

The Sea

He wore a lungi and his light brown torso passed across the gray walls of his flat. Sunrays slanted through the window and cast a shadow of the window grill on the floor and dust turned and reflected in the air. He slipped on a pair of trousers underneath his lungi and then he undid his lungi and put on a white button-down shirt. She came into the room. He watched her and when she left he shook his head. He sipped his tea and outside he heard a broom thrashing back and forth against the bricked lane and the sound of aluminum pots clanging together. He stood. His pant legs passed through the sunrays as he walked into the next room and saw his wife cleaning pots.

I'm going, he said to her.

She didn't say anything as her hand continued in small round circles inside the aluminum pot.

I'm going, he said again.

All right, she said, her head down. She heard his footsteps on the cement floor. She heard the metal latch and the chain and she heard the two thick wooden doors swing open and close. He stepped into the sunlight. His feet hit the uneven bricks as he walked and he saw Ajit in the street.

Namaskar.

Namaskar.

They shook hands softly and stood close together, holding hands as they talked.

How are you?

I'm ok. And you?

Ajit smiled. I'm excellent, he said. My wife is pregnant. The astrologer says it will be a son.

Then it will be a son. It's good news for you.

They were still holding hands as Ajit asked, How's work going?

It's going on. And for you?

It's good.

Ok. See you.

They stepped away and moved in opposite directions. Dillip brushed his hand through his hair and stared at his hand for a second. He thought about his gray hairs and then he told himself not to worry about such things.

At their rented flat she sat with her back against the wall and her knees bent up near her chest. She heard the knock on the door. She stood, pulled her palu over her head and walked to the door.

Who is it? she called.

Gita, from upstairs.

Ritu opened the door and kept it slightly ajar and through the crack she asked, What do you want?

Would you like to have tea?

No. Not now. I'm busy.

Please come. We're neighbors.

Not now. I'm busy. Some other time. She shut the door and retreated into the dark house and sat down again near the window where it was warm.

He walked out of the small lanes and onto a larger dirt road. Two horses pulling a cart laden with people clattered up the road in the direction of Assi. A few men clad in white kurtas and dhotis walked the street. A lone Ambassador car rolled down the road and Dillip along with everyone else stopped to look at it. The car passed and two men walked by with their hands clasped behind their backs.

You don't see one of those very often, said one.

Rich people, said the other.

Must be a minister.

Dillip walked under the shade of green trees. He came to a sawmill. He heard the buzzing of the machines and he saw the young workers covered with saw dust and he went to work.

As he walked home he thought of his wife and the muscles in his cheekbones and mouth became hard and tight and he could not think beyond the source of his tension.

The door to his flat opened and he searched for her eyes but she kept them down as she stepped to the side. He went in and she closed the door behind him.

She went to the tap and began cleaning her dishes.

Whenever I see you, he said, you are cleaning and cooking. But when I come home I want to see my wife.

There are things I must do, she said, to maintain the home.

We are only two people, he responded, pointing his finger at her. You are only busying yourself to avoid me.

I am cleaning to maintain the house.

She turned her head back to the pots in her hand.

Take down your palu. I am your husband.

She raised her left hand and pulled her palu down.

Do you want your food? she asked.

I will take it and you will sit with me as I eat.

She sat down.

Why are you unhappy with me? he asked. You have no mother-in law dominating you. It is only the two of us. I try to speak with you. I try to sit with you. I try to be with you. But you never say anything or appreciate my actions and now I am asking you, what have I done?

I want to see my mother.

He nearly exploded. This is your life now, he said, starting to stammer. This is your home. This, he repeated, pointing to the ground with his first finger, this is your home. He looked down. He ran his hands through his hair. Then he looked up. His palms were open and his fingers were slightly curled. We, he said, are supposed to be making a life together.

He stood and started to walk away but turned back.

This is your home, he said, and I am your husband and it is with me that you will live and with me that you will die.

The thick wooden doors swung open and the chain rattled. His feet hit the bricks of the narrow lane. It was dark. Ahead he saw a lone bulb burning and a few people passed by him and he saw their black shadows moving on a gray wall. He went to

Durgakund. There were many trees and a large pond and the Durga temple in silhouette against the sky. He sat on the steps before pond. The crescent moon curved across a dark blue sky punctured with stars. He closed his eyes. He concentrated on the sound of insects and the sound became loud. His eyes opened and he stared at the water and he heard a pair of sandals skipping against the concrete and the clang of the temple bell.

He went to the temple. He went under the gate and quickly touched both hands to his breast. He bought three yellow flowers from an old woman. Before the entrance to the inner portion he kicked off his sandals. He thought of his gray hairs. He stood before the image. He dropped the three flowers and three coins before the image. He folded his hands and bowed his head and closing his eyes he prayed for a loving wife and two sons.

He returned home through the dark and empty streets of the city. She let him in while holding a lantern in her hand. The light shone on her face and he saw her eyelids and eyelashes. He took the lantern from her hand and said, Come with me. He gripped her wrist and led her to the bedroom and sat her down on the bed. He removed her clothing and his. She lay down and he pulled himself on top of her.

The sound of bells and lone cries for the glory of god popped out of the bottom of the night like a few solitary bubbles rising up through water and opening at the surface. Footsteps sounded below her window and like a tree beside a walkway she witnessed the ringing of the bells and the cries and the sound of the fading footsteps and the silence.

She stood and collected a few sticks of incense and a small bit of rice. She bowed before the tiny image of Durga. She lifted her head and opened her eyes and looked at the image. The sounds of muted footsteps, muted voices and the ringing of bells everywhere began to rise and spread out over the city like the light of dawn, like the concentric waves produced when a small stone is dropped into a pool of calm water. She lit the incense and she prayed with the sticks between her folded hands. She prayed for the health and prosperity of her child and her home. She asked for blessings and good luck from God. She honored the power of Durga and she vowed to respect and remember Durga and her

power. In the next room she heard the metal latch fall and the heavy wooden doors open and close. She sprinkled the rice at the foot of the deity and put the incense into the holder next to the idol.

The bricks in the walkway passed beneath his feet. He turned abruptly and went underneath the gate of a temple. It occurred to him that he should have bathed before entering the house of God but he just didn't care about the rule. He slid his sandals off and took one step, raising his arm and pulling on the metal bar above, ringing the bell and then folding his hands and saying Jai Sri Ram. He approached the main image. He bowed his head, prayed and moved onto the smaller images in the temple. He touched the first image and then his heart and he went to the next image and touched it and then his heart and often he said Ram or Om.

He looked around. Young men strutted along the ghats in their underwear that just covered their genitalia and often they swore and made crude jokes about sexual organs. He was like a foreigner in this city. It was a nice place, very beautiful and very sacred, but not his homeland, not the place of his family. But this was what God had given him. And he was lucky to have landed on his feet, to be alive and living without much difficulty. That's what he told himself as he stood and walked with his hands clasped behind his back.

His foot kicked a stone as he stepped forward. But she sits in my house groveling over my son and ignoring me. Me, who gives her no problems. Me, who only wants a peaceful home. Me, who provides. He was married to a witch, living in a strange city, while the life he had known, the life that was his destiny, the life that was in his bones, lay scattered in the dust of Pakistan. Damn those Muslims, he thought. They always cause trouble. Damn them and damn Pakistan.

She squatted on the ground. Her legs and chest were still and her arms moved quickly. She cut the garlic, the onions, the chilies, the potatoes, aubergines. She put the pot on the coal fire. She flung a wad of ghee into the pot. The ghee melted and popped. She sprinkled cumin seeds into the pot. Her hand scooped up the small pile of garlic and dropped it into the mix and after that she added the chilies and the onions and let it fry.

He would bath and she would give him his food in a tiffin and he would take the food to work. He didn't want to eat her food. He didn't want to eat the food she cooked.

Why should he? Why should he dignify such a miserable person by honoring her role in his house, his cold house. How can someone be so cold? How? I don't understand it. But I will eat her food. She is my wife, the mother of my son. She will care for my son and I will eat her food and I will work and provide for my family. This is my salvation. I must let go of her and yet live side by side with her and carry on. The wheels of the cart are still turning, he told himself. Still turning. Still turning. The wheels of the cart are still turning. Life is going on. Don't miss it, he told himself. Don't miss it.

He stood before the gray house. Darwaza kholo! he said loudly. Open the door! Kholo! he said again. Open it! A woman who lived upstairs looked out the window. He saw her peer just over the edge of the window and then she withdrew and called out to the one who was already undoing the latch. The heavy wooden doors swung open and she, her palu atop her head, stepped to the side as her husband walked in. He smelled the food as he went into the room and wrapped a red ghamcha around his waist and slid his pants down underneath the red cloth. He pulled off his shirt and then went into the center of the house under the open air roof where the pump was and where the tenants gathered water, washed clothes and bathed. She heard the clinking of the metal pump and the fall of water as she packed his food in the tiffin.

He dressed and combed his hair in the faded cracked mirror leaning up against the wall on a shelf. The plaster on the wall was flaking and turning gray. Pinned on the wall were the pictures of Hanuman and Kali and Shiva that one could buy from the bazaars around Dasaswamedh Ghat. He took a last look into the mirror and he ran his fingers across his mustache. He turned away and left the room and she greeted him with the tiffin in her right hand.

What should I bring from the market? he asked

Chili, potato and cauliflower.

He turned and opened the door. The glare from the sun was bright and a man dressed in white with a white cloth wrapped around his head walked by. He stepped outside and joined the lane. She pushed the wooden doors back in place.

Vinod ran in and out of the room. He ran and his arms wavered and bounced at his sides like short wobbling wings while his heels kicked up behind him. He ran as if he were trying to escape because invariably one of the people in the room—a cousin, an auntie, a friend of the family, his father or his mother—would go out and swing him up in the air and bring him back into the room.

Vinod, the eldest son of Dillip and Ritu, never stopped moving. His eyes guided him around Rahul Chacha. He put a hand on his thigh but didn't look at him as he moved on and picked up a cup. He turned around and asked Rahul Chacha, What is this? He received his answer as Rahul took the cup out of his hand and placed it back on the small table in front of them. The boy moved on, picking up whatever he saw—a plate, a spoon, a sweet. He picked it up. He looked at it. Sometimes he threw it down. Sometimes he took an object to his father and asked, What is this, Papa? Almost before he got an answer he had abandoned the object and was off at a trot to find a new one. Now and then someone grabbed him and held him before he managed to get loose, continuing around the table, between the legs of his father, Auntie Gita, Rahul Chacha, Anil Bhaiya, Ajit Bhaiya, Hemant Bhaiya. He stopped in front of Sunita and held up his finger and he said, finger.

Yes dear, that's right, finger.

Vinod turned and took a biscuit from a plate on the table. He ate part of it and then walked to Rahul Chacha and dropped the biscuit in his cup of tea and everyone laughed. Ritu frowned, grabbed Vinod's arm, pulled him away and passed him to Gita. Then she picked up Rahul Chacha's cup just as Dillip said, Bring a new cup of tea.

Ajit started singing. His eyes were closed and his head was moving. A few of the others joined in and Ajit stood and clapped his hands and sang. Anil and Hemant and Dillip danced. They encouraged Vinod. Dance, dance, they said. But Vinod stood absolutely still with his finger in his mouth looking at them with an expression of mild amusement tinged with confusion.

The infant Vimal lay with his eyes wide, staring at the ceiling; then his eyes appeared as if he were looking at wondrous visions that only he can see and then he

started crying. Both Dillip and Ritu stood to pick him up. Dillip stepped in front of her and told her, No. She sat down. She hoped the boy would start wailing. Dillip remained standing, rocking his infant son while Ajit continued to sing, now softly, about love. Vimal stopped crying and Dillip propped him up with his bottom on Dillip's knees, bracing the child with one hand on his chest and one hand on his back. Vimal looked out before him. His head swiveled on his neck and Dillip bounced his son up and down on his knees by raising and lowering his heels, looking at his son from the side, as the pace of Ajit's singing picked up, and Dillip said to Vivek, Dance, Dance, Dance.

Dillip filled the metal bucket with water and squatted and dumped the bucket over his head and the water crashed to the ground and ran over his light brown skin. He rubbed soap all over his hair and body. Then he worked the pump and filled the bucket and dumped it over himself. The water splashed to the ground and he filled the bucket again and dumped more water over his head. He did this repeatedly and quickly and he cupped his hands and he drank the water and he spit it out, coughing, grunting, spewing.

He returned to his room. He picked up a few sticks of incense and a matchbox and he stood before the Lakshmi image. He lit the incense. He waved it in front of the image and twirls of smoke trailed his waving hand. He prayed for peace, he prayed for health and he prayed for material success, so that he could take care of his family and live without trouble.

He turned to his two sons. He put them each in one of his arms and he kissed them each on the cheek. Vimal lay his head on his father's shoulder and Vinod raised his tiny hands into the air and smiled. Dillip laughed, stood up and walked around the room with the kids, bouncing slightly and looking at each one and raising his eyebrows and opening his mouth, calling their names, giggling.

Your tea is ready, she said.

Vinod took his sons into the next room and sat down next to a small table. He had his sons sit with him. He took the tea that was on the table and gently brought it to his lips. It wasn't too hot but he sipped the tea anyway.

Papa, Papa, his kids called, reaching for the cup.

Wait, he said. It's too hot. Later I'll give you some.

Dillip drank his tea almost down to the bottom and gave the cup to Vinod. Share with your brother, he said. He went into the next room.

Vinod took the cup with both hands. He drank from it and smiled. Then he put the cup in his brother's hands and helped his brother bring it to his mouth. He took the cup out of Vimal's hands and looked inside and saw a small bit of the light brown tea. He finished it and their father returned into the room.

Come, he said to them.

He bent down so that his face was level with theirs. He raised his arms in the air and called out softly, Aaahhh, and Vinod imitated him and laughed. But Vimal sat looking at his father with one finger stuck in his mouth. Dillip did it again but got no reaction from Vimal. He did it again and both kids raised their arms and called Aaahhh and Vinod jumped, clapping his hands and Vimal giggled and clapped his hands and Dillip imitated his children. Then he stood up. I'm going, he said. He looked at his wife and she looked at him. He searched her eyes but found nothing.

He walked through the lanes to the main road and to the building that had the sign, Mehra and Sons, Wood Merchants. He had acquired the sawmill on a rental basis and began providing wood to construction companies and furniture manufacturers. He was on good terms with the people from whom he bought wood and they had given him an excellent credit line. The credit line, combined with good business practices, brought him a modest amount of success. His business opened early and kept regular hours. He never defaulted on his payments. He delivered a quality product and he went out of his way to help customers. This earned him much respect among his business partners and in this way he gradually began to open a steady stream of clients for Mehra and Sons.

At their small flat Ritu bathed her children. The two boys stood looking at the pump. Go on, she said. It's water. It will clean you, purify you.

Ritu pumped out water and Vinod got underneath and Vimal ran behind his mother.

Come, beta. I'm here. There's nothing to worry about.

She put him underneath the water and the water splashed onto her face and her arms. Vimal whimpered slightly and Ritu rubbed his back and legs.

Feel the water, she said. It's beautiful, how it slides over the skin.

They finished and she held both of their hands and led them into the next room.

She combed Vinod's hair and she smiled as she did so. She wondered how their features would change as they grew. Vimal would be light skinned, square jawed, maybe even tall. Somewhere in her family there must have been tall men.

All day at work he dealt with his customers and workers in his impeccable manner. But inside his mind whirled endlessly around one point: she was the coldest person he had ever met. He was courteous with her. He brought food home from the market for her. He bought her what she asked for. He was working for their prosperity. Why wouldn't she love him? He did not beat her. He did not speak harshly with her. He did not order her about. She didn't look at him. She didn't even look at him. How could he live with such a person? What kind of misery would follow him? To go every night to a home without warmth, to not feel loved by the woman who bore his children. I will not put up with this. I will not tolerate this. I will freeze her out as well. Then she will feel it.

Open the door! She heard him. He loathed her. He didn't want to speak to her. He didn't want to say anything to her. He knocked. She waited. He knocked again, louder, sustained. The door shook and she stepped back from it.

My god! he cried. Would you open the door so that I can enter my house?

She opened it. She looked down because she knew he would pause and search for her eyes. But he walked past her and bumped her shoulder on the way. Now I'll be beaten, she thought. He stood in the room with his back to her and he heard the door shut.

I will not eat here tonight, he said.

She nodded her head and he said it again.

I will not eat here tonight. Not in this house where I do not feel welcome.

It is your home and I have cooked.

Wife of mine, mother of my two sons, the one who will travel with me through this life, I work for you, I think of you, I plan for you and for your sons. But you don't love me in return.

I do everything a wife should do.

But you never smile. You never look at me. He thrust his arm in her direction and pointed his finger. I will quit remembering you, he told her. I will quit remembering you. Soon I'll do it.

He left the house. A light bulb burned in the distance. He walked underneath the four story buildings and the carved wooden frames over the doors, his steps touching the ground like the clicking of a wind up clock as he moved through the silent shadows of the cast irons designs of the verandahs. He smelled the water first. He went down a few steps and sat down. The sky was dark and the river was black. His head hung down and rubbed his hand through his hair and down to the back of his neck. He looked up and exhaled. The only thing to do, he told himself, was to do his work. Build up his business, educate his sons, get them established. Go each day to work and come home and sleep and go again and each day would pass that way. He raised his head. He heard a lone drum and he saw firelight on the other side of the river, twirling in the black space.

Raju was a neighborhood boy. He wore a necklace of black string with a sliver box-shaped locket and he sat on the stone bench near a tea shop and talked. Vinod and Vimal sat in front of him. If you go to the cremation ground, said Raju, you can see ghosts. Sometimes people go to the other side of the river at night and never return. The ghosts come out at night and they take revenge on anyone they see.

Vinod scrutinized Raju.

Why do they take revenge? he asked.

Because they are suffering.

Why are ghosts unhappy?

Because they are not with God and they are not here with us. They are separate.

Where are the ghosts?

A black and white dog came running and stopped in front of Raju and then jumped up onto the bench. Raju grabbed the dog and pulled him into his lap.

At the cremation grounds, said Raju. In the open places, near rivers and fields. And wherever there were murders or accidents. On the other side of the Ganga, at night, they come out and it's very dangerous.

Vinod laughed.

Don't laugh. Just know where the ghosts are and don't go there.

Vinod! Vimal!

They turned around. It was their mother. She grabbed their hair and yanked them off the step. What are you doing here? I told you not to sit here. She shoved her children in the direction of the house and off they ran. At home she berated them. Don't play with those children. They are not our people. You are Punjabi. You will learn bad habits among the people here. You have to study and stay at home.

When Dillip returned from work she fed him his food and sat with him while he ate.

I don't like this house, she said. Can we move to some place better?

Why?

I don't like this neighborhood. Vinod and Vimal were outside today with the other boys. There are bad influences out there. Those boys are bad. The environment is bad. I want to move out of here. I fear for my children.

They are just playing, he said. They are boys and it is only a neighborhood. Outside people are working and kids are playing and others are just sitting and talking. There's nothing—

That's it, she said, interrupting him. Sitting around, talking and becoming good for nothings. Is this what you want for your sons?

He thought for a second and looked up from his plate. You're right, he said in his warm and sincere voice. I don't want this to happen. Thank you for looking after our sons very well. It is good. You are a good mother.

What will you do? she asked.

Something will be done. I've been planning to move us out of here. Business is going well. One day will move to a new house where the atmosphere is good. He smiled and said, Don't worry. You tell me what we need and I will get it.

When will we go?

He held up his hand. It will take some time. But don't worry because it will happen. I'm making preparations. The work is happening.

It needs to be soon. I don't like it here. It's dirty. The environment is bad. The boys of this place—

I know. I know. The preparations are being put into place. I won't fail you.

She looked at his plate.

Take more dal, she said, reaching for the ladle.

Yes, he said, nodding his head. More dal.

Take more vegetables.

Ok.

And roti. You need to eat. To keep your strength so you can support this household.

Yes. More roti, he said softly, loving his wife's words and watching her place each item on his plate one by one.

He walked and she followed him. Ritu wore her palu over her forehead. She had not left the house for weeks, for months. She kept her head down and she walked. They stopped on the side of the road and he waved down a cycle rickshaw with his hand.

Belvariya, he said.

The rickshaw driver nodded to the back seat.

Ritu raised her leg and rested her hand on the rickshaw seat and hoisted herself up and sat down. Dillip got on and sat next to her.

The rickshaw driver pedaled and Dillip saw the man's thin calf muscles flex in the sun. He peddled toward Assi and turned right and eventually they came to a spacious area with wide gravel roads and a few houses.

This used to be a bel forest, he said to his wife. All of this was forest. Now it is being developed into a modern neighborhood. He looked around. Just houses, he said as he spread his hands slowly in front of him. Open, clean, modern.

The rickshaw driver looked back at Dillip as if to ask where he should go.

Straight, said Dillip. I'll tell you.

He peddled on.

Ok, here is fine.

Dillip got down from the Rickshaw and extended a hand to his wife to help her down. She accepted it. The sky was clear and pale and there were trees on the horizon.

This way, he said. They took a few steps and he pointed to a plot of empty land. Next to the plot was a three story house with a gate and on the street there were three similar houses.

Here we will build the house. It will be four stories. One day our sons will be married and they will live with us. Vinod and Vimal will each have a level of the house for their own families, our daughters and our grandsons and granddaughters.

Ritu smiled and a deep wave of satisfaction welled up in his heart. The area was quiet and open and spacious and all of the houses were houses of good people. Over there, said Dillip, is the house of a doctor, KP Mishra, and over there is the house of a businessman, Ashok Gupta. There is the house of RK Panday and there is the house of Benarasidas Mehra.

They got back into the rickshaw and returned home. Inside the house Ritu made tea. Dillip came from behind her and spoke.

Wife of mine, he said. We were been married according to the custom of our people. I did not have the fortune of choosing you. You were chosen for me and I was chosen for you. You are my wife and I am your husband and together we have made children. Please, please, keep me no more at a distance.

She faced him.

You have nothing to say? he asked.

She looked at him blankly.

And he slapped her with the back of his hand and then he turned away and walked to the window and wiped tears from his eyes and since that day there was an ocean between them, he standing on the shore and seeing only sea that stretched and stretched and finally slid away underneath the faint white clouds on the horizon.

At home in the residential area Ritu lies on her bed and laments the heat and humidity of the season. Her eyes move to the window and she sees the shadow of a cloud moving across a large green leaf outside and she closes her eyes. The whine of the saws reaches the small office in front of the sawmill. A cart appears on the street laden with wood and pushed by two men at the back and two men at the front. They stop in front of the mill and unload the wood. Then two men dressed in pants and shirts come to the office and Dillip stands to greet them.

Namaskar, he says.

Namaskar Dillip Bhaiya, namaskar.

Kya hal hai.

Sab Thik hai.

Please sit, he says, pointing to the chairs in front of the table. Dillip calls to a peon to bring cups of tea. The men are customers. They drink their tea and exchanged pleasantries before placing an order. They leave and Dillip sits back in his chair. He picks up the newspaper and sets it back down and sighs as he looks out onto the street.

In the evening he goes to the Ganga. Swollen from the rains the river fans out into the distance underneath an electric blue haze and far far away with no sight of land anywhere it disappears beneath a horizon topped with large silver clouds. The clouds shift and the large moon lays a solid white path of light across the water and the current moves relentlessly through the moon beam. Dillip drops his head and he closes his eyes. Then he shakes his head and looks out over the river. He thinks, after all of these years I'm still locked inside this mind, inside these thoughts. I am diseased and it is unbearable. It is ghastly. The moonbeam loses shape, narrowing on the near shore and widening as it reaches the barren other side and as the moon rises the path of light disintegrates into a

swath of hundreds of thousands of silver mirrors flickering all over the vast surface of the water that runs inside a blue humid haze. Someone calls out Hai Ram and bells ring from a temple and fall still. Two people pass behind him, their sandals brushing against the concrete.

He hears the water curling against the concrete below and he runs his fingers along the sides of his mouth. The area underneath his cheekbones is stiff and rigid and it aches. He drives his scooter to Assi. He parks and he sees a man running from side to side in the middle of the street. The man wears frayed clothing soiled with dirt and his face and hair glisten in the night lights. He runs with high bouncing steps, three steps to one side, where he pauses, his fingers frozen in the shape of claws, his neck flung back, his eyes closed. Then he opens his eyes and looks out in mock surprise, laughing and running again with those three high dainty steps back to where he started and from where he repeats the same gesture: the hands frozen in the shape of claws, the neck flung back, the laughter and the mocking look to the oblivious crowd.

Dillip steps into the eatery. He passes the clay stove where a boy squats in front of a heap of flour with a rolling pin in his hand. Outside vegetable vendors shout out their wares and prices as middle aged men sit in open air tea stalls reading newspapers and debating politics. Others loiter in front of the tea and paan stalls or stroll arm in arm in the street while women move together, stopping in front of the vegetable traders who sit on the ground before their large wicker baskets as the cycles and scooters roll past, and occasionally, proclaimed by the ubiquitous horn, a car ploughs through the crowd.

Dillip greets the proprietor. Namaskar.

Namaskar.

How are you?

The old man with thick framed glasses and gaps in his teeth looks up and says, It's all the grace of the god as he continues loading the metal plates with food for his customers. Dilip sits down. One light bulb casts a dim light on a few calendars loosely pinned on the brown walls. The proprietor sets down two dishes of vegetables and one plate of roti and another dish of yellow dal in front of Dillip, who looks up briefly and sees the curled edge of a calendar flickering slightly in the wind of the ceiling fan. He

puts his head down and eats and he doesn't raise his head until he finishes the food on his plate. The food is simple and clean and not heavily spiced and Dillip leaves sated.

He drives his scooter. His hands grip the handlebars and his arms shake from the bumps in the road as the head light bobs up and down in the murky night ahead. The wind brushes against his face as he moves through the empty streets of the upscale residential neighborhood, the home of doctors and businessmen and college professors. He presses his horn and the gatekeeper opens the gate and Dillip drives in and parks his scooter. He speaks loudly at the door and the servant opens it and he goes inside. He comes around the corner and sees his wife and he walks the other way to the bedroom. Wind blows through the leaves outside. He undresses and lies down. A half hour later he hears the light skip of his wife's sandals across the hallway floor. She enters her room, puts on a nightgown and lays in bed while Dillip lies with his eyes open in the next room.

Instantaneously it rains. He closes his eyes and diving into the soft constant sound that eliminates all other sounds he slides into sleep.