind his cheer, Dadu, who had worked all his life managing distribution at a company that manufactured secateurs, or pruning shears—always knowing, and accepting, that the arena of true feeling, for him, lay elsewhere, for example in the pursuit of trivial hobbies like writing poems—was afraid of stepping onto that plane. He was too old to commence life in a new country. In America, he knew, he would be a diminished version of himself—uncertain of social mores, unaccustomed to the accents, wary of car culture. There would be nobody in that place acquainted with his boyhood self. Was such an escape rescue or its own ruin?

While he read, he thumped the saltshaker on the table to loosen the clumps, and shook a little on his egg. He ate slowly, yolk rich as loam on his tongue, and held pieces out to Mishti, who pressed her lips together and shook her head. She had remembered her current craving.

"Flowerflower?" she asked hopefully.

"We don't have any more cauliflower, Mishti. You ate all of it."

"I want flowerflower, peese!"

"Eat this, then we all have to go to the consulate. We can't be late."

"Flowerflower," she pleaded. "Peese! I say it nicely!"

"She has had no fresh vegetables," allowed Ma, returning to the table. What she meant, and what Dadu understood, was that there had been no recent donations to the shelter of fresh vegetables. All that arrived these days—and it had slowed to a worrisome trickle—were packages of protein bars, in numbers so small that the removal of even a few would be noticeable. The shelter residents had begun to split bars between themselves, trading flavors, a game that grew subdued after a resident who had stolen some bars for reselling was caught and evicted—not by the administrators but by his fellow residents.

“After the consulate,” said Ma, “we can stop by the market and see if they have cauliflower. Then we can eat a nice lunch of rice and cauliflower tomorrow. What do you say, Mishti?”

## B.

OUT THEY WENT INTO THE NIGHT. THE TOPS OF THEIR EARS, and their necks and arms, too, shone with mosquito gel. Ma carried a purse heavy with three water bottles and electrolyte tablets in the zippered pockets. When they emerged from their quiet residential lane onto the main street, the lamplit darkness grew dense with people moving noisily along, clutching bundles to their chests, shouting into phones, coughing, adolescents shrieking as they ran, causing the adults to be fearful of snatchers before they remembered: That was how it was to be young. Those teenagers shrieked because they were coming to know their own voices. No crisis could quiet their glee.

When a cockroach dashed up Mishti’s leg, alarming her, Ma suppressed her own lifelong fear and flicked the insect off with her bare hand. “It’s gone,” she comforted Mishti. “It can’t do anything to you.” For a while afterward, Mishti refused to set foot on the pavement, and Ma carried her, feeling both the discomfort of the growing child’s weight and the peace she felt only when their bodies were nestled together, as in the first days of this body-rending, earth-shattering love.

Farther along the sidewalk, clusters of people played carrom, in their fingers the lit tips of old-fashioned cigarettes, beneath their feet pavement hot as a stovetop, hosed every now and then by a well-meaning shopkeeper. Dadu wove around them, thumping his walking stick in a steady beat, delighting in the conversations he overheard.

“It’s half boat, half rickshaw, don’t ask me, only he knows what it is—but he is convinced he has invented something fantastic!

Orville and Wilbur Wright, followed by Arindam of our paan shop!”

“Then one day I cooked the synthetic beet—”

“No question, friend! Even if I have to hang from the side of the ferry by my fingertips, I will make it to the feast—”

“O ma go! Why did you run on my foot!” This from a man built like a wrestler, to a mouse.

“I could spend all night listening,” said Dadu to Ma. “I could put some of this into a poem.”

Then he couldn’t resist stating what he had stated to her a hundred times before, for the unparalleled pleasure of speaking what he believed: “The best philosopher, don’t you know, is the one who laughs, and makes others laugh. This city will survive because it is full of such street corner philosophers. They understand that laughing is the most truthful way of approaching life.”

Dadu felt invigorated by the city around him, the only city in which he knew who he was—a young man, with a heart given to a love of small things. The more banal and the more comedic, the more fervent his love. In Michigan, he would never be able to share with a new acquaintance, if he even found one, that he did not want to introduce himself by his job. His job represented very little of him. Perhaps only his discipline, and his sense of responsibility. But all the parts of him that he delighted in—his creativity, his pull toward rhymes, his curious eyes and ears, his laughter—these he would never be able to claim in a new land, before a new peer. These, too, would remain in Kolkata. That old self would roam the vacant house like a ghost.

“You say that,” said Ma, her eyes upon the ground. She had heard his sentiments countless times, and on this day, with departure imminent, she finally spoke a little bit of her mind. “But I think that, maybe, you and I have lived in two different cities.”

In his—jokes, crows, lizards, corner conversations. In hers—

men on buses who reached for schoolgirls' chests. Once, she had been such a schoolgirl. Dadu said nothing, and Ma patted Dadu's shoulder to show that she did not mean to be cruel. He put a hand on hers, and held it for a moment.

He knew that she was not being unkind. She was the opposite, he thought, an endlessly feeling and helpful person. The shelter had come her way soon after she had graduated from a local university with a master's in nonprofit administration. At that time, it was a new shelter, funded by the city's remaining benevolent billionaire, built to serve solo adults with children under ten—mostly women, but some men, too—who were moving to the city from regions of the state that were flooded. The influx was massive. Men and women crowded railway platforms, bus stations, medians, metro stops, and mall garages, selling trinkets or begging for money, their faces marked by exhaustion. Many of them held the hands of their children, who, after all, were children. They hopped and twirled, holding baskets of items for sale, their long familiarity with hardship visible in their obedience. Theirs was not the unruly childhood of *I want I want I want* or *no I will not, you do it*; theirs was a childhood of compliance. How could a person with a heart not wish to help them? Ma had risen from shelter assistant to shelter manager swiftly and confidently, never doubting her own wish to do good.

That she had, in the past year, with the increasing scarcity of food, been quietly taking from the shelter's donations did not erase nor taint how deeply she felt for the shelter's residents.

### C.

AFTER FIFTEEN MINUTES OF WAITING AT THE LORD'S MORE BUS stop, Ma and Dadu approached a police car that was parked by the side of the road. Around the vehicle, a dog patrolled, its metal paws clicking on the pavement, peacefully tolerating heat that

would have a true animal panting. Within the vehicle, a policeman played a game on his phone.

"Brother," said Ma, marching up to the window. This was her manager's voice. The dog paused mid-step, and the policeman frowned and lowered the window an inch, permitting a pleasant flume of cool air. "Can you tell us, what happened to the Exide bus? We have been waiting for a long time, and there hasn't been a single one."

The policeman laid his phone on his leg, screen side down. "You have been waiting?" he said. "Many buses didn't pass their pollution today." He inclined his head to indicate, vaguely, the part of the city in which inspections had occurred. "Maybe that's why. Wait for a different bus."

"How about a taxi?" said Dadu from behind Ma.

Mishti clutched his hand and jumped up and down, partly reading the car's number plate, partly yelling what she knew, "One, two, three, seven, ten!"

"You won't find a taxi," the policeman said, then eased back into his playing position and flipped his phone up. He was bored of this talk. "There's a strike. Driver died of heatstroke yesterday."

This was unsettling news. It was past eight o'clock, and the collection window for the passports closed at nine. On foot, they wouldn't make it. For a moment, Ma and Dadu watched the road and its unabated activity continue without them. Daring pedestrians vaulted over the divider, cars played their orchestra, and pockmarked banners swayed above the traffic, offering discounts at a coaching center. Then Ma said to Dadu, as she had on errands before, "Why don't you go home with Mishti? I'll find a way. I can flag down a private car if I need to. I have—"

She looked in her purse and discreetly counted her cash.

Dadu said nothing, which meant: No. He knew, of course, that he was slowing down his daughter. But the heat and the short-