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Stories by
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ARRANGED
MARRIAGE

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To

my mother, Tatini, with gratitude
my husband, Murthy, with love
my sons, Anand and Abhay, with hope

edges of things. I hold out my hands to it, palms down, shivering a little.

The snow falls on them, chill, stinging all the way to the bone. But after a while the excruciating pain fades. I am thinking of hands. The pink-tipped blond hand of the air hostess as she offers me a warm towlette that smells like unknown flowers. The boy's grimy one pushing back his limp hair, then tightening into a fist to throw a lump of slush. Uncle's with its black nails, its oddly defenseless scraped knuckles, arcing through the air to knock Aunt's head sideways. And Aunt's hand, stroking that angry pink scar. Threading her long elegant fingers (the fingers, still, of a Bengali aristocrat's daughter) through his graying hair to pull him to her. All these American hands that I know will keep coming back in my dreams.

*Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land
Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all
gold?*

When I finally look down, I notice that the snow has covered my own hands so they are no longer brown but white, white, white. And now it makes sense that the beauty and the pain should be part of each other. I continue holding them out in front of me, gazing at them, until they're completely covered. Until they do not hurt at all.



THE WORD LOVE

YOU PRACTICE THEM OUT LOUD FOR DAYS IN FRONT OF the bathroom mirror, the words with which you'll tell your mother you're living with a man. Sometimes they are words of confession and repentance. Sometimes they are angry, defiant. Sometimes they melt into a single, sighing sound. *Love*. You let the water run so he won't hear you and ask what those foreign phrases you keep saying mean. You don't want to have to explain, don't want another argument like last time.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" he'd asked, throwing his books down on the table when he returned from class to find you curled into a corner of the sagging sofa you'd bought together at a Berkeley garage sale. You'd washed your face but he knew right away that you'd been crying. Around you, wads of paper crumpled tight as stones. (This was when you thought writing would be the best way.) "I hate

seeing you like this." Then he added, his tone darkening, "You're acting like I was some kind of a criminal."

You'd watched the upside-down titles of his books splay across the table. *Control Systems Engineering*. *Boiler Operations Guide*. *Handbook of Shock and Vibration*. Cryptic as tarot cards, they seemed to be telling you something. If only you could decipher it.

"It isn't you," you'd said, gathering up the books guiltily, smoothing their covers. Holding them tight against you. "I'd have the same problem no matter who it was."

You tried to tell him about your mother, how she'd seen her husband's face for the first time at her wedding. How, when he died (you were two years old then), she had taken off her jewelry and put on widow's white and dedicated the rest of her life to the business of bringing you up. *We only have each other*, she often told you.

"So?"

"She lives in a different world. Can't you see that? She's never traveled more than a hundred miles from the village where she was born; she's never touched cigarettes or alcohol; even though she lives in Calcutta, she's never watched a movie."

"Are you serious!"

"I love her, Rex." *I will not feel apologetic*, you told yourself. You wanted him to know that when you conjured up her face, the stern angles of it softening into a rare smile, the silver at her temples catching the afternoon sun in the backyard under the pomegranate tree, love made you breathless, as though someone had punched a hole through your chest. But he interrupted.

"So don't tell her," he said, "that you're living in sin. With a foreigner, no less. Someone whose favorite food is sacred cow steak and Budweiser. Who pops a pill now and then when he gets depressed. The shock'll probably do her in."

You hate it when he talks like that, biting off the ends of words and spitting them out. You try to tell yourself that he wants to hurt you only because *he's* hurting, because he's jealous of how much she means to you. You try to remember the special times. The morning he showed up outside your Shakespeare class with violets the color of his eyes. The evening when the two of you drove up to Grizzly Peak and watched the sunset spreading red over the Bay while he told you of his childhood, years of being shunted between his divorced parents till he was old enough to move out. How you had held him. The night in his apartment (has it only been three months?) when he took your hands in his warm strong ones, asking you to move in with him, please, because he really needed you. You try to shut out the whispery voice that lives behind the ache in your eyes, the one that started when you said yes and he kissed you, hard.

Mistake, says the voice, whispering in your mother's tones.

Sometimes the voice sounds different, not hers. It is a rushed intake of air, as just before someone asks a question that might change your life. You don't want to hear the question, which might be *how did you get yourself into this mess*, or perhaps *why*, so you leap in with that magic word. *Love*, you tell yourself, *lovelovelove*. But you know, deep down, that words solve nothing.

And so you no longer try to explain to him why you *must* tell your mother. You just stand in the bathroom in front of the crooked mirror with tarnished edges and practice the words. You try not to notice that the eyes in the mirror are so like her eyes, that same vertical line between the brows. The line of your jaw slants up at the same angle as hers when she would lean forward to kiss you goodbye at the door. Outside a wino shouts something. Crash of broken glass and, later, police sirens. But you're hearing the street vendor call out *momphali, momphali, fresh and hot*, and she's smiling, handing you a coin, saying, *yes, baby, you can have some*. The salty crunch of roasted peanuts fills your mouth, the bathroom water runs and runs, endless as sorrow, the week blurs past, and suddenly it's Saturday morning, the time of her weekly call.

She tells you how Aunt Arati's arthritis isn't getting any better in spite of the turmeric poultices. It's so cold this year in Calcutta, the *shiuli* flowers have all died. You listen, holding on to the rounded *o*'s, the long liquid *e*'s, the *s*'s that brush against your face soft as night kisses. She's trying to arrange a marriage for cousin Leela who's going to graduate from college next year, remember? She misses you. Do you like your new apartment? How long before you finish the Ph.D. and come home for good? Her voice is small and far, tinny with static. "You're so quiet. . . . Are you OK, *shona*? Is something bothering you?" You want to tell her, but your heart flings itself around in your chest like a netted bird, and the words that you practiced so long are gone.

"I'm fine, Ma," you say. "Everything's all right."



The first thing you did when you moved into his apartment was to put up the batik hanging, deep red flowers winding around a black circle. The late summer sun shone through the open window. Smell of California honeysuckle in the air, a radio next door playing Mozart. He walked in, narrowing his eyes, pausing to watch. You waited, pin in hand, the nubs of the fabric pulsing under your palm, erratic as a heart. "Not bad," he nodded finally, and you let out your breath in a relieved shiver of a laugh.

"My mother gave it to me," you said. "A going-away-to-college gift, a talisman. . . ." You started to tell him how she had bought it at the Maidan fair on a day as beautiful as this one, the buds just coming out on the mango trees, the red-breasted bulbuls returning north. But he held up his hand, *later*. Swung you off the rickety chair and carried you to the bed. Lay on top, pinning you down. His eyes were sapphire stones. His hair caught the light, glinting like warm sandstone. Surge of electric (love or fear?) up your spine, making you shiver, making you forget what you wanted to say.

At night after lovemaking, you lie listening to his sleeping breath. His arm falls across you, warm, *protective*, you say to yourself. Outside, wind rattles the panes. A dry wind. (There hasn't been rain for a long time.) *I am cherished*.

But then the memories come.

Once when you were in college you had gone to see a popular Hindi movie with your girlfriends. Secretly, because

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Mother said movies were frivolous, decadent. But there were no secrets in Calcutta. When you came home from classes the next day, a suitcase full of your clothes was on the doorstep. A note on it, in your mother's hand. *Better no daughter than a disobedient one, a shame to the family.* Even now you remember how you felt, the dizzy fear that shriveled the edges of the day, the desperate knocking on the door that left your knuckles raw. You'd sat on the doorstep all afternoon, and passersby had glanced at you curiously. By evening it was cold. The numbness crept up your feet and covered you. When she'd finally opened the door after midnight, for a moment you couldn't stand. She had pulled you up, and you had fallen into her arms, both of you crying. Later she had soaked your feet in hot water with boric soda. You still remember the softness of the towels with which she wiped them.

Why do you always focus on the sad things, you wonder. Is it some flaw in yourself, some cross-connection in the thin silver filaments of your brain? So many good things happened, too. Her sitting in the front row at your high school graduation, face bright as a dahlia above the white of her sari. The two of you going for a bath in the Ganga, the brown tug of the water on your clothes, the warm sleepy sun as you sat on the bank eating curried potatoes wrapped in hot *puris*. And further back, her teaching you to write, the soft curve of her hand over yours, helping you hold the chalk, the smell of her newly washed hair curling about your face.

But these memories are wary, fugitive. You have to coax them out of their dark recesses. They dissipate, foglike, even as you are looking at them. And suddenly his arm feels terribly heavy. You are suffocating beneath its weight, its muscular,

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hairy maleness. You slip out and step into the shower. The wind snatches at the straggly nasturtiums you planted on the little strip of balcony. *What will you remember of him when it is all over?* whispers the papery voice inside your skull. Light from the bathroom slashes the floor while against the dark wall the hanging glows fire-red.

The first month you moved in with him, your head pounded with fear and guilt every time the phone rang. You'd rush across the room to pick it up while he watched you from his tilted-back chair, raising an eyebrow. (You'd made him promise never to pick up the phone.) At night you slept next to the bedside extension. You picked it up on the very first ring, struggling up out of layers of sleep heavy as water to whisper a breathless hello, the next word held in readiness, *mother*. But it was never her. Sometimes it was a friend of yours from the graduate program. Mostly it was for him. Women. Ex-girlfriends, he would explain with a guileless smile, stressing the *ex*. Then he would turn toward the window, his voice dropping into a low murmur while you pretended sleep and hated yourself for being jealous.

She always called on Saturday morning, Saturday night back home. The last thing before she went to bed. You picture her sitting on the large mahogany bed where you, too, had slept when you were little. Or when you were sick or scared. Outside, crickets are chanting. The night watchman makes his rounds, calling out the hour. The old *ayah* (she has been there from before you were born) stands behind her, combing out her long hair which lifts a little in the breeze from the fan, the

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silver in it glimmering like a smile. It is the most beautiful hair in the world.

And so you grew less careful. Sometimes you'd call out from the shower for him to answer the phone. And he would tease you (*you sure now?*) before picking it up. At night after the last kiss your body would slide off his damp, glistening one—and you didn't care which side of the bed it was as long as you had him to hold on to. *Or was it that you wanted her, somehow, to find out?* the voice asks. But you are learning to not pay attention to the voice, to fill your mind with sensations (how the nubs of his elbows fit exactly into your cupped palms, how his sleeping breath stirs the small hairs on your arm) until its echoes dissipate.

So when the phone rang very early that Tuesday morning you thought nothing of it. You pulled sleep like a furry blanket over your head, and even when you half heard his voice, suddenly formal, saying *just one moment, please*, you didn't get it. Not until he was shaking your shoulder, handing you the phone, mouthing the words silently, *your mother*.

Later you try to remember what you said to her, but you can't quite get the words right. Something about a wonderful man, getting married soon (although the only time you'd discussed marriage was when he had told you it wasn't for him). She'd called to let you know that cousin Leela's wedding was all arranged—a good Brahmin boy, a rising executive in an accounting firm. Next month in Delhi. The whole family would travel there. She'd bought your ticket already. *But now of course you need not come*. Her voice had been a spear of ice. Did you cry out, *Don't be angry, Mother, please?* Did you

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beg forgiveness? Did you whisper (again that word) *love*? You do know this: you kept talking, even after the phone went dead. When you finally looked up, he was watching you. His eyes were opaque, like pebbles.

All through the next month you try to reach her. You call. The *ayah* answers. She sounds frightened when she hears your voice. *Memsaab* has told her not to speak to you, or else she'll lose her job.

"She had the lawyer over yesterday to change her will. What did you do, Missybaba, that was so bad?"

You hear your mother in the background. "Who are you talking to, Ayah? What? How can it be my daughter? I don't *have* a daughter. Hang up right now."

"Mother . . ." you cry. The word ricochets through the apartment so that the hanging shivers against the wall. Its black center ripples like a bottomless well. The phone goes dead. You call again. Your fingers are shaking. It's hard to see the digits through the tears. Your knees feel as though they have been broken. The phone buzzes against your ear like a trapped insect. No one picks it up. You keep calling all week. Finally a machine tells you the number has been changed. There is no new number.

Here is a story your mother told you when you were growing up:

There was a girl I used to play with sometimes, whose father was the roof thatcher in your grandfather's village.

They lived near the women's lake. She was an only child, pretty in a dark-skinned way, and motherless, so her father spoiled her. He let her run wild, climbing trees, swimming in the river. Let her go to school, even after she reached the age when girls from good families stayed home, waiting to be married. (You know already this is a tale with an unhappy end, a cautionary moral.) He would laugh when the old women of the village warned him that an unmarried girl is like a firebrand in a field of ripe grain. She's a good girl, he'd say. She knows right and wrong. He found her a fine match, a master carpenter from the next village. But a few days before the wedding, her body was discovered in the women's lake. We all thought it was an accident until we heard about the rocks she had tied in her sari. (She stops, waits for the question you do not want to ask but must.) Who knows why? People whispered that she was pregnant, said they'd seen her once or twice with a man, a traveling actor who had come to the village some time back. Her father was heartbroken, his good name ruined. He had to leave the village, all those tongues and eyes. Leave behind the house of his forefathers that he loved so much. No, no one knows what happened to him.

For months afterward, you lie awake at night and think of the abandoned house, mice claws skittering over the floors, the dry papery slither of snakes, bats' wings. When you fall asleep you dream of a beautiful dark girl knotting stones into her *palloo* and swimming out to the middle of the dark lake. The water is cool on her heavying breasts, her growing belly. It ripples and parts for her. Before she goes under, she turns toward you. Sometimes her face is a blank oval, featureless. Sometimes it is your face.



Things are not going well for you. At school you cannot concentrate on your classes, they seem so disconnected from the rest of your life. Your advisor calls you into her office to talk to you. You stare at the neat rows of books behind her head. She is speaking of missed deadlines, research that lacks innovation. You notice her teeth, large and white and regular, like a horse's. She pauses, asks if you are feeling well.

"Oh yes," you say, in the respectful tone you were always taught to use with teachers. "I feel just fine."

But the next day it is too difficult to get up and get dressed for class. What difference would it make if you miss a deconstructionist critique of the Sonnets? you ask yourself. You stay in bed until the postal carrier comes.

You have written a letter to Aunt Arati explaining, asking her to please tell your mother that you're sorry. *I'll come home right now if she wants.* Every day you check the box for Aunt's reply, but there's nothing. Her arthritis is acting up, you tell yourself. It's the wedding preparations. The letter is lost.

Things are not going well between him and you either. Sometimes when he is talking, the words make no sense. You watch him move his mouth as though he were a character in a foreign film someone has forgotten to dub. He asks you a question. By the raised tone of his voice you know that's what it is, but you have no idea what he wants from you. He asks again, louder.

"What?" you say.

He walks out, slamming the door.

You have written a letter to your mother, too. A registered letter, so it can't get lost. You run outside every day when you hear the mail van. Nothing. You glance at the carrier, a large black woman, suspiciously. "Are you sure?" you ask. You wonder if she put the letter into someone else's box by mistake. After she leaves, you peer into the narrow metal slots of the other mailboxes, trying to see.

At first he was sympathetic. He held you when you lay sleepless at night. "Cry," he said. "Get it out of your system." Then, "It was bound to happen sooner or later. You must have known that. Maybe it's all for the best." Later, "Try to look at the positive side. You had to cut the umbilical cord *sometime*."

You pulled away when he said things like that. What did *he* know, you thought, about families, about (yes) love. He'd left home the day he turned eighteen. He only called his mother on Mother's Day and, if he remembered, her birthday. When he told her about you she'd said, "How *nice*, dear. We really must have you both over to the house for dinner sometime soon."

Lately he has been angry a lot. "You're blaming me for this mess between your mother and yourself," he shouted the other day at dinner although you hadn't said anything. He shook his head. "You're driving yourself crazy. You need a shrink." He shoved back his plate and slammed out of the apartment again. The dry, scratchy voice pushing at your temples reminded you how he'd watched the red-haired waitress at the Mexican restaurant last week, how he was laughing, his hand on her shoulder, when you came out of the rest room. How, recently, there had been more late-night calls.

When he came back, very late, you were still sitting at

the table. Staring at the hanging. He took you by the arms and brought his face close to yours.

"Sweetheart," he said, "I want to help you but I don't know how. You've become obsessed with this thing. You're so depressed all the time I hardly know you anymore. So your mother is behaving irrationally. *You* can't afford to do the same."

You looked past his head. He has a sweet voice, you thought absently. A voice that charms. An actor's voice.

"You're not even listening," he said.

You tried because you knew he was trying, too. But later in bed, even with his lips pressing hot into you, a part of you kept counting the days. How many since you mailed the letter? He pulled away with an angry exclamation and turned the other way. You put out your hand to touch the nubs of his backbone. *I'm sorry*. But you went on thinking, something *must* be wrong. A reply should have reached you by now.

The letter came today. You walked out under a low, gray-bellied sky and there was the mail-woman, holding it up, smiling—the registered letter to your mother, with a red ink stamp across the address. *Not accepted. Return to sender*.

Now you are kneeling in the bathroom, rummaging in the cabinet behind the cleaning supplies. When you find the bottles, you line them up along the sink top. You open each one and look at the tablets: red, white, pink. You'd found them one day while cleaning. You remember how shocked you'd been, the argument the two of you'd had. He'd shrugged and spread his hands, palms up. You wish now you'd asked him

which ones were the sleeping pills. No matter. You can take them all, if that's what you decide to do.

You'd held the letter in your hand a long time, until it grew weightless, transparent. You could see through it to another letter, one that wasn't written yet. His letter.

You knew what it would say.

Before he left for class this morning he had looked at you still crumpled on the sofa where you'd spent the night. He looked for a long time, as though he'd never really seen you before. Then he said, very softly, "It was never me, was it? Never love. It was always you and her, her and you."

He hadn't waited for an answer.

Wind slams a door somewhere, making you jump. It's raining outside, the first time in years. Big swollen drops, then thick silver sheets of it. You walk out to the balcony. The rain runs down your cheeks, the tears you couldn't shed. The nasturtiums, washed clean, are glowing red. Smell of wet earth. You take a deep breath, decide to go for a long walk.

As you walk you try to figure out what to do. (And maybe the meaning of what you have done.) The pills are there, of course. You picture it: the empty bottles by the bed, your body fallen across it, a hand flung over the side. The note left behind. Will he press repentant kisses on your pale palm? Will she fly across the ocean to wash your stiff eyelids with her tears?

Or—what? *what*? Surely there's another choice. But you can't find the words to give it shape. When you look down the empty street, the bright leaves of the newly-washed maples hurt your eyes.

So you continue to walk. Your shoes darken, grow heavy.

Water swirls in the gutters, carrying away months of dust. Coming toward you is a young woman with an umbrella. Shoulders bunched, she tiptoes through puddles, trying hard to stay dry. But a gust snaps the umbrella back and soaks her. She is shocked for a moment, angry. Then she begins to laugh. And you are laughing too, because you know just how it feels. Short, hysterical laugh-bursts, then quieter, drawing the breath deep into yourself. You watch as she stops in the middle of the sidewalk and tosses her ruined umbrella into a garbage can. She spreads her arms and lets the rain take her: hair, paisley blouse, midnight-blue skirt. Thunder and lightning. It's going to be quite a storm. You remember the monsoons of your childhood. There are no people in this memory, only the sky, rippling with exhilarating light.

You know then that when you return to the apartment you will pack your belongings. A few clothes, some music, a favorite book, the hanging. No, not that. You will not need it in your new life, the one you're going to live for yourself.

And a word comes to you out of the opening sky. The word *love*. You see that you had never understood it before. It is like rain, and when you lift your face to it, like rain it washes away inessentials, leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin.