IT'S A FRIDAY EVENING but you can't head home and settle in front of the TV with beers from your fridge and mutton biryani from the dhaba across the street. It's already been a long day and it's still not ended. You now have to go to your friend's home for a dinner party. Well, she isn't really a *friend* friend. She is a former colleague, so you *could* blow it off. But you're also not an asshole, and she has invited you to celebrate the three-month anniversary of her wedding. You care neither for the occasion nor the husband. Still, you board an auto and head her way because you are a good person.

The two-story, bungalow-style home has a wrought-iron gate and a small garden. It's conveniently located a hop away from the bustling Hauz Khas market. You can't help being envious. They probably just stand at their balcony and holler for all sorts of vendors to come rushing in with platters of pakoras and samosas and hot jalebis straight from the fryer. You, on the other hand, you live in the hinterlands by yourself because that's all you can afford on your salary. Which is really why you tip the dhaba boys so generously every time they bring over your order. You cannot risk angering the one source of good food in your neighborhood.

You reread the directions you were given over the phone this morning. You are to go straight upstairs and neither loiter around the ground floor nor accidentally ring its bell. The husband's widowed mother lives below them, and you've been warned she has little tolerance for anyone under the age of seventy.

You walk past the tidy, square garden until you hit the mosaic staircase. With each step you take, the strain of jazz music grows stronger. The stairs lead you to a heavy, black door, and you let your finger hover over the bell. You're no expert, you don't know the names and types of woods in this world, but you can tell *this* is expensive. And you're happy for her—your friend / former colleague, you truly are. After all, how many people your age and with practically the same goddamned salary get to disappear behind a door such as this every evening?

You take a deep breath and press the bell even though your throat feels like it's closing in, like flowers whose petals clam up at night. *We are done preening for you, sucker!*

You hear the momentary lull in conversation but you have already recognized the voices. You quit these people a few months ago in pursuit of a flashier salary but now you have to spend an entire evening with them. You press the doorbell again. Urgently. As if you are here to take care of serious business.

Tanu opens the door, her face awash with happiness and laughter. Marriage hasn't changed her, at least not on the outside. She is dressed simply in her usual blue jeans and a pale T-shirt, her outfit of choice for practically every occasion. She gives you a hug, and you breathe in a cloud of familiar smells—lemon verbena soap, sandalwood perfume. Mahesh slides up beside her, his shaved head hovering like an egg over her bony shoulder, his arm possessively gripped around her tiny waist. He smiles too and says, "Welcome, welcome. Please come in."

You say, "Thank you," although you can't help thinking the deep lines under his eyes and the tight way his skin stretches over his face make him look less like Tanu's husband and more like a creepy uncle. Somehow, the fifteen-year gap between them is more pronounced tonight than it was on the day of their wedding, when you saw him for the first time. But you were too drunk that night, and so all you

remember is how after a few drinks, Mahesh began telling everyone what he would like to do to every man who has ever hurt Tanu. You had giggled along with the others, but secretly you had wondered what it must feel like to be the object of such passion.

You catch Mahesh's eyes sweeping over your black shirt. His gaze doesn't linger on your breasts—maybe if you weren't so flat-chested things would be different—but out of habit, you surreptitiously glance down to check that the buttons haven't come undone.

"Black really suits you," Mahesh says.

You laugh because you haven't mastered the art of accepting compliments in stride. You follow Mahesh and Tanu into the drawing room, where a cluster of familiar faces acknowledges you with varying degrees of nods and smiles.

It's a smartly put together room, all stainless steel and white leather with tasteful accents of bamboo. Two loveseats face an enormous couch, and the side tables have neat stacks of expensive-looking coffee table books, lit up just so by stark, Scandinavian-looking lamps.

On one of the loveseats, Pia and Projapoti are smashed next to each other, gazing into a glossy book of black and white photographs of umbrellas. Their romance is as new as it is tumultuous, so you tell yourself to forgive them if they ignore you. But they don't. Pia looks up from the page to give you a cheery wink and Projapoti, who took you under her wing when you first joined the company, sets downs her drink, stands up, and wraps you in a hug.

Rani is sprawled on the large sofa. Swathed in a voluminous pink and red sari, she looks like a porcelain doll. Her eyes are closed, lips pressed together. She is the picture of calm, a far cry from the perpetually anxious person she is in the office.

Auro, the only other man in the room besides Mahesh, is on the other end of the couch. He was hired to replace you, and you trained him for the last week you were there. But from the cocky, two-fingered salute he gives you, you would think it was the other way around. He slides toward Rani to make space for you on the couch. You sit down beside him and, as if to deliberately ignore your irritation, Auro stretches languorously and crosses his long legs at the ankles.

Tanu and Mahesh settle themselves in the other loveseat and resume their conversation with Auro, something about Nietzsche's third principle.

"I have never understood his point about if you stare at the abyss, the abyss stares back," Auro says, taking a swig of his drink. "I mean I know what it means literally. You will become whatever you let consume you. But I think it is our ability to turn away from the abyss that makes us human."

Mahesh leans back, and sighs dramatically. You wonder if it's mostly for effect because he must sense the way Tanu looks at him, her eyes filled more with the ardor of a devotee than the love of a wife.

Rani too stares at Mahesh, as if in a daze. She moistens her parted lips and cups her chin, the way one does while admiring a work of art.

You, however, are too tired to care what any of the men—Nietzsche, Mahesh, or Auro—have thought or said. You glance about, hoping someone will offer you a drink or a bite to eat. But no one moves a muscle, as if this isn't your first time here, as if you didn't just arrive at a party, hungry and tired from a long day at work.

You glance at your watch. It's only six-thirty. You need something in your hands if only to distract your rumbling stomach. You spot the stylish bar cart in the corner. Two shelves lined with bottles of expensive liquor, a handful of glasses, and two bowls of chips. You take care to avoid tripping over Auro's legs, and walk over to pour yourself a generous drink. But where's the ice?

You're considering trying the kitchen when Mahesh calls out, "Sorry. Our fridge broke this morning. So, no ice."

It's April. In New Delhi. What kind of human beings invite people over with a broken fridge and no ice?

You return to the couch and sink in, grateful for the blast of the air conditioner in your face. Perhaps things aren't that dire after all. At least this is not the kind of party your new company likes to throw every Saturday where you are required to spend all evening on your feet, balancing little bird-sized snacks in one hand and a drink in the other, all the while moving around the room, mingling with guests, and holding forth on a variety of topics. Truth be told, you're bad at it, so you stick to the few faces you know like an infant latched to a warm teat.

Your stomach grumbles loudly for everyone to hear but nobody does over the din of whatever Nietzsche did and didn't. You wonder if there is a pleasant way to ask about food as you breathe in the oily, fried smells wafting in from the market outside. Surely, two bowls of potato chips cannot be it.

As if reading your mind, Tanu says, "Mahesh suggested we keep the appetizers light. He is cooking dinner tonight. Mutton biryani. It's his specialty."

Wait. Is she calling potato chips "appetizers"? You consider asking the question but then kill it in your throat. You say something about how mutton biryani is your favorite food after all. Nothing compares to the taste of tender meat layered with rice and spices and cooked over a low flame for hours. But how does Mahesh intend to cook something that indulgent and time-consuming this late? Even if he starts right this minute, when will he be done? When will you all eat? But really, what do you know? You have never cooked mutton biryani. You have relied on restaurants, cheap and otherwise, to fulfill your need for the same. Maybe Mahesh has mastered a shortcut.

You watch Pia close the big book of umbrellas and prop her head on Projapoti's shoulder. She plants mini kisses on Projapoti's neck and your stomach churns. No, no, no, not again. You have watched enough lesbian PDA to last you a lifetime. When you first joined the company, it was in fact Tanu and Projapoti who used to be an item. A few months later, they broke up but remained friends. Shortly after, Pia joined

the team, and she and Projapoti began dating. Or rather, slurping. Poor you! You had no choice in this matter. Your cubicle was right across from theirs. You had to watch them kiss openmouthed and listen to their little moaning noises all day long. It made you grateful that Tanu and Projapoti had been your first lesbians. They didn't kiss as frequently nor make you that uncomfortable.

Which is why it was so easy—and nice—to imagine them together in bed, naked. It was a harmless pastime, really. It didn't mean anything. It certainly didn't mean *you* were a lesbian. If you were a man, you would have had no trouble liking Tanu's curly hair or brushing it from her face. Or praising her beautiful smile and kissing the hollow at the base of her neck. But you aren't a man, and therefore these thoughts are silly and pointless. It's good you nipped them in the bud.

The vodka has hit a sweet spot. It makes you want to try to focus on the conversation. Mahesh and Auro have moved away from Nietzsche and are now arguing whether video games can be considered art. You don't know who believes what, and truthfully you don't care. But once again, you are struck by the difference in the body language of the two men. Auro's face is pinched with effort. His nostrils are flared and he has leaned forward, waving his hands to passionately argue his point.

Mahesh, on the other hand, is still comfortably leaning against his seat. He has his right arm wrapped around his adoring wife. Every now and then when he shifts, soft light bounces off his shaved head, giving him the appearance of an enlightened guru dispensing wisdom to his disciples.

A high-pitched, shrill giggle alerts you that Rani has finally opened her mouth in response to something Mahesh has just said. She pushes her red-rimmed glasses to the top of her head and nods vigorously, pausing only to ask Tanu the location of the bathroom. When she gets up, you notice her walk, the deliberate swing in her hips, an invitation if ever there was one.

You aren't the only one watching Rani watch Mahesh. Tanu has quietly refilled the bowls of chips and is passing them around but her eyes keep flitting back to Rani. You shovel a handful of chips in your mouth as you once again ignore the lustful cries of the vendors outside. You refill your glass though you know you shouldn't drink any more on an empty stomach, but what else are you to do?

You remember the first time you witnessed a fight between Pia and Projapoti. It had started like a slow burn, over something as inconsequential as who should buy the next pack of beer, but it had quickly turned into an inferno. Pia and Projapoti had flung accusations and counter accusations. You wouldn't think they had been dating only a short while because the fight brought in every imaginable issue—money, house chores, feeding the cats, past fights, respective mothers. Projapoti had pounded her fists on her desk and smashed her computer mouse, and Pia had marched out into the driveway, where armed with her dark glasses and a pack of cigarettes, she had paced the pebbled driveway in a frenzy.

In spite of that scene, two weeks later, Pia and Projapoti had opted to move in together. It was a one-bedroom apartment with a sliver of balcony facing a golf course. You had heard about it the Monday after they threw their housewarming party. They had invited everyone including you, but you had pleaded headache and rushed home instead. Why put yourself through additional discomfort anyway? It was

already enough to hear Projapoti's Harley Davidson pull into the office driveway every morning with Pia perched on the back, her tight ass pointed to the sky like a dare.

MAHESH FINALLY SAYS THE WORDS you have been waiting to hear all evening. "Let's make dinner, shall we?" he says, smacking his right knee theatrically with a sharp *thwak*.

You steal another glance at your watch. It's a little past eight. Had you been home, you would have demolished the dhaba biryani by now along with a Netflix movie. Still, you are too well brought up to not offer help.

"Do you need a sous-chef?" you ask before you can stop yourself.

As always, you are the only fool who has offered to help. In a hot kitchen in April in New Delhi. And on an empty stomach. The other guests are absorbed in each other or their phones. Maybe Mahesh will thank you profusely and ask you to sit down.

No such luck. Mahesh's egg-shaped head gleams like a pearl. He grins, "Yes, of course. Could you slice some onions for me? And then the garlic?" He stops Tanu from following him into the kitchen. "Not you, my sweets. Not tonight. Tonight, you get full release from the kitchen."

Tanu gives Mahesh a quick peck on the cheek. She asks, "Are you sure?" so sweetly that it crushes your heart. When she returns to her spot in the drawing room, you watch her clasp her hands, as if she doesn't know what to do with this wealth of affection.

Mahesh hands you three enormous onions and clears a space for you on the black stone countertop. A childhood memory slides into your mind. You were nine years old, and it was the day of the annual Christmas party at school. Like all previous years, you and your friends had brought food from home to share with each other. You had sat in a large circle and passed around platters of bread rolls and samosas, bags of chips and biscuits, and tiffin boxes filled with laddoos and barfis. Someone had brought a tray of cucumber sandwiches. By the time the tray had made its way over to you, there were only three sandwiches left. The two girls sitting with you had grabbed theirs quickly, leaving you with the last one on the tray. That poor sandwich hadn't kept its shape. It had collapsed in the middle. You had hesitated, the dismembered sandwich hadn't looked appetizing but overcome by greed and curiosity, you had scooped it up. The girl next to you had nodded sagely and said, "You did the right thing. You loved the ugly stepchild." For some reason, hearing those words had swelled your heart with pride.

Later, at home, you had narrated the story to your parents over dinner. Granted, it was a small story but still, you had thought they would be proud that you didn't get caught up over the appearance of something as insignificant as a sandwich. You no longer remember what your mother served for dinner that night or what else the three of you talked about. But long after everyone had gone to bed, when you had gotten up to go to the kitchen for a drink of water, you had overheard your mother hissing to your father, "I cannot believe I gave birth to a spineless child."

ALTHOUGH THE ONIONS DON'T take more than fifteen minutes, you emerge from the kitchen two hours later. Your feet are so tired, you can barely stand. Every time you made a move to withdraw from the kitchen and return to the drawing room, Mahesh began yet another topic of discussion. Except it was never a discussion. It was him listening to himself spread wisdom on topics as wide-ranging as the best writing software in the market, why the rhino population might be on the rise in Kaziranga, who was the better president between Kennedy and Nixon, and what really differentiates Marxist philosophy from Leninist.

You notice the guests have rearranged themselves. Projapoti and Tanu are now on the big, white leather couch, and Rani, Pia, and Auro are stretched out on the floor. You collapse on the nearest loveseat. If you stretch your legs, your toes will brush against Auro's thigh. The alcohol makes you want to try it although he is staring intently at his phone. At the very least, you want to say something smart so he will take notice.

But you can't because you have never been charming, and right this minute the inside of your mouth tastes like chalk. You are most definitely the only one in this room still a virgin. Sure, you have gone on a few dates and those men have slipped their hands under your shirts. But that's as far as you've allowed, paralyzed by your childhood fear of getting pregnant the first time you sleep with someone, the way it always happens in Hindi films.

The sight of Projapoti and Tanu on the couch reminds you of when they used to be a couple. Although that was many months ago—and back then you knew even less about lesbians than you know now—their relationship made sense. They agreed easily, like a husband and wife married for decades. They were so attuned to each other's needs; they were intuitive to a fault and boring in their predictability. Their relationship lacked the ravenous passion that Projapoti's relationship with Pia oozed from the start.

Wait, did Auro say something? Did he say something to you?

"What?" you blurt through the alcohol-induced stupor in your head. Even with other conversations unfolding around you, your question comes out louder than socially acceptable.

"What are you doing afterwards?" Auro asks, a touch of impatience in his voice, in a tone so low you can hardly hear.

You shrug, fearful and desperate at the same time, itching to grasp the opportunity, but also horrified at where it might lead you.

You don't realize that Mahesh has come out of the kitchen and slid to the spot beside you. "Surely, you aren't thinking of leaving?" he asks you loudly. "You came in after everyone else." He wags his finger in your face, "You *have* to stay."

"Of course," the words tumble out of you automatically, even as an angry, bitter taste fills your mouth. Auro looks away. *No, Ma, I was not spineless*.

Finally, it's time to eat. You are not used to eating this late. You have lost your appetite. Still, not wanting to seem rude or inconsiderate, you load up a plate. The browned rice and meat smell excellent, but the first bite proves disappointing. As does the second and the third. So on and so forth. If this is Mahesh's specialty, you don't want to be in the kitchen when he is in a bad mood. The overcooked rice does no favors to the undercooked meat, which is horribly fibrous in places. Everything is so over salted, you probably won't have to consume any sodium for the next five years. The onions, burnt and greasy, stick to the roof of your mouth, and the hard grains of rice feel like pebbles on your teeth.

Pia and Projapoti share a plate. They feed each other little bites, praising the biryani like it is the best thing they have put inside their mouths. They waste most of what they ladled on their plate and leave without bothering to wait for others to finish.

Auro too takes off soon after. He shakes Mahesh's hand, thanks him profusely, then kisses Tanu's cheek. When he says goodbye to you, his smile is brief. His eyes are neither cold nor cruel, but they are filled with pity, the kind one might reserve for a wretched dog. He offers Rani a lift and she takes it.

MAHESH REFILLS his glass and yours.

When you look at Tanu's inquiringly, she smiles. "We're trying to get pregnant. My OBGYN has prescribed hormone pills. I'm off booze these days."

"Wait. What? So, what have you been drinking the whole evening?"

"Mostly, water. Some orange juice. I'm also prone to dehydration so I have to build better habits."

"Don't you miss it?"

"Miss it? Oh my god, I can't tell you what I'd do for an ice-cold beer in this heat."

"I can't wait to be a dad," Mahesh says, beaming. "Ever since the pills, we've doubled our efforts. I'm drinking less to boost my bad boys."

You wince. "TMI," you want to shout.

Mahesh laughs. He has no use for your prudishness. He pulls Tanu close and kisses her wetly on her mouth. You see his lips at work as he buries his long fingers into her hair.

When they finally pull apart, Tanu cups his face with her hands. "I don't think you recognize your own attractiveness, Mahesh. Did you see how Rani was looking at you all evening?" Tanu's voice trembles and she looks at you for corroboration.

Mahesh's eyes soften. In that moment, he is no longer a man with an egg-shaped head, obsessed with the sound of his own voice. He is also not the uncouth revenge freak you met on the day of their wedding, eager to wreak devastation on the boys and men who'd hurt Tanu in the past, and whose names and last

names he claims to have memorized to ensure that if life ever brings them to him, he will know to tear them apart.

The clench in your throat makes you realize that you are looking at a vulnerable man, a man frightened that he might lose what he loves most in his life. But then the vodka acts up. Or at least that's how you justify your words for days afterward when you realize again and again what you have done. You blame it on a number of things—the broken fridge, the iceless pours of vodka that you drank on an empty stomach, the terrible biryani, the ego behind each of Mahesh's conversations, the way Auro suggested something and when you were too chicken to take it, how he offered it to Rani.

You are done being that nine-year-old kid who got the dismembered sandwich. You are done disappointing your mother with your spinelessness. You cannot stand another moment of being a virgin, or the thought of being the meaningless fuck you would have been for Auro, even though a part of you wishes you had gone ahead with it, just this once.

And so you ignore the warning inside your head, the eerie stillness of caution that matches the empty streets below where the vendors have long since packed their stores and left for the night, and you smile sweetly and say, "Tanu, does it feel weird watching Projapoti with another woman?"

You watch Tanu's face as it loses color, as her cheekbones turn gaunt and hollow like a bird's. She has never discussed this matter with you but you have always guessed this about Mahesh. He has never known about Tanu's relationship with Projapoti. In spite of all his talk and intellectual bullshit, Mahesh is the kind of man who cannot swallow the idea of his wife ever having been satisfied by a woman.

You are not the only one to come to this realization. Tanu holds your gaze until you cannot bear it anymore and have to look away. She carefully sets down her orange juice. She refuses to look at Mahesh even though he is right there, his body straight, his face unmoving, and his head full of the names of men he wants to beat up to protect his wife.

Tanu gets up from the sofa, and sinks into the love seat where Pia and Projapoti sat not too long ago.
From the side table, she picks up Pia's half-empty glass of vodka, and takes a sip.