

JHUMPA LAHIRI

ONLY GOODNESS



FAMILY SNAPSHOTS

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Family Snapshots

by Jhumpa Lahiri

B L O O M S B U R Y
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Only Goodness

It was Sudha who'd introduced Rahul to alcohol, one weekend he came to visit her at Penn—to his first drink from a keg and then, the next morning in the dining hall, his first cup of coffee. He'd pronounced both beverages revolting, preferring Schnapps to the beer and emptying a dozen packets of sugar in his coffee cup. That had been his junior year of high school. When she was home the following summer he asked her to buy him some six-packs, planning to have a party one weekend when their parents were going to be in Connecticut overnight. He'd shot up to six feet, braces off his teeth, whiskers sprouting around his mouth, dark pimples occasionally studding his cheekbones, her little brother in name only. She went to a local liquor store, helping Rahul divvy up the cans between his room and hers so that their parents wouldn't discover them.

After her parents were asleep she brought some cans into Rahul's room. He snuck downstairs, bringing back a cup of ice cubes to chill down the warm Budweiser. They shared one cupful, then another, listening to the Stones and the Doors on Rahul's record player, smoking cigarettes next to the open window and exhaling through the screen. It was as if Sudha were in high school again, doing things she once hadn't had the wits or guts for. She felt a new bond with her brother, a sense, after years of regarding him as just a kid, that they were finally friends.

Sudha had waited until college to disobey her parents. Before then she had lived according to their expectations, her persona scholarly, her social life limited to other demure girls in her class, if only to ensure that one day she would be set free. Out of sight in Philadelphia she studied diligently, double-majoring in economics and math, but on weekends she learned to let loose, going to parties and allowing boys into her bed. She began drinking, something her parents did not do. They were prudish about alcohol to the point of seeming Puritanical, frowning upon the members of their Bengali circle—the men, that was to say—who liked to sip whiskey at gatherings. In her freshman year there had been nights when she got so drunk that she was sick on the streets of campus, splattering the sidewalk and stumbling back to her dorm with friends. But she learned what her limits were. The idea of excess, of being out of control, did not appeal to Sudha. Competence: this was the trait that fundamentally defined her.

After Rahul graduated from high school their parents celebrated, having in their opinion now successfully raised two children in America. Rahul was going to Cornell, and Sudha was still in Philadelphia, getting a master's in international relations. Their parents threw a party, inviting nearly two hundred people, and bought Rahul a car, justifying it as a necessity for his life in Ithaca. They bragged about the school, more impressed by it than they'd been with Penn. "Our job is done," her father declared at the end of the party, posing for pictures with Rahul and Sudha at either side. For years they had been compared to other Bengali children, told about gold medals brought back from science fairs, colleges that offered full scholarships. Sometimes Sudha's

father would clip newspaper articles about unusually gifted adolescents—the boy who finished a PhD at twenty, the girl who went to Stanford at twelve—and tape them to the refrigerator. When Sudha was fourteen her father had written to Harvard Medical School, requested an application, and placed it on her desk.

Sudha's example had taught her parents that there was nothing to fear about sending a child to college. Rahul took it in stride as well, not overly anxious as Sudha had been the summer before she'd gone away. He was almost indifferent to the changes ahead, his attitude reminding her that he'd always been the smarter one. Sudha had struggled to keep her place on the honor roll, to become salutatorian of her high school class. But Rahul never lifted a finger, never cracked a book unless it appealed to him, precocious enough to have skipped third grade.

At the end of the summer, Sudha went to Wayland to help him pack, but when she got there she saw that there was nothing left for her to do. He had already stuffed his bags, filled some milk crates with records, grabbed sheets and towels from the linen closet, wrapped the cord around his electric typewriter. He told her she didn't need to go all the way to Ithaca, but she insisted, riding beside him as he drove his new car, their parents following behind. The campus was on a hilltop surrounded by farms and lakes and waterfalls, nothing like Penn. She helped unload his things, carrying boxes across the quadrangle along with the other families of incoming freshmen. When it was time to say good-bye their mother wept, and Sudha cried a little, too, at the thought of abandoning her little brother, still not eighteen, in that remote, majestic place. But Rahul did not behave as if he were being either abandoned or liberated. He pocketed the money their father counted out and gave him as they parted, and he turned back toward his dormitory before Sudha and her parents had pulled away.

...

The next time she saw him was Christmas. At dinner he had nothing specific to say about his classes, or his professors, or the new friends he'd made. His hair had grown long enough to conceal his neck and to tuck behind his ears. He wore a checked flannel shirt, and around his wrist, a knotted woven bracelet. He did not eat the enormous amounts Sudha still did when she sat at her mother's table. He seemed bored, watching but not helping when Sudha and her mother decorated the tree with the ornaments she and Rahul had made when they were little. Sudha remembered always seeming to come down with the flu over Christmas break, collapsing once she was free of the pressure of exams, and thought that Rahul might do so, too. But later that evening, finding her upstairs where she was wrapping gifts in her room, he seemed to have perked up. "Hey. Where did you hide it?" he asked.

"Hide what?"

"Don't tell me you came home empty-handed."

"Oh," she said, realizing what he meant. "It didn't occur to me. I just thought, since you're in college—" It was true, it hadn't occurred to her this time to stick a six-pack into her bag. She preferred wine now, a glass with dinner when she went out with friends in Philadelphia, but she did not expect it when she came home to Wayland.

"I'm still not old enough to buy anything here." He glanced around the room as if it

might contain what he sought, looking at her closet and her chest of drawers, at the bed that was covered with wrapping paper and a box from Filene's containing a nightgown for her mother.

"Trip to the liquor store?" he suggested, sitting on top of the bed, crushing some wrapping paper she'd unrolled. His hand sifted through the gift tags, the tape, picking up each item and then dropping it again.

"Now?" she asked.

"Do you have any other plans for the evening?"

"Well, no. But Ma and Baba are going to think it's weird if we go out all of a sudden."

He rolled his eyes. "Jesus, Didi. You're almost twenty-four. Do you really still care what they think?"

"I was about to get into my pajamas."

He picked up the scissors, his eyes focused on the slow opening and closing of the blades, as if discovering their function for the first time. "Since when did you get so boring?"

She knew he was joking, but the remark hurt her nevertheless. "Tomorrow, I promise."

He stood up, distant again as he had been at dinner, and she felt herself faltering. "I guess it's still open," she said, looking at her watch. And so she'd gone, lying to her parents that she needed to get something last minute at the mall, Rahul saying he'd drive her there.

"You're the best," Rahul told her as they headed into town. He rolled down the window on his side, filling the car with freezing air, and fished in his coat pocket for a pack of cigarettes. He pushed in the lighter on the dashboard and offered her one, but she shook her head, turning up the heat. She told him that she'd applied to go to London the following year, to do a second master's at the London School of Economics.

"You're going to London for a whole year?"

"You can visit me."

"Why do you need another master's degree?" He sounded distressed, and also disapproving. It was the sort of reaction she expected from her parents. Her parents hadn't allowed her to do a junior year abroad at Oxford, telling her then that she was too young to live in a foreign county alone. But now they were excited by the prospect of Sudha going to London, where they'd first lived after getting married and where Sudha had been born, talking about visiting and reconnecting with old friends.

She explained that LSE had one of the best programs in development economics, that she was thinking of doing NGO work, eventually. But Rahul didn't seem to be listening, and she was annoyed with him, with herself, really, for agreeing to go out so late at night. "You want a six-pack?" she asked when they got to the liquor store.

"I'd prefer a case."

In the past she had paid for things without a second thought, but she was aware, now, that he did not reach for his wallet.

"And a bottle of vodka, too," he added.

“Vodka?”

He drew another cigarette out of its pack. “It’s a long vacation.”

Their parents were in bed by the time they returned, but Sudha insisted they hide things as they had before. Thinking that their mother might have reason to enter Rahul’s room for the weeks that he was home, to clean up or put away his laundry, she kept the liquor in her room, a few cans at the back of her closet, some in a gap behind a bookcase, the bottle of Smirnoff wrapped in an old pilly sweater in her chest of drawers. She told Rahul it was safer that way, and he didn’t seem to care. He took a couple of cans for the night, pecking her on the cheek before he left her, not insisting when she said she was too tired to join him.

He had been born when Sudha was six, and the night her mother went into labor was the first sustained memory of her life. She remembered being at a party in the home of one of her parents’ Bengali friends in Peabody, being left there overnight because her father had to take her mother straight to Boston without the suitcase Sudha had helped pack containing the toothbrush and cold cream and robe her mother would need in the hospital. Though Sudha understood that a baby was about to be born, had felt it with her hand as it sometimes threatened to pound clear through her mother’s belly, she was terrified nevertheless that her mother, moaning with her forehead pressed against a wall, was dying. “Go away,” she said, when Sudha tried to stroke her mother’s hand, in a tone that had stung. “I don’t want you to see me this way.” After her parents’ departure the party continued. Sudha was expected to play in the basement with the other children, among the washer and dryer, as dinner was served to adults. The host and hostess did not have children of their own. Sudha had slept on a cot in a spare room containing no permanent furniture other than an ironing board and a closet devoted to cleaning supplies. In the morning there were no Frosted Flakes for her to eat, only toast with margarine, and it was then, during that restrained and disappointing adult breakfast, that the phone rang with news of her brother’s arrival.

She had been hoping for a sister but was delighted nevertheless no longer to be an only child, to have someone help fill the emptiness she felt in her parents’ home. The few things they owned were always in their places, the two most current issues of *Time* in the same spot on the coffee table. Sudha preferred the homes of her American friends, crammed and piled with things, toothpaste caking their sinks, their soft beds unmade. Finally, with Rahul’s arrival, there was a similar swelling and disorder: his lotions and diapers heaped on the top of the dresser, stockpots clattering with boiling bottles on the stove, an infant’s strong, milky odor pervading the rooms. She remembered how excited she had been, moving her things to one side to make space in her bedroom for Rahul’s bassinet, his changing table, his mobile of stuffed bumblebees. Toys and other gifts accumulated in the crib he would eventually use; her favorite was a stuffed white rabbit that played a tune if a key at its throat was turned. She had not minded when her mother came in in the middle of the night to comfort Rahul, sitting in a rocking chair, singing a song in Bengali, something about a fishbone piercing the foot of a little boy, a song that would lull Sudha back to sleep also. Birth announcements were bought at the drugstore, the card of Sudha’s choosing, and she helped to put them in their envelopes, dampening stamps with her father on a wet

sponge. Countless photographs were taken—Rahul sleeping in his bassinet, being bathed in a plastic tub—and she took it upon herself to arrange these in a special album, with a blue denim cover because he was a boy.

There was not the same documentation of Sudha's infancy. In London, her parents had rented two rooms in Balham from a Bengali landlord named Mr. Pal, and it was he who had taken the few baby pictures of Sudha that existed, wearing a white lace dress intended for a christening but that her mother had simply thought pretty. Mr. Pal had opened his doors to her parents when her mother was pregnant with Sudha, providing refuge from their previous landlady, an elderly British woman who did not allow children under her roof. Her parents told her that half the rentals in London in the sixties said WHITES ONLY, and the combination of being Indian and pregnant limited her parents to the point where her father considered sending her mother back to India to give birth, until they met Mr. Pal. To Sudha this story was like an episode out of a Greek myth or the Bible, rich with blessing and portent, marking her family as survivors in strange intolerant seas.

Four years later they moved to Massachusetts, her father transferring from Badger to Raytheon, transporting no evidence of their years in London, no trace apart from her mother's fondness for the McVitie's biscuits she ate every morning with tea and her lifelong belief in the quality of British brassieres, which she asked friends in the UK to mail her every so often. None of Sudha's toys had made it on the journey across the Atlantic, no baby clothing or bedding or keepsake of any kind. In grade school, when Sudha had been required to present her autobiography to the class, a project for which the other students brought in blankets and scuffed shoes and blackened spoons, she came only with an envelope containing pictures Mr. Pal had taken, boring her classmates as she stood at the front of the room.

None of this mattered after Rahul arrived. Sudha had slipped through the cracks, but she was determined that her little brother should leave his mark as a child in America. She sought out all the right toys for him, scavenging from yard sales the Fisher Price barn, Tonka trucks, the Speak and Say that made animal sounds, and other things that she'd discovered in the playrooms of her friends. She asked her parents to buy him the books she'd been read by her first teachers, *Peter Rabbit* and *Frog and Toad*. "What's the point of buying books for someone who can't read?" her parents asked, legitimately enough, and so she checked them out of her school library and read them to Rahul herself. She told her parents to set up sprinklers on the lawn for him to run through in the summer, and she convinced her father to put a swing set in the yard. She thought up elaborate Halloween costumes, turning him into an elephant or a refrigerator, while hers had come from boxes, a flimsy apron and a weightless mask. At times she engaged with Rahul's upbringing more than he did—it was she, too heavy by then for the seats, who would swing in the yard after school, she who spent hours building towns out of Lincoln Logs that he would destroy with a gleeful swipe of the hand.

Though she doted on him and adored him, she began to envy him in small ways. She envied him for his lean limbs while she grew slightly pudgy once her period came, and she envied him because people could call him Raoul, that he could introduce himself in crowds without questions. She envied him for his beauty; even when he was

a child there was a clear sense of the handsome man he would become. His face defied the family mold. Sudha, with her father's rounded chin and her mother's low hairline, was transparently their offspring, but Rahul looked little like either of them, his genes pulled not from the surface but from some deeper, forgotten source. His complexion was darker, his skin an unmistakable brown, his pronounced features lacking the indeterminate quality she and her parents shared. He was allowed to wear shorts in summer, to play sports in school, things her mother considered inappropriate for a girl. Sudha supposed it was a combination of his being a boy and being younger, and her parents being more at ease with the way things worked in America by then. Sudha had no fondness for her younger self, no sentimental affection for the way she had looked or the things she had done. What she felt was an overwhelming sense of regret, for what exactly she did not know. She had looked, of course, perfectly ordinary, her black hair worn in pigtails or braids, grown to her waist one year and cut like Dorothy Hamill's the next. And she had done ordinary things: attended slumber parties and played clarinet in the school band and sold chocolate bars from door to door. And yet she could not forgive herself. Even as an adult, she wished only that she could go back and change things: the ungainly things she'd worn, the insecurity she'd felt, all the innocent mistakes she'd made.

Thanks to Rahul there was also someone else to witness the perplexing fact of her parents' marriage. It was neither happy nor unhappy, and the lack of emotion in either extreme was what upset Sudha most. She would have understood quarrels, she believed she would even have understood divorce. She always hoped some sign of love would manifest itself; the only things that consoled her were a few pictures taken during their London years. Her mother looked unrecognizably slim, hair styled at a salon, a woven purse shaped like a cornucopia dangling from the crook of her elbow. Even her saris were glamorous back then, tightly wrapped to show off her figure, patterned with a spidery brown batik. Her father seemed vaguely mod, wearing suits with narrow dark ties and sunglasses. Those were the days, Sudha, supposed, when immigration was still an adventure, living with paraffin heaters, seeing snow for the first time.

Wayland was the shock. Suddenly they were stuck, her parents aware that they faced a life sentence of being foreign. In London her mother had been working toward a certificate in Montessori education, but in America she did not work, did not drive. She put on twenty pounds after Rahul was born, and her father put away his mod suits and shopped at Sears. In Wayland they became passive, wary, the rituals of small-town New England more confounding than negotiating two of the world's largest cities. They relied on their children, on Sudha especially. It was she who had to explain to her father that he had to gather up the leaves in bags, not just drag them with his rake to the woods opposite the house. She, with her perfect English, who called the repair department at Lechmere to have their appliances serviced. Rahul never considered it his duty to help their parents in this way. While Sudha regarded her parents' separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer, Rahul was impermeable to that aspect of their life as well. "No one dragged them here," he would say. "Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do." That was Rahul, always aware of the family's weaknesses, never sparing Sudha from the things she least wanted to face.

Another semester passed before she saw him again. She was accepted at LSE, and in June she came home to Wayland for a week. During her visit, Sudha gave herself fully to her parents, watching Wimbledon with her father on television, helping her mother cook and order new blinds for the bedrooms. She was always in the house, while Rahul drifted in and out without explanation. He was waiting tables part time at a seafood restaurant out in Scituate, thirty-five miles away, sleeping most days, working dinner shifts, out with friends after that. These were no longer friends from high school, boys Sudha had known since Rahul started kindergarten. Instead, they were people he met working at the restaurant, people he never bothered to invite home.

His aloofness troubled Sudha, but her parents said nothing. He seemed always to be in a slightly bad mood and in urgent need to get somewhere—to his job, to a gym where he went to lift weights, to the video store to return one of the foreign films he would watch when everyone else was asleep. She and Rahul never argued, but there were moments, when she crossed paths with him in the hallway or asked him to pass her the remote control, when she was briefly convinced he despised her. It was nothing he said or did—even in his avoidance he was always coolly polite—but she sensed that he had revised his opinion of her, that the Rahul who had once looked up to her and confided in her was replaced by a person she could only offend. She wondered when he would approach her for another run to the liquor store, but he never mentioned it. She gathered he had his own supply, stashed away somewhere; one night, when she was up late reading a magazine, she heard the sound of the ice machine grinding in the refrigerator, cubes dropping into a glass.

She learned from her mother that his second-semester grades had been bad; the first semester the lowest was a B, but now he'd gotten mostly C's. He had dropped biology and organic chemistry and taken up film and English literature instead. "Can you talk to him?" her mother asked Sudha. "Find out what went wrong?" Sudha came to Rahul's defense, saying that it was an enormous adjustment going from high school to college, that a lot of students had a hard time. Her father did not hide his disapproval, and while he did not confront Rahul, one day he said to Sudha, "He is floundering." He did not approve of paying an astronomical tuition just so Rahul could watch French movies in a classroom. Her father had no patience for failure, for indulgences. He never let his children forget that there had been no one to help him as he helped them, so that no matter how well Sudha did, she felt that her good fortune had been handed to her, not earned. Both her parents came from humble backgrounds; both their grandmothers had given up the gold on their arms to put roofs over their families' heads and food on their plates. This mentality, as tiresome as it sometimes felt, also reassured Sudha, for it was something her parents understood and respected about each other, and she suspected it was the glue that held them together.

Late one night, she knocked on Rahul's door. He was lying in bed, listening to music on his headphones, leafing through a tattered copy of Beckett's plays. He put the book on his chest when he saw her but didn't remove the headphones. She saw a mug on the floor by the bed, filled with ice cubes and a clear liquid. He didn't offer any, was playing their old game without her.

"So, what's going on at school?" she asked.

He looked up at her. His eyes were reddish. "I'm on vacation."

“Your grades weren’t good, Rahul. You need to work a little harder.”

“I did work hard,” he said. “I know the first year can be tough.”

“I did work hard,” he repeated. “My professors hate me. Is that my fault?”

“I’m sure they don’t hate you,” she said. She considered crossing the room and sitting on the edge of the bed but remained where she was.

“What the fuck do you know?” he said, giving her a start.

“Look, I’m just trying to help.”

“I’m not asking you to help. You don’t need to fix anything. Has it ever occurred to you that my life might be fine the way it is?”

His words silenced her, cut to the bone. She’d always had a heavy hand in his life, it was true, striving not to control it but to improve it somehow. She had always considered this her responsibility to him. She had not known how to be a sister any other way.

“You don’t even live here,” he continued. “You think you can stroll in and make everything perfect before you disappear to London? Is that what you want to do?”

She looked at him, and then at the mug at the side of his bed, wondering how much he’d consumed in the course of the evening, where the bottle was hidden. She thought of her parents sleeping down the hall, unaware of what he was doing, and she felt indignant on their behalf. “You’re smart, Rahul. You’re a lot smarter than me. I don’t get it.”

He leaned over and picked up the cup from the floor. He took a sip and swallowed, then slid the cup under the bed, out of sight. “You don’t have to get it, Didi. You don’t have to get everything all the time.”

On Sudha’s last night before heading back to Philadelphia he surprised them, agreeing to go out to a restaurant to celebrate her impending departure for England. Their parents were in good moods, reminiscing about London, trying to remember the order of stops on the Piccadilly Line. Rahul was jovial, too, telling Sudha about all the writers’ homes and graves she should visit while she was there. He spoke with an aggressive authority, as if he’d been to Marx’s tomb himself, and for the first time it occurred to Sudha that perhaps Rahul was jealous of those years she and her parents had lived in England, those years when Rahul did not exist. He ordered a Singapore Sling and nursed it slowly through the meal. He mentioned nothing about having plans later on, but before the check came he looked at his watch and leapt up from the table, saying he was late for something, and left in his own car.

Sudha went home with her parents, was up watching *Spellbound* on the VCR when the phone rang. It was Rahul calling from the local police station. He’d been pulled over on a quiet road near Mill Pond for wavering in his lane. His blood alcohol content was not extreme, but because he was under twenty-one it was enough to get him arrested. He asked Sudha to come to the station alone, to bring three hundred dollars in cash. But it was past midnight, and besides, the keys to her parents’ car were in the pocket of her father’s pants, in their bedroom. She woke up her father, told him to get dressed. Together they went to post bail and release Rahul from the cell. Her father drove, his face creased with sleep, seeming disoriented in the town he’d lived in for

years. They stopped at an ATM and withdrew money. “You go,” her father said when they reached the station. “I prefer to wait in the car.” His voice faltered as he spoke, as it had the day he’d called Sudha in college, to tell her his father died. And so she spared her father that humiliation, that pain, entering a place where handcuffed criminals were brought. When she saw Rahul he was sober, the pads of his fingers blackened from ink. It was a Sunday night, the arraignment scheduled for the following day. “Will you go with me?” he asked as they walked back to the car, and he was shaken enough for her to assure him that she would.

“It’s ridiculous,” her mother said the next morning as Rahul slept. She blamed the police for overreacting. “It’s not like he had an accident. He was only going forty miles an hour. They probably stopped him just for being Indian.” Her father said nothing. He sat sipping his tea and reading the *Sunday Globe*. He’d said nothing on the way home.

“That wasn’t the problem,” Sudha said slowly, forcing cold butter across the surface of her toast.

“What are you saying, Sudha?” her mother asked, sounding bothered. Her father did not put down his paper, but she sensed that he had stopped reading. Sudha knew that what she was about to say was something they expected and also viscerally feared, like disobedient children who are about to be slapped. That it was up to her to deliver the blow.

“I think Rahul might have a drinking problem.”

“Sudha, please,” her mother said. After a pause she added, “I gather everyone at American colleges drinks.” She spoke as if drinking were an undergraduate hobby, a phase one outgrew.

“Not like that.”

“Didn’t you drink in college?”

“Not like that,” Sudha repeated. Not enough to get arrested, she was tempted to say.

“That’s the problem with this country,” her mother said. “Too many freedoms, too much having fun. When we were young, life wasn’t always about fun.”

Sudha pitied her mother, pitied her refusal to accommodate such an unpleasant and alien fact, her need to blame America and its laws instead of her son. She sensed that her father understood, but he refused to engage in the conversation, refused to confront Rahul when he eventually came downstairs, showered and penitent, promising never to do such a thing again. Her parents had always been blind to the things that plagued their children: being teased at school for the color of their skin or for the funny things their mother occasionally put into their lunch boxes, potato curry sandwiches that tinted Wonderbread green. What could there possibly be to be unhappy about? her parents would have thought. “Depression” was a foreign word to them, an American thing. In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India, as if the inoculations the pediatrician had given Sudha and Rahul when they were babies guaranteed them an existence free of suffering.

She was excited to be in London, curious to know the land of her birth. Before leaving she had applied for her British passport, a document her parents had not obtained for

her when she was born, and when she presented it at Heathrow the immigration officer welcomed her home. Her parents went with her and stayed ten days, settling her into her hall of residence off Tottenham Court Road. They reminded her to look right before crossing the street, bought her cardigans from Marks and Spencer's to see her through the winter. They took her to Balham on the Tube to show her the house where she'd been an infant. Together they made a trip to Sheffield, three hours away through the countryside, where their old landlord Mr. Pal now lived with his family. They did not speak of Rahul unless forced to by friends, and when they did, it was always the same unobjectionably impressive facts about him—that he was at Cornell, a sophomore now. These facts gave her parents a feeble hope: as if college, where he'd begun to fall apart, would magically put him together again.

After her parents left she grew busy with her classes, and with the new friends she made who came from all over the world, joining them to study and sightsee and visit pubs. Perhaps because it was her birthplace, she felt an instinctive connection to London, a sense of belonging though she barely knew her way around. In spite of the ocean that now separated her from her parents, she felt closer to them, but she also felt free, for the first time in her life, of her family's weight. Still, she could not drink anymore without thinking of Rahul, always conscious that the second pint she drained, satisfied at the end of a night out, would not have been enough for him. At the arraignment she'd sat next to him in the crowded courtroom, waiting for his name to be called, listening as the charges were read. She was there to stand by him, to support him, but in that place of judgment she was not on his side. His license was suspended for six months and he was ordered to attend some alcohol education classes in Ithaca. In the end her father had had to pay nearly two thousand dollars in fines and fees. The arrest was mentioned in *The Wayland Town Crier*, a paper her parents received.

In November, wandering through the National Gallery, she met a man. She had been admiring *The Arnolfini Marriage* by van Eyck, lingering in front of it after a cluster of people had passed. It was an oil painting of a couple in a bedroom holding hands, with a small dog standing at their feet. The man wore a fur-trimmed purple cape and an overly large black straw hat. The woman wore an emerald-green gown that trailed like a heavy curtain onto the floor, some of the material gathered up in her left hand. She had a white veil on her head and looked possibly pregnant, Sudha wasn't sure. There was a window behind the man, with a piece of fruit, an apricot or a tangerine, on the sill. On the wall hung a convex mirror that reflected everything in the painting.

"Come closer," the man next to Sudha said, ushering her a few steps forward so that no one could cross their line of vision. "Otherwise you can't really see." He started talking about the mirror, how it was the focal point of the painting, capturing the floor and the ceiling, the room and the world outside, and then she saw that it reflected not only the couple but also a pair of men standing in the doorway, peering into the room just as she was. "One of them is van Eyck," the man said. "That's what the inscription above the mirror says. It's Latin for '*van Eyck was here.*'" He spoke softly, as if for Sudha alone, with the singsong British cadence that was already influencing Sudha's speech. His dark hair was slightly long, and he kept raking it with his fingers away from his face. She could smell the slightly spiced soap on his skin. He wore a tweed

blazer and corduroy pants, and carried a raincoat draped over one arm. He told her that the two men in the doorway of the painting were witnessing the couple's union, adding that the painting was intended to serve as a marriage certificate. "Of course, that's just one interpretation," the man said. "Some argue that it's a betrothal scene."

She studied the details he spoke of, the glow of the paint, conscious of their shared gaze. "What about the shoes? Do they mean something?" Sudha heard herself asking, pointing to a pair of abandoned wooden clogs in the foreground, and then to some red slippers by the carpet.

The man turned to Sudha then. He was older than she expected, closer to forty judging from the eyes, clear blue eyes that settled calmly upon different points of her face. His expression was serious, placidly cast, but the sides of his mouth now rose up in a smile. "I suspect it means they're standing on holy ground. Either that or she just went shopping."

She had not known that day what a famous painting it was, but the man never made her feel ignorant. They walked to other paintings, the man bending his head down toward Sudha's and talking about them, and eventually he asked if she would like to join him for tea. His name was Roger Featherstone. He had a PhD in art history, was an editor at an art magazine and had also written a book about Renaissance portraiture. He wooed Sudha consistently, romantically: flowers every time he knocked on the door, gifts of gloves and earrings and perfume. He was an only child who had grown up in English boarding schools; his father had worked overseas for Singer sewing machines and now both his parents were dead. Roger was born in India, spent the first three years of his life in Bombay but remembered nothing. He had been married in his twenties to a girl he'd known at Cambridge; after two years she left him, renounced her possessions, and joined a Buddhist monastery in Tibet.

He took responsibility for things, booking theater tickets, making reservations at restaurants, packing picnics and dragging Sudha off to Hampstead Heath. He was the first man she'd dated who was never late, never forgot to call when he said he would, and Sudha quickly recognized in him the same strain of competence she possessed. He enjoyed food and cooking, inspired to get up early and walk to a favorite bakery for pastries, surprising Sudha, the first morning she woke up in his flat in Shepherd's Bush, with breakfast on a tray. He had lived alone for many years but quickly opened his life to her, giving her a key, lined drawers in his bureau, a glass shelf in his medicine cabinet. In his youth he had dreamed of being a painter, had enrolled at Chelsea Art School, but after a teacher told him he would not go far he never touched a canvas again. He was not bitter about this turn of events; like Sudha, he was a person who understood what his limits were. At the same time he could be exacting, writing withering reviews for his magazine, insisting on the best table at restaurants, sending back wine. Like Sudha he was moderate with alcohol, always ordering a bottle for the table but seldom consuming more than a glass or two.

As Christmas approached she told her parents she had too much work and did not come home, when in fact she and Roger went away together, to Seville and then to the Costa del Sol. When she returned from Spain there was a message at the switchboard of her dormitory from her parents, asking her to call. When she did, from one of the pay phones in the lobby of the dorm, they told her that Rahul's grades had not

improved, that a letter had come from an adviser, expressing concern. He was in Wayland now for Christmas break; after one explosive fight, he'd stopped speaking to them. She was glad that Roger wasn't there to overhear the call, that he'd kissed her good-bye in the taxi and gone back to his flat. She'd painted a hazy image of her family that he absorbed as if it were an endnote in a book, something stemming from her but safely tucked out of sight. "I can't wait to meet them," he told her, words that, Sudha hoped, made his intentions clear. Beyond the basic details he did not probe. And so she did not tell Roger about Rahul's drinking, about his arrest, about the fact that she had not talked to her brother in months.

Her parents asked her to speak to Rahul, saying he'd gone out for a walk, to try in a little while. She waited a few days. She was surprised after all these months by how upset she felt. And she was upset at her parents, too, for still depending on her to help. She called from Roger's flat, putting the charges on a card while Roger was at work. Rahul had turned twenty in the first week of January, a thing she'd let pass without acknowledgment. He picked up the phone, and she wished him happy birthday now. It was noon in Massachusetts, early evening in London. The sky was dark through Roger's kitchen window; at the counter, Sudha was setting out cheese and crackers and olives for her and Roger to eat together when he got home.

"Things okay?" she asked.

"Everything's fine. Ma and Baba are getting totally hysterical over nothing." Rahul spoke as if no strain existed between them, asking her how London was.

"They said you failed two classes."

"They were lousy classes."

"Are you even going to your classes?"

"Lay off, Didi," he said, his mood turning.

"Are you?" she persisted.

There was a pause. She heard the flicking of a lighter, the first pent-up exhale of a cigarette. "I don't want to be doing this."

"What do you want to do?" she asked, not bothering to conceal her exasperation.

"I'm writing a play."

She was surprised by this information and found it promising that he was actually doing something. He had always been a good writer; once, when he was in high school, he'd written a response to one of the take-home essay questions she had on a philosophy exam at Penn, a question about Plato's *Euthyphro* that her professor had approved of with a lengthy comment.

She put an olive in her mouth, extracted the thin purple pit, and placed it on a painted dish she and Roger had bought together in Seville. "That's great, Rahul. But you have to study, too."

"I want to drop out."

"Ma and Baba aren't going to go for that. Finish college and then you can do whatever you want."

"I'm sick of wasting time. And I want my car back. I hate not driving. I feel trapped."

She controlled herself, not telling him that it was ludicrous to expect their parents to

trust him on the road again. "It's just two more years of your life, Rahul. Try to stick it out. Otherwise you'll end up hating yourself."

"Jesus, you sound just like them," he said and hung up on her.

She returned to Boston in April, during the break after the Lent term, a diamond ring from Roger concealed on a chain beneath her sweater, and this made her feel dipped in a protective coating from her family. After January her parents had not bothered her again about Rahul, telling her, the one time she asked, that he'd gone back to school. She felt guilty for distancing herself but not enough to counsel her parents, not enough to speak to Rahul. She had a ten-thousand-word dissertation to write on deregulation for her degree, and she had Roger, had moved in with him by then. She was surprised to see Rahul standing at the airport with her parents. All three of them looked sad, preoccupied, her parents perking up only when they caught sight of her behind her trolley piled with bags.

"Hey," she said, walking up to him, hugging him, though initially his long arms remained at his side. "It's good to see you."

"Welcome home," he said, and when he stepped back, she saw that he was not smiling.

"Is your semester finished already?"

He shook his head, still refusing to meet her gaze, and then a small, odd-sounding laugh escaped from him. "I live here now."

She had come home to tell her family about Roger, to tell them she planned to move permanently to London and marry him, but it was Rahul they had to talk about first. During the ride home from the airport she pieced together what had happened. It was her mother who did the talking; her father drove, muttering to himself now and then about the condition of the traffic, and Rahul spent most of the time staring out the window, as if he occupied the back of a cab. Though he returned to Ithaca after Christmas break, he'd stopped going to classes, and two weeks ago, after being formally dismissed from the university, he moved back to Wayland.

From what Sudha could tell, he was living in the house as if it were simply another vacation. He stayed in his room or watched television during the day. Their parents had sold his car, and so he never went out. Previously when he'd avoided them, there was something bristling in him, something about to explode. That energy was missing now. He no longer seemed upset with them, or with the fact that he was at home. For a while her parents told their friends that he was taking a leave of absence and then that he was in the process of transferring to BU. "Rahul needs a city in order to thrive," they said; but he never applied to other schools. They told people Rahul was looking for a job, and then the lie became more elaborate, and Rahul had a job, a consulting job from home, when in fact he stayed home all day doing nothing. Their mother, who had always hoped her children would live under her roof, was now ashamed that this was the case.

Eventually he got a job managing a Laundromat in Wayland three days a week. Her parents bought a cheap used car so that Rahul could drive into town. Sudha knew that the job embarrassed her parents. They had not minded him washing dishes in the past,

but now they lived in fear of the day someone they knew would see their son weighing sacks of dirty clothes on a scale. Other Bengalis gossiped about him and prayed their own children would not ruin their lives in the same way. And so he became what all parents feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of *The New York Times*.

Sudha was among those successful children now, her collection of higher degrees framed and filling up her parents' upstairs hall. She was working as a project manager for an organization in London that promoted micro loans in poor countries. And she was spoken for. In the summer, she and Roger flew to Massachusetts so that he could meet Sudha's family and ask formally for her hand. At Roger's request they stayed not in Wayland but in a hotel in Boston; by now she knew him well enough to accept that he would maintain a limited exposure to her family, just as he guarded his body, on the beach, from the rays of the sun. "Better to be up front about these things at the start," Roger had told Sudha in his kind but firm way, and she took this as another sign of his responsible nature, his vigilance toward their life together. The hotel arrangement was accepted by her parents without protest; Rahul had stripped them of their capacity to fight back. They accepted that she and Roger planned to have a registry wedding in London, that they were willing to have only a reception in Massachusetts, that Roger had been previously married, that he and Sudha had a fourteen-year gap. They approved of his academic qualifications, his ability, thanks to his wisely invested inheritance, to buy a house for himself and Sudha in Kilburn. It helped that he'd been born in India, that he was English and not American, drinking tea, not coffee, and saying "zed" not "zee," superficial things that allowed her parents to relate to him. Sudha felt that they were not so much making room for Roger in the family as allowing him to take her away. But Rahul had not loosened his grip; he asked Roger questions, combing through the current issue of Roger's art magazine that her parents had admired and set aside, doing his part to inspect his sister's future husband for flaws.

"Roger's a good guy," Rahul told her when the two of them were alone in the kitchen clearing plates. "Congratulations."

"Thanks. Thanks for being here," she said. She meant it; she'd never brought a man to the house, hadn't realized how nervous she'd be.

"Got nowhere else to go."

"So, how are things?" she asked. "It's not driving you crazy, living at home this way?"

"It's not so bad."

She was grateful that he was talking to her, afraid to pressure him. She was aware of a horrible imbalance between them. She felt accused, simply because her life wasn't broken in the same way.

"How's the Laundromat?"

He shrugged.

"Are you still writing your play?"

"It was stupid."

Not knowing what else to do she stepped forward to hug him, and it was then that

she smelled the liquor, sweet, strong, unmistakable. During lunch he'd gotten up from the table once; now she realized he'd gone wherever the bottle was hidden. He was not drunk, there was nothing about his behavior to indicate that he'd had more than a single drink. But the fact that he'd consumed the alcohol in stealth, that he could not endure her family's company without it, made her realize that Rahul was not simply fond of drinking, or a social drinker, or a binge drinker, which were all the ways she'd rationalized it until now.

"You're welcome to visit us in London any time," she offered, saddened by the fact that she did not mean it.

"I don't have any money."

"I'm sure Baba would buy you a ticket."

"I don't want his money," Rahul said.

You live in his house, she wanted to point out. You eat the food Ma puts on the table. You let them put gas in your car. But she said none of this, knowing that if she did, the door he tentatively held open for her benefit would slam once more in her face.

In the months before Sudha's wedding reception, planned for the fall, Rahul began dating a woman named Elena. Elena was an aspiring actress, and she was a waitress at a diner in Waltham. He had conveyed these facts to Sudha when she came back to Wayland ten days before the reception, without Roger, who would be flying in for the party alone. "I've never felt this way before, Didi," he told her. A few days before the reception he brought Elena home. Sudha was a married woman now, but being without Roger made her anxious, that protective coating he provided suddenly thinning. Elena was thirty, eight years older than Rahul. But she could have passed for a high school student, wearing tight jeans and a tank top, her long brown hair fastened at one side with a barrette, dark liner rimming her eyes. She was quiet, speaking only when spoken to, not working to charm Sudha's parents as Roger had. She told them she'd grown up in Mattapoisett and had gone to Emerson. She did not eat the rice Sudha's mother served with lunch, saying it caused her bloating. Rahul kept his arm around her thin shoulders, kissing her dreamily in front of everyone. He spoke on Elena's behalf, saying she had once made a commercial for an allergy medicine. He kept mentioning someone named Crystal; it turned out that Crystal was Elena's daughter from a previous boyfriend.

Sudha's parents said nothing as this information was divulged. They had welcomed Elena, filled their table in her honor as they had done for Roger, making chitchat about the Big Dig and the menu for Sudha and Roger's reception. But then, as Sudha and her mother were bringing out tea and a bowl of pantuas in their syrupy bath, Rahul announced that he and Elena were engaged.

Sudha froze behind a chair, gripping the spoons she was in the process of distributing. The room seemed to tilt; she pressed down on the tablecloth as if a forceful wind were about to come and blow everything away. She looked down at the diamond on her finger, imagining the same thing on Elena's hand, wondering where in the world her brother would get the money to buy a ring. The Darjeeling brought out

for special occasions grew too strong in the pot, the reddish-brown pantuas still crowded together in their serving bowl.

“That’s not possible,” their father said finally, breaking the silence that he had been maintaining, it seemed to Sudha, for over a year.

“What’s not possible about it?” Rahul asked. He still had an arm around Elena, his index finger stroking the side of her neck.

“You are only a boy. You have no career, no goal, no path in life. You are in no position to be getting married. And this woman,” their father said, registering Elena’s presence only for an instant before turning away, “is practically old enough to be your mother.”

They were even, equilibrium, if it could be called that, restored to the room. But Sudha knew that it was the furthest thing from equilibrium, that in fact it was war.

“You’re a snob,” Rahul said. “You’re nothing but a pathetic old snob.” There was no rage in his voice, none of the violence Sudha had expected. He stood up in a fluid motion, seeming to lift Elena to her feet as well, as if his arm were a magnet for her form, and then the two of them left the house. Sudha and her parents waited until they heard the sound of Elena’s car backing out of the driveway, and then her mother began to pour the tea.

“I have been thinking,” her father said, turning to Sudha, breaking the silence for the second time. “The restaurant where we will have the wedding reception. There is a bar?”

“All restaurants have bars, Baba.”

“I am concerned about Rahul. He has no control when it comes to—” He paused, searching for the word he wished to use. “When it comes to that.”

Sudha shut her eyes, thinking she might cry. All this time she had been waiting for her parents to acknowledge Rahul’s drinking, but hearing her father say it now, after what had just happened, was too much.

“Maybe we should hold it somewhere else,” her mother suggested. “Somewhere without drinks.”

“It’s too late for that. And it’s not fair,” Sudha said. Sudha and Roger expected to be able to drink at their own wedding reception, she maintained. Why should everyone be punished because of Rahul?

“Can’t you ask him not to drink too much that day?” her mother asked.

“No,” Sudha said, pushing back her chair and standing up. She had been fiddling all this time with her teaspoon, and she flung it now, ineffectually, on the carpeted floor of the dining room, where it fell without sound. “I can’t talk to him anymore. I can’t fix him. I can’t keep fixing what’s wrong with this family,” she said, and like her brother only a little while earlier, she stormed out of the room.

During the reception Rahul made a toast. It was a tribute to Sudha and Roger, but Sudha held her breath as he spoke, wanting him only to sit down. He was without Elena. The day after walking out with her he’d returned abject, alone. Sudha wondered if Elena had broken up with him, but she didn’t ask. She wondered if Rahul would not attend the reception, but he was at the restaurant an hour early, maintaining his rightful