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The Third and Final Continent

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☛ Guess what these words and phrases mean from the context

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| LSE | Grundig reel-to-reel | hollered |
| heralded | clamorous | stucco |
| forsythia bushes | ruffles | chapped |
| foyer | mortified | |

I left India in 1964 with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, of ten dollars to my name. For three weeks I sailed on the *SS Roma*, an Italian cargo vessel, in a third-class cabin next to the ship's engine, across the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and, finally, to England. I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad.

I attended lectures at the LSE and worked at the university library to get by. We lived three or four to a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers. Apart from our jobs we had few responsibilities. On weekends we lounged barefoot in drawstring pyjamas, drinking tea and smoking Rothmans, or set out to watch cricket at Lord's. Some weekends the house was crammed with still more Bengalis to whom we had introduced ourselves at the greengrocer or on the Tube, and we made yet more egg curry, and played Mukesh on a Grundig reel-to-reel, and soaked our dirty dishes in the bathtub. Every now and then someone in the house moved out to live with a woman whom his family back in Calcutta had determined he was to wed. In 1969, when I was thirty-

six years old, my own marriage was arranged. Around the same time, I was offered a full-time job in America, in the processing department of a library at MIT. The salary was generous enough to support a wife, and I was honoured to be hired by a world-famous university, and so I obtained a sixth-preference green card and prepared to travel farther still.

By now I had enough money to go by plane. I flew first to Calcutta, to attend my wedding, and a week later I flew first to Boston, to begin my new job. During the flight I read *The Student Guide to North America*, a paperback volume that I'd bought before leaving London, for seven shillings six pence on Tottenham Court Road for, although I was no longer a student, I was on a budget all the same. I learned that Americans drove on the right side of the road, not the left, and that they called a lift an elevator and an engaged phone busy. 'The pace of life in North America is different from Britain as you will soon discover,' the guidebook informed me. 'Everybody feels he must get to the top. Don't expect an English cup of tea.' As the plane began its descent over Boston Harbour, the pilot announced the weather and time, and that President Nixon had declared a national holiday: two American men had landed on the moon. Several passengers cheered. 'God bless America!' one of them hollered. Across the aisle, I saw a woman praying.

I spent my first night at the YMCA in Central Square, Cambridge, an inexpensive accommodation recommended by my guidebook. It was walking distance from MIT, and steps away from the post office and a supermarket called Purity Supreme. The room contained a cot, a desk and a small wooden cross on one wall. A sign on the door said cooking was strictly forbidden. A bare window overlooked Massachusetts Avenue, a major thoroughfare with traffic in both directions. Car horns, shrill and prolonged, blared one after another. Flashing sirens heralded endless emergencies and a fleet of buses rumbled past, their doors opening and closing with a powerful hiss, throughout the night. The noise was constantly distracting, at times suffocating. I felt it deep in my ribs, just as I had felt the furious drone of the engine on the *SS Roma*. But there was

no ship's deck to escape to, no glittering ocean to thrill my soul, no breeze to cool my face, no one to talk to. I was too tired to pace the gloomy corridors of the YMCA in my drawstring pyjamas. Instead I sat at the desk and stared out the window, at the city hall of Cambridge and a row of small shops. In the morning I reported to my job at the Dewey Library, a beige fortlike building by Memorial Drive. I also opened a bank account, rented a post office box, and bought a plastic bowl and a spoon at Woolworth's, a store whose name I recognised from London. I went to Purity Supreme, wandering up and down the aisles, converting ounces to grams and comparing prices to things in England. In the end I bought a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. This was my first meal in America. I ate it at my desk. I preferred it to hamburgers or hot dogs, the only alternative I could afford in the coffee shops on Massachusetts Avenue, and, besides, at the time I had yet to consume any beef. Even the simple chore of buying milk was new to me; in London we'd had bottles delivered each morning to our door.

In a week I had adjusted, more or less. I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety, slicing them into the bowl with the edge of my spoon. In addition I bought tea bags and a flask, which the salesman in Woolworth's referred to as a thermos (a flask, he informed me, was used to store whiskey, another thing I had never consumed). For the price of one cup of tea at a coffee shop, I filled the flask with boiling water on my way to work each morning, and brewed the four cups I drank in the course of a day. I bought a larger carton of milk, and learned to leave it on the shaded part of the windowsill, as I had seen another resident at the YMCA do. To pass the time in the evenings I read the *Boston Globe* downstairs, in a spacious room with stained glass windows. I read every article and advertisement so that I would grow familiar with things and, when my eyes grew tired, I slept. Only I did not sleep well. Each night I had to keep the window wide open; it was the only source of air in the stifling room, and the noise was intolerable. I would lie on the cot with my fingers pressed into my ears but when I drifted off to

sleep, my hands fell away and the noise of the traffic would wake me up again. Pigeon feathers drifted onto the windowsill and, one evening, when I poured milk over my cornflakes, I saw that it had soured. Nevertheless I resolved to stay at the YMCA for six weeks, until my wife's passport and green card were ready. Once she arrived I would have to rent a proper apartment and so, from time to time, I studied the classified section of the newspaper, or stopped in at the housing office at MIT during my lunch-break, to see what was available in my price range. It was in this manner that I discovered a room, for immediate occupancy, in a house on a quiet street, the listing said, for eight dollars per week. I copied the number into my guidebook and dialled from a pay telephone, sorting through the coins with which I was still unfamiliar, smaller and lighter than shillings, heavier and brighter than *paisas*.

'Who is speaking?' a woman demanded. Her voice was bold and clamorous.

'Yes, good afternoon, madame. I am calling about the room, for rent.'

'Harvard or Tech?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Are you from Harvard or Tech?'

Gathering that Tech referred to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I replied, 'I work at Dewey Library', adding tentatively, 'at Tech'.

I was given an address and an appointment for seven o'clock that evening. Thirty minutes before the hour I set out, my guidebook in my pocket, my breath fresh with Listerine. I turned down a street shaded with trees, perpendicular to Massachusetts Avenue. Stray blades of grass poked between the cracks of the footpath. In spite of the heat I wore a coat and a tie, regarding the event as I would any other interview; I had never lived in the home of a person who was not Indian. The house, surrounded by a chain-link fence, was off-white with dark brown trim. Unlike the stucco row house I'd lived in, in London, this house, fully detached, was covered with wooded shingles, with a tangle of forsythia bushes plastered against the front and sides. When I pressed the calling bell, the woman

with whom I had spoken on the phone hollered from what seemed to be just the other side of the door, 'One minute please!'

Several minutes later the door was opened by a tiny, extremely old woman. A mass of snowy hair was arranged like a small sack on top of her head. As I stepped into the house, she sat down on a wooden bench positioned at the bottom of a narrow carpeted staircase. Once she was settled on the bench, in a small pool of light, she peered up at me with undivided attention. She wore a long black skirt that spread like a stiff tent to the floor, and a starched white shirt edged with ruffles at the throat and cuffs. Her hands, folded together in her lap, had long pallid fingers, with swollen knuckles and tough yellow nails. Age had battered her features so that she almost resembled a man, with sharp, shrunken eyes and prominent creases on either side of her nose. Her lips, chapped and faded, had nearly disappeared, and her eyebrows were missing altogether. Nevertheless she looked fierce.

'Look up!' she commanded. She shouted even though I stood only a few feet away. 'Fasten the chain and firmly press that button on the knob! This is the first thing you shall do when you enter, is that clear?'

I locked the door as directed and examined the house. Next to the bench on which the woman sat was a small round table, its legs fully concealed, much like the woman's, by a skirt of lace. The table held a lamp, a transistor radio, a leather change purse with a silver clasp and a telephone. A thick wooden cane coated with a layer of dust was propped against one side. There was a parlour to my right, lined with bookcases and filled with shabby claw-footed furniture. In the corner of the parlour I saw a grand piano with its top down, piled with papers. The piano's bench was missing; it seemed to be the one on which the woman was sitting. Somewhere in the house a clock chimed seven times.

'You're punctual!' the woman proclaimed. 'I expect you shall be so with the rent!'

'I have a letter, madame.' In my jacket pocket was a letter confirming my employment from MIT, which I had brought along to prove that I was indeed from Tech.

She stared at the letter, then handed it back to me carefully, gripping it with her fingers as if it were a dinner plate heaped with food instead of a sheet of paper. She did not wear glasses and I wondered if she'd read a word of it. 'The last boy was always late! Still owes me eight dollars! Harvard boys aren't what they used to be! Only Harvard and Tech in this house! How's Tech, boy?'

'It is very well.'

'You checked the lock?'

'Yes, madame.'

She slapped the space beside her on the bench with one hand and told me to sit down. For a moment she was silent. Then she intoned, as if she alone possessed this knowledge:

'There is an American flag on the moon!'

'Yes, madame.' Until then I had not thought very much about the moon shot. It was in the newspaper, of course, article upon article. The astronauts had landed on the shores of the Sea of Tranquillity, I had read, travelling farther than anyone in the history of civilization. For a few hours they explored the moon's surface. They gathered rocks in their pockets, described their surroundings (a magnificent desolation, according to one astronaut), spoke by phone to the President and planted a flag in lunar soil. The voyage was hailed as man's most awesome achievement. I had seen full-page photographs in the *Globe*, of the astronauts in their inflated costumes, and read about what certain people in Boston had been doing at the exact moment the astronauts landed, on a Sunday afternoon. A man said that he was operating a swan boat with a radio pressed to his ear; a woman had been baking rolls for her grandchildren.

The woman bellowed, 'A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn't that splendid?'

'Yes, madame.'

But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead she commanded, 'Say 'splendid!'

I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request. It reminded me of the way I was taught multiplication tables as a child, repeating after the master,

sitting cross-legged, without shoes or pencils, on the floor of my one-room Tollygunge school. It also reminded me of my wedding when I had repeated endless Sanskrit verses after the priest, verses I barely understood, which joined me to my wife. I said nothing.

‘Say ‘splendid!’ the woman bellowed once again.

‘Splendid,’ I murmured. I had to repeat the word a second time at the top of my lungs so she could hear. I am soft-spoken by nature and was especially reluctant to raise my voice to an elderly woman whom I had met only moments ago, but she did not appear to be offended. If anything the reply pleased her because her next command was:

‘Go see the room!’

I rose from the bench and mounted the narrow carpeted staircase. There were five doors, two on either side of an equally narrow hallway and one at the opposite end. Only one door was partly open. The room contained a twin bed under a sloping ceiling, a brown oval rug, a basin with an exposed pipe, and a chest of drawers. One door, painted white, led to a closet, another to a toilet and a tub. The walls were covered with gray and ivory striped paper. The window was open; net curtains stirred in the breeze. I lifted them away and inspected the view: a small backyard, with a few fruit trees and an empty clothesline. I was satisfied. From the bottom of the stairs I heard the woman demand, ‘What is your decision?’

When I returned to the foyer and told her, she picked up the leather change purse on the table, opened the clasp, fished about with her fingers, and produced a key on a thin wire hoop. She informed me that there was a kitchen at the back of the house, accessible through the parlour. I was welcome to use the stove as long as I left it as I found it. Sheets and towels were provided but keeping them clean was my own responsibility. The rent was due Friday mornings on the ledge above the piano keys. ‘And no lady visitors!’

‘I am a married man, madame.’ It was the first time I had announced this fact to anyone.

But she had not heard. ‘No lady visitors!’ she insisted. She introduced herself as Mrs Croft.

My wife's name was Mala. The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife. I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me as it was expected of every man. She was the daughter of a school teacher in Belegkata. I was told that she could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes and recite poems by Tagore, but these talents could not make up for the fact that she did not possess a fair complexion and so a string of men had rejected her to her face. She was twenty-seven, an age when her parents had begun to fear that she would never marry, and so they were willing to ship their only child halfway across the world in order to save her from spinsterhood.

For five nights we shared a bed. Each of those nights, after applying cold cream and braiding her hair, which she tied up at the end with a black cotton string, she turned from me and wept; she missed her parents. Although I would be leaving the country in a few days, custom dictated that she was now a part of my household, and for the next six weeks she was to live with my brother and his wife, cooking, cleaning, serving tea and sweets to guests. I did nothing to console her. I lay on my own side of the bed, reading my guidebook by flashlight and anticipating my journey. At times I thought of the tiny room on the other side of the wall which had belonged to my mother. Now the room was practically empty; the wooden pallet on which she'd once slept was piled with trunks and old bedding. Nearly six years ago, before leaving for London, I had watched her die on that bed, had found her playing with her excrement in her final days. Before we cremated her I had cleaned each of her fingernails with a hairpin and then, because my brother could not bear it, I had assumed the role of eldest son, and had touched the flame to her temple, to release her tormented soul to heaven.

The next morning I moved into the room in Mrs Croft's house. When I unlocked the door, I saw that she was sitting on the piano bench, on the same side as the previous evening. She wore the same black skirt, the same starched white blouse and had her hands folded together the same way in her lap. She looked so much the same that I wondered

if she'd spent the whole night on the bench. I put my suitcase upstairs, filled my flask with boiling water in the kitchen, and headed off to work. That evening when I came home from the university, she was still there.

'Sit down, boy!' She slapped the space beside her.

I perched beside her on the bench. I had a bag of groceries with me—more milk, more cornflakes and more bananas, for, my inspection of the kitchen earlier in the day had revealed no spare pots, pans, or cooking utensils. There were only two saucepans in the refrigerator, both containing some orange broth, and a copper kettle on the stove.

'Good evening, madame.'

She asked me if I had checked the lock. I told her I had.

For a moment she was silent. Then suddenly she declared, with equal measures of disbelief and delight as the night before, 'There's an American flag on the moon, boy!'

'Yes, madame.'

'A flag on the moon! Isn't that splendid?'

I nodded, dreading what I knew was coming. 'Yes, madame.'

'Say 'splendid!'

This time I paused, looking to either side in case anyone were there to overhear me, though I knew perfectly well that the house was empty. I felt like an idiot. But it was a small enough thing to ask. 'splendid!' I cried out.

Within days it became our routine. In the mornings, when I left for the library, Mrs Croft was either hidden away in her bedroom, on the other side of the staircase, or she was sitting on the bench, oblivious to my presence, listening to the news or classical music on the radio. But each evening when I returned the same thing happened: she slapped the bench, ordered me to sit down, declared that there was a flag on the moon, and declared that it was splendid. I said it was splendid, too, and then we sat in silence. As awkward as it was, and as endless as it felt to me then, the nightly encounter lasted only about ten minutes; inevitably she would drift off to sleep, her head

falling abruptly toward her chest, leaving me free to retire to my room. By then, of course, there was no flag on the moon. The astronauts, I had read in the paper, had taken it down before flying back to earth. But I did not have the heart to tell her.

Friday morning, when my first week's rent was due, I went to the piano in the parlour to place my money on the ledge. The piano keys were dull and discoloured. When I pressed one, it made no sound at all. I had put eight one-dollar bills in an envelope and written Mrs Croft's name on the front of it; I was not in the habit of leaving money unmarked and unattended. From where I stood I could see the profile of her tent-shaped skirt. She was sitting on the bench, listening to the radio. It seemed unnecessary to make her get up and walk all the way to the piano. I never saw her walking about and assumed, from the cane always propped against the round table at her side, that she did so with difficulty. When I approached the bench, she peered up at me and demanded:

'What is your business?'

'The rent, madame.'

'On the ledge above the piano keys!'

'I have it here.' I extended the envelope toward her, but her fingers, folded together in her lap, did not budge. I bowed slightly and lowered the envelope, so that it hovered just above her hands. After a moment she accepted, and nodded her head.

That night when I came home, she did not slap the bench but out of habit I sat beside her as usual. She asked me if I had checked the lock but she mentioned nothing about the flag on the moon. Instead she said:

'It was very kind of you!'

'I beg your pardon, madame?'

'Very kind of you!'

She was still holding the envelope in her hands.

On Sunday there was a knock on my door. An elderly woman introduced herself: she was Mrs Croft's daughter, Helen. She walked into the room and looked at each of the walls as if for signs of change, glancing at the shirts that hung in the closet, the neckties draped over the doorknob,

the box of cornflakes on the chest of drawers, the dirty bowl and spoon in the basin. She was short and thick-waisted, with cropped silver hair and bright pink lipstick. She wore a sleeveless summer dress, a row of white plastic beads and spectacles on a chain that hung like a swing against her chest. The backs of her legs were mapped with dark blue veins and her upper arms sagged like the flesh of a roasted eggplant. She told me she lived in Arlington, a town farther up Massachusetts Avenue. 'I come once a week to bring Mother groceries. Has she sent you packing yet?'

'It is very well, madame.'

'Some of the boys run screaming. But I think she likes you. You're the first boarder she's ever referred to as a gentleman.'

'Not at all, madame.'

She looked at me, noticing my bare feet (I still felt strange wearing shoes indoors, and always removed them before entering my room). 'Are you new to Boston?'

'New to America, madame.'

'From?' She raised her eyebrows.

'I am from Calcutta, India.'

'Is that right? We had a Brazilian fellow, about a year ago. You'll find Cambridge a very international city.'

I nodded, and began to wonder how long our conversation would last. But at that moment we heard Mrs Croft's electrifying voice rising up the stairs. When we stepped into the hallway we heard her hollering:

'You are to come downstairs immediately!'

'What is it?' Helen hollered back.

'Immediately!'

I put on my shoes at once. Helen sighed.

We walked down the staircase. It was too narrow for us to descend side by side, so I followed Helen, who seemed to be in no hurry, and complained at one point that she had a bad knee. 'Have you been walking without your cane?' Helen called out. 'You know you're not supposed to walk without that cane.' She paused, resting her hand on the banister, and looked back at me. 'She slips sometimes.'

For the first time Mrs Croft seemed vulnerable. I pictured her on the floor in front of the bench, flat on her

back, staring at the ceiling, her feet pointing in opposite directions. But when we reached the bottom of the staircase she was sitting there as usual, her hands folded together in her lap. Two grocery bags were at her feet. When we stood before her she did not slap the bench, or ask us to sit down. She glared.

‘What is it, Mother?’

‘It’s improper!’

‘What’s improper?’

‘It is improper for a lady and gentleman who are not married to one another to hold a private conversation without a chaperone!’

Helen said she was sixty-eight years old, old enough to be my mother, but Mrs Croft insisted that Helen and I speak to each other downstairs, in the parlour. She added that it was also improper for a lady of Helen’s station to reveal her age, and to wear a dress so high above the ankle.

‘For your information, Mother, it’s 1969. What would you do if you actually left the house one day and saw a girl in a miniskirt?’

Mrs Croft sniffed, ‘I’d have her arrested.’

Helen shook her head and picked up one of the grocery bags. I picked up the other one and followed her through the parlour and into the kitchen. The bags were filled with cans of soup, which Helen opened up one by one with a few cranks of a can opener. She tossed the old soup in the saucepans into the sink, rinsed the pans under the tap, filled them with soup from the newly opened cans, and put them back in the refrigerator. ‘A few years ago she could still open the cans herself,’ Helen said. ‘She hates that I do it for her now. But the piano killed her hands.’ She put on her spectacles, glanced at the cupboards, and spotted my tea bags. ‘Shall we have a cup?’

I filled the kettle on the stove. ‘I beg your pardon, madame. The piano?’

‘She used to give lessons. For forty years. It was how she raised us after my father died.’ Helen put her hands on her hips, staring at the open refrigerator. She reached into the back, pulled out a wrapped stick of butter, frowned, and tossed it into the garbage. ‘That ought to do it,’ she

said, and put the unopened cans of soup in the cupboard. I sat at the table and watched as Helen washed the dirty dishes, tied up the garbage bag, watered a spider plant over the sink, and poured boiling water into two cups. She handed one to me without milk, the string of the tea bag trailing over the side, and sat down at the table.

‘Excuse me, madame, but is it enough?’

Helen took a sip of her tea. Her lipstick left a smiling pink stain on the inside rim of the cup. ‘Is what enough?’

‘The soup in the pans. Is it enough food for Mrs Croft?’

‘She won’t eat anything else. She stopped eating solids after she turned one hundred. That was, let’s see, three years ago.’

I was mortified. I had assumed Mrs Croft was in her eighties, perhaps as old as ninety. I had never known a person who had lived for over a century. That this person was a widow who lived alone mortified me further still. It was widowhood that had driven my own mother insane. My father, who worked as a clerk at the General Post Office of Calcutta, died of encephalitis when I was sixteen. My mother refused to adjust to life without him; instead, she sank deeper into a world of darkness from which neither I, nor my brother, nor concerned relatives, nor psychiatric clinics on Rashbihari Avenue could save her. What pained me most was to see her so unguarded, to hear her burp after meals or expel gas in front of company without the slightest embarrassment. After my father’s death my brother abandoned his schooling and began to work in the jute mill he would eventually manage, in order to keep the household running. And so it was my job to sit by my mother’s feet and study for my exams as she counted and recounted the bracelets on her arm as if they were the beads of an abacus. We tried to keep an eye on her. Once she had wandered half naked to the tram depot before we were able to bring her inside again.

‘I am happy to warm Mrs Croft’s soup in the evenings,’ I suggested, removing the tea bag from my cup and squeezing out the liquor. ‘It is no trouble.’

Helen looked at her watch, stood up, and poured the rest of her tea into the sink. ‘I wouldn’t if I

were you. That's the sort of thing that would kill her altogether.'

That evening, when Helen had gone back to Arlington and Mrs Croft and I were alone again, I began to worry. Now that I knew how very old she was, I worried that something would happen to her in the middle of the night, or when I was out during the day. As vigorous as her voice was, and imperious as she seemed, I knew that even a scratch or a cough could kill a person that old; each day she lived, I knew, was something of a miracle. Although Helen had seemed friendly enough, a small part of me worried that she might accuse me of negligence if anything were to happen. Helen didn't seem worried. She came and went, bringing soup for Mrs Croft, one Sunday after the next.

In this manner the six weeks of that summer passed. I came home each evening, after my hours at the library, and spent a few minutes on the piano bench with Mrs Croft. I gave her a bit of my company, and assured her that I had checked the lock, and told her that the flag on the moon was splendid. Some evenings I sat beside her long after she had drifted off to sleep, still in awe of how many years she had spent on this earth. At times I tried to picture the world she had been born into, in 1866—a world, I imagined, filled with women in long black skirts and chaste conversations in the parlour. Now when I looked at her hands with their swollen knuckles folded together in her lap, I imagined them smooth and slim, striking the piano keys. At times I came downstairs, before going to sleep, to make sure that she was sitting upright on the bench, or was safe in her bedroom. On Fridays I made sure to put the rent in her hands. There was nothing I could do for her beyond these simple gestures. I was not her son and apart from those eight dollars, I owed her nothing.

At the end of August, Mala's passport and green card were ready. I received a telegram with her flight information; my brother's house in Calcutta had no telephone. Around that time I also received a letter from her, written only a few days after we had parted. There was no salutation; addressing me by name would have assumed an intimacy we had not

yet discovered. It contained only a few lines. 'I write in English in preparation for the journey. Here I am very much lonely. Is it very cold there. Is there snow. Yours, Mala.'

I was not touched by her words. We had spent only a handful of days in each other's company. And yet we were bound together; for six weeks she had worn an iron bangle on her wrist, and applied vermilion powder to the part in her hair, to signify to the world that she was a bride. In those six weeks I regarded her arrival as I would the arrival of a coming month, or season—something inevitable but meaningless at the time. So little did I know her that, while details of her face sometimes rose to my memory, I could not conjure up the whole of it.

A few days after receiving the letter, as I was walking to work in the morning, I saw an Indian woman on the other side of Massachusetts Avenue, wearing a sari with its free end nearly dragging on the footpath, and pushing a child in a stroller. An American woman with a small black dog on a leash was walking to one side of her. Suddenly the dog began barking. From the other side of the street I watched as the Indian woman, startled, stopped in her path, at which point the dog leapt up and seized the end of the sari between its teeth. The American woman scolded the dog, appeared to apologise, and walked quickly away, leaving the Indian woman to fix her sari in the middle of the footpath, and quiet her crying child. She did not see me standing there and eventually she continued on her way. Such a mishap, I realised that morning, would soon be my concern. It was my duty to take care of Mala, to welcome her and protect her. I would have to buy her her first pair of snow boots, her first winter coat. I would have to tell her which streets to avoid, which way the traffic came, tell her to wear her sari so that the free end did not drag on the footpath. A five-mile separation from her parents, I recalled with some irritation, had caused her to weep.

Unlike Mala, I was used to it all by then: used to cornflakes and milk, used to Helen's visits, used to sitting on the bench with Mrs Croft. The only thing I was not used to was Mala. Nevertheless I did what I had to do. I went to

the housing office at MIT and found a furnished apartment a few blocks away, with a double bed and a private kitchen and bath, for forty dollars a week. One last Friday I handed Mrs Croft eight one-dollar bills in an envelope, brought my suitcase downstairs, and informed her that I was moving. She put my key into her change purse. The last thing she asked me to do was to hand her the cane propped against the table so that she could walk to the door and lock it behind me. 'Good-bye, then,' she said, and retreated back into the house. I did not expect any display of emotion but I was disappointed all the same. I was only a boarder, a man who paid her a bit of money and passed in and out of her home for six weeks. Compared to a century, it was no time at all.

At the airport I recognised Mala immediately. The free end of her sari did not drag on the floor but was draped in a sign of bridal modesty over her head, just as it had draped my mother until the day my father died. Her thin brown arms were stacked with gold bracelets, a small red circle was painted on her forehead and the edges of her feet were tinted with a decorative red dye. I did not embrace her, or kiss her, or take her hand. Instead I asked her, speaking Bengali for the first time in America, if she was hungry.

I told her I had prepared some egg curry at home. 'What did they give you to eat on the plane?'

'I didn't eat.'

'All the way from Calcutta?'

'The menu said oxtail soup.'

'But surely there were other items.'

'The thought of eating an ox's tail made me lose my appetite.'

When we arrived home, Mala opened up one of her suitcases and presented me with two pullover sweaters, both made with bright blue wool, which she had knitted in the course of our separation, one with a V neck, the other covered with cables. I tried them on; both were tight under the arms. She had also brought me two new pairs of drawstring pyjamas, a letter from my brother and a packet of loose Darjeeling tea. I had no present for her apart from the egg curry. We sat at a bare table, each of us staring at

our plates. We ate with our hands, another thing I had not yet done in America.

'The house is nice,' she said, 'also the egg curry'. With her left hand she held the end of her sari to her chest, so it would not slip off her head.

'I don't know many recipes.'

She nodded, peeling the skin off each of her potatoes before eating them. At one point the sari slipped to her shoulders. She readjusted it at once.

'There is no need to cover your head,' I said. 'I don't mind. It doesn't matter here.'

She kept it covered anyway.

I waited to get used to her, to her presence at my side, at my table and in my bed, but a week later we were still strangers. I still was not used to coming home to an apartment that smelled of steamed rice, and finding that the basin in the bathroom was always wiped clean, our two toothbrushes lying side by side, a cake of Pears soap from India resting in the soap dish. I was not used to the fragrance of the coconut oil she rubbed every other night into her scalp, or the delicate sound her bracelets made as she moved about the apartment. In the mornings she was always awake before I was. The first morning when I came into the kitchen she had heated up the leftovers and set a plate with a spoonful of salt on its edge on the table, assuming I would eat rice for breakfast, as most Bengali husbands did. I told her cereal would do and the next morning when I came into the kitchen she had already poured the cornflakes into my bowl. One morning she walked with me down Massachusetts Avenue to MIT, where I gave her a short tour of the campus. On the way we stopped at a hardware store and I made a copy of the key, so that she could let herself into the apartment. The next morning before I left for work she asked me for a few dollars. I parted with them reluctantly but I knew that this, too, was now normal. When I came home from work there was a potato peeler in the kitchen drawer, and a tablecloth on the table, and chicken curry made with fresh garlic and ginger on the stove. We did not have a television in those days. After dinner I read the newspaper, while Mala sat at

the kitchen table, working on a cardigan for herself with more of the bright blue wool, or writing letters home.

At the end of our first week, on Friday, I suggested going out. Mala set down her knitting and disappeared into the bathroom. When she emerged I regretted the suggestion; she had put on a clean silk sari and extra bracelets, and coiled her hair with a flattering side part on top of her head. She was prepared as if for a party, or at the very least for the cinema, but I had no such destination in mind. The evening air was balmy. We walked several blocks down Massachusetts Avenue, looking into the windows of restaurants and shops. Then, without thinking, I led her down the quiet street where for so many nights I had walked alone.

'This is where I lived before you came,' I said, stopping at Mrs Croft's chain-link fence.

'In such a big house?'

'I had a small room upstairs. At the back.'

'Who else lives there?'

'A very old woman.'

'With her family?'

'Alone.'

'But who takes care of her?'

I opened the gate. 'For the most part she takes care of herself.'

I wondered if Mrs Croft would remember me; I wondered if she had a new boarder to sit with her on the bench each evening. When I pressed the bell I expected the same long wait as that day of our first meeting, when I did not have a key. But this time the door was opened almost immediately, by Helen. Mrs Croft was not sitting on the bench. The bench was gone.

'Hello there,' Helen said, smiling with her bright pink lips at Mala.

'Mother's in the parlour. Will you be visiting awhile?'

'As you wish, madame.'

'Then I think I'll run to the store, if you don't mind. She had a little accident. We can't leave her alone these days, not even for a minute.'

I locked the door after Helen and walked into the

parlour. Mrs Croft was lying flat on her back, her head on a peach-coloured cushion, a thin white quilt spread over her body. Her hands were folded together on top of her chest. When she saw me she pointed at the sofa and told me to sit down. I took my place as directed but Mala wandered over to the piano and sat on the bench which was now positioned where it belonged.

'I broke my hip!' Mrs Croft announced, as if no time had passed.

'Oh dear, madame.'

'I fell off the bench!'

'I am so sorry, madame.'

'It was the middle of the night! Do you know what I did, boy?'

I shook my head.

'I called the police!'

She stared up at the ceiling and grinned sedately, exposing a crowded row of long grey teeth. Not one was missing. 'What do you say to that, boy?'

As stunned as I was, I knew what I had to say. With no hesitation at all, I cried out, 'Splendid!'

Mala laughed then. Her voice was full of kindness, her eyes bright with amusement. I had never heard her laugh before, and it was loud enough so that Mrs Croft had heard, too. She turned to Mala and glared.

'Who is she, boy?'

'She is my wife, madame.'

Mrs Croft pressed her head at an angle against the cushion to get a better look, 'Can you play the piano?'

'No, madame,' Mala replied.

'Then stand up!'

Mala rose to her feet, adjusting the end of her sari over her head and holding it to her chest, and, for the first time since her arrival, I felt sympathy. I remembered my first days in London, learning how to take the tube to Russell Square, riding an escalator for the first time, being unable to understand that when the man cried 'piper' it meant 'paper', being unable to decipher, for a whole year, that the conductor said 'mind the gap' as the train pulled away from each station. Like me, Mala had travelled far from

home. Not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife. As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me and, stranger still, that mine would affect her. I wanted somehow to explain this to Mrs Croft, who was still scrutinising Mala from top to toe with what seemed to be placid disdain. I wondered if Mrs Croft had ever seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she would object to. I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala's feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari. At last Mrs Croft declared, with equal measures of disbelief and delight I knew well:

'She is a perfect lady!'

Now it was I who laughed. I did so quietly and Mrs Croft did not hear me. But Mala had heard, and, for the first time, we looked at each other and smiled.

I like to think of that moment in Mrs Croft's parlour as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen. Although we were not yet fully in love, I like to think of the months that followed as a honeymoon of sorts. Together we explored the city and met other Bengalis, some of whom are still friends today. We discovered that a man named Bill sold fresh fish on Prospect Street, and that a shop in Harvard Square, called Cardullo's, sold bay leaves and cloves. In the evenings we walked to the Charles River to watch sailboats drift across the water, or had ice cream cones in Harvard Yard. We bought an Instamatic camera with which to document our life together, and I took pictures of her posing in front of the Prudential building so that she could send them to her parents. At night we kissed, shy at first but quickly bold, and discovered pleasure and solace in each other's arms. I told her about my voyage on the SS *Roma*, and about Finsbury Park and the YMCA, and my evenings on the bench with Mrs Croft. When I told her stories about my mother, she wept. It was Mala who consoled me when, reading the *Globe* one evening, I came across Mrs Croft's obituary. I had not thought of her in several months—by then those six weeks of the summer were already a remote interlude in my past—but when I

learned of her death I was stricken, so much so that when Mala looked up from her knitting she found me staring at the wall, the newspaper neglected in my lap, unable to speak. Mrs Croft's was the first death I mourned in America, for, hers was the first life I had admired; she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return.

As for me, I have not strayed much farther: Mala and I live in a town about twenty miles from Boston, on a tree-lined street much like Mrs Croft's, in a house we own, with a garden that saves us from buying tomatoes in summer, and room for guests. We are American citizens now so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pyjamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here. I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents but, occasionally, she weeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die.

Whenever we make that drive, I always make it a point to take Massachusetts Avenue, in spite of the traffic. I barely recognise the buildings now but each time I am there I return instantly to those six weeks as if they were only the other day, and I slow down and point to Mrs Croft's street, saying to my son, here was my first home in America where I lived with a woman who was 103. 'Remember?' Mala says, and smiles, amazed, as I am, that there was ever a time that we were strangers. My son always expresses his astonishment, not at Mrs Croft's age, but at how little I paid in rent, a nearly inconceivable amount to him as a flag on the moon was to a woman born in 1866. In my son's eyes I see the ambition that had first hurled me across the world. In a few years he will graduate and pave his way, alone and unprotected. But I remind myself that he has a father who is still living, a mother who is happy and strong. Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot

conquer. While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian Bengali, born in London (1967), lives in New York with her husband and son. This story is from her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), a bestseller in 2000 both in U.S.A. and elsewhere. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, she has received a number of awards for the work which has been translated into twenty-nine languages.



Her stories revolve around the lives of Indians in diasporic situations, i.e., of Indians living abroad, Indians who have been brought up in traditional India but are now encountering the baffling new world [U.S.A.].

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Indicate the details that tell us that the narrator was not very financially comfortable during his stay in London.
2. How did the narrator adjust to the ways of life first in London and then in Cambridge, U.S.A.?
3. What do you understand of the character of Mrs Croft from the story?
4. What kind of a relationship did Mrs Croft share with her daughter Helen?
5. How does the narrator bring out the contrast between the Indian way of life and American society? Do you think his wife Mala adjusted comfortably to the new way of life?
6. How does the bond of affection between Mrs Croft and the narrator evolve?

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Discuss in pairs or in small groups

1. Living abroad is challenging in many ways.
2. The Indian family system offers more security to the aged than what is found in the West.
3. The eccentricities of the old are often endearing.

APPRECIATION

1. Discuss the manner in which the author interweaves details of the narrator's family with the flow of the main narrative.
2. 'Mrs Croft's was the first death I mourned in America, for, hers was the first life I had admired; she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return'—how do these lines encapsulate the bond that is possible between two strangers?
3. Examine the pieces of conversation in the story. How do they reflect the worldview of each of the speakers?
4. There are many instances of gentle humour in the story. Point out some of these and state how this contributes to the interest of the narration.

LANGUAGE WORK

1. 'Don't expect **an English cup of tea**'—how does this phrase bring out the contrast between the English and American attitudes?
2. How did the narrator learn to distinguish between 'a flask' and 'a thermos'?
3. It took the narrator quite some time to understand that what he heard as 'piper', in fact, meant 'paper' and the phrase 'mind the gap' in the Tube. What do you think caused the problem?
4. Make a list of items that are referred to differently in British and American English, for example, 'lift' (BE) 'elevator' (AmE).
5. See if you understand what the following words that are parts of a house mean. Look up the dictionary if you don't.

| | | | |
|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| parlour | foyer | lounge | porch |
| lobby | attic | portico | |

SUGGESTED READING

1. *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri.