



**FICTION
WRITING**
group

UPROOTS & OFF-SHOOTS



Lahore, Pakistan
Qasim Rehmani Pixabay



LETTER FROM THE COORDINATOR

The Fiction Writing Group at Pardesi was a product of my own desire for a creative, supportive, and accountable space. The programme itself was a test, a call into the unknown that asked “Does anyone else feel this way?” A mass amount of applications answered with a resounding “YES,” and we launched the cohort with 15 people.

What followed was 4 months of creativity, support, and experimenting that led us to 5+ author events, 4 participant feedback meetings, cross-group interactions, and this zine.

Thank you to our first cohort for your trust, feedback, and inspiration; thank you to the broader Pardesi Team for your support; and to our wonderful Zine Team for their marvelous work.

Ana Kumar
**FICTION WRITING
GROUP COORDINATOR**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 05 FROM FLAMES**
SARAYU ADENI
- 07 CONDITIONS OF SOLITUDE**
BIDISHA DAS
- 09 SALT WATER**
NAGMA KAPOOR
- 14 TRIPPING**
NINA KEEMA
- 15 LUV (UN)ARRANGED**
N.M. PATEL
- 17 SHATTERED STONES, SHATTERED SOULS**
SAMIHA QUDDUS
- 20 STRANGERS**
SHOBANA RAMASAMY
- 21 THE LAST STAND OF LAKSH-UDHRA**
TEJAL TAILOR
- 25 UNDONE**
EVANKA WEERASINGHE
- 30 NOT ALL HONEY IS SWEET**
AMINA B WEST





Delhi, India
Ravi Sharma, Unsplash

FROM FLAMES

BY SARAYU ADENI

There's something heavy in my head, Chaya says, stopping to look back at me. And my chest. Why can't I smell anything anymore?

"Chaya-pup, stay close to me," I beg her, as smoke wanders around us. "Keep your head down when you breathe." She's too big for me to carry if she falls unconscious. I am almost sick to think of it.

We've been in danger this whole time, but now I recognize fear by what it's doing to my body, not my mind. My eyes are being forced open, as if I'm lying awake at night. Every muscle in my back is clenched, my scalp prickling with sweat. Deep within my layers, a fresh sheen of it pastes my shirt to my torso, almost restraining me, but I don't dare take anything off. My legs are unconsciously moving me, completely powered by adrenaline. Pine cones snap crisply under my steps. I jump as if they are gunshots.

"Those are nothing to be afraid of," the black wolf says, passing us. "The forest is born from the fire, and the fire from the forest." She pants lightly through her explanation. "Storms bring sparks. Winds spread flames. The seeds of life burst forth from their shells at the touch of warmth." She pauses in her steps to blink at me. "They rise, green and dropping new seeds. Then they are blackened and lost. And storms again bring rain to nourish them where they lie, and more sparks. In this cycle, the forest rises and falls."

"So why are we running? If it's all part of a cycle?"

"Because something is wrong now. The fires are too frequent, too large, too slow to end. There are fewer rains. And your kind bring sparks before the forest is ready. We could once set our courses by the fires. But not anymore."

She moves ahead to catch up with her gray mate. He halts to look at her, then back at me and Chaya, his broad snout twitching tensely.

"Faster," he mutters to us both. His one word is weighted with fear.

The black wolf picks up her pace, long legs flinging her forward in a graceful gallop. Chaya follows, stopping periodically for me with ears perked. I struggle to keep up over the ashy terrain.

As more animals glide around us, a rabbit falls into step with me, loping briskly along. He's an older one, with more gaunt limbs and lighter looking fur. After a few moments of moving in silence, I catch enough breath to ask him a question.

"The one of yours we saw back there. I'm...I'm so sorry for your loss."

He says nothing, which makes me wonder if my comment was stupid. I try to engage him in conversation again, guiding my mind away from the flames at our backs.

"Do you still think about your loved ones after they die?"

"We never dwell on what happens after death," the old rabbit replies, in a whisper I can hardly hear. "Because life doesn't truly disappear for any of us. We simply exist in one form, then another, then another." He begins to speed up, leaving me behind. "If it were any other way, perhaps we would not get through our days."

His words hang back with me as I struggle to keep up. They transport me back to the week of Amma-Ma's funeral, in my fifteenth summer.

One day she was fine and able to talk on the phone as usual. And the next we five were hurtling across the world on the fastest flightpath money could buy, landing in Chennai and going straight to the house where Amma-Ma lived with Vignesh Uncle, my mother's eldest brother.

The blessing, everyone said later, was that my mother made it in time to join her siblings. To watch their mother breathe her last, peacefully and wordlessly in her own bed at home. The heavy travel tension twisted then into a whirlpool of grief, and Amma seemed to disappear into it, with my father at her side dealing with phone calls and errand boys the whole time, only occasionally looking my way. My brothers soon succumbed to their jetlag and were ushered by an auntie into a bedroom upstairs to drop into sleep, with no one protesting.



The band of older cousins was put in charge of me, and I was instructed to change out of my Western clothes and into a clean salwar kameez. Once I did, I sat with them on a bamboo mat on the floor outside Amma-Ma's room, and watched the solemn parade of distant relatives and neighbors cross the open threshold back and forth, dressed in various shades of unadorned, funereal white, nodding grimly at us. Keshav-Thatha, our grandfather, had passed away years before, a memory most of us didn't have. Our mourning experience now was in full color.

Knowing her more intimately than I did, my cousins wept in near silence with red-rimmed eyes, while I clenched their fingers in mine, dazed. It still felt like Amma-Ma would come out, wiping her hands on a dish towel, to greet all these visitors as she usually did, "Yaaruu? Who is it?"

I started to feel uneasy when it sank in that she would never do that anymore, that I would never hear her stern voice again. The walls of this house were quickly turning into a new strange world I wasn't sure I wanted to be in. I couldn't cry now though. With my family seemingly incapacitated around me, I was terrified to be anything but composed. Later that night, only the rock-like pillow on the teakwood four poster bed I shared with two other cousins would be there to gather my tears in the dark.

The crowd seemed to part when the priest arrived in a white dhoti, glasses pushed down to his nose tip and graying hair pulled back into a pigtail. My four uncles greeted him almost wordlessly, and led him to the back rooms where my grandmother's body was being prepared by a group of aunties for the last rites.

My cousin Raghav, just a year older than me, let out an involuntary sob. His older sister Ambika cleared her throat and put a hand on his skinny knee, patting firmly. "Not too much, remember."

He put the heels of his hands to his eyes, but silenced himself.
"What does she mean?" I whispered to him. "Remember what?"

He didn't answer, but our eldest cousin Kavita, who taught at the local college, leaned in toward me.

"The soul gets confused if there's too much crying and carrying on," she said. "Death is normal. We can be sad, but we shouldn't make such a big deal. Otherwise there will be so many spirits who won't go on to the next life."

Out of sight, the priest began to speak, and people around us sat up a little straighter. The bamboo mat ticked under our shifting weight.

My cousins passively tried to discourage me from looking, pulling me close to lean their cheeks on my hair, or handing me bits of fallen chrysanthemum petals as if I was a baby in need of distraction. But through the huddle of women around her, I still saw Amma-Ma's nose, ears and mouth being filled with small tufts of white cotton. I saw her body moved into a prone cross-legged position onto a stretcher covered in white cloth. I saw folds of fabric expertly wrapped around her, and her diamond nose ring and earrings removed, and piles of garlands laid over her, and sticks of sandalwood agarbathi lit all around her. Curls of spiced smoke from their ends drifted into our nostrils. The priest went on chanting.

"What's he saying?" I whisper-begged Kavita for a translation, feeling anchorless.

"Just prayers. About fire and water being the purifiers," she said, sniffing. "After her body is burned, they will take the ashes to water. That will help return it to where it belongs, and then her soul can keep moving on to where it also belongs."

Fire? Ashes? Water? I gazed at my grandmother's body, partly out of sight of the doorway, and imagined her no-nonsense gaze, her soft, broad hands, her coconut oiled white bun. What we're all looking at will be a memory soon, consumed by the elements, with the only seeds from her life left now in the blood of her children and grandchildren. The same fate awaited everyone else in the room. Including, I realized, me.

Smoke reaches the back of my throat, seizing it until I cough. The sound is frighteningly harsh, bringing me back to the burning forest, where we the living now hope to outrun our deaths and rebirths for one more day.



CONDITIONS OF SOLITUDE

BY BIDISHA DAS

The day I made up my mind to come to France, I had the best sex of the year.

Maybe it was the foreplay that began while watching a Japanese anime on the sofa Ayan and I had both territorially occupied either side of, letting our feet curl around each other's in No Man's Land (a very good idea). Or the fact that he had not taken a bath after the gym (generally a very bad idea) but I could smell that new woody cologne on him under all that sweat that escalated my horniness (a default state mostly). Or the fact that he finally decided to play with my clit instead of trying to dig into my vagina like it's an archeological site. But it probably was because he breathed, You're the best fuck of my life, into my ear, the pressure of his entire body on my wrists, just as I was climaxing. There's a novelty to being told you're the best fuck of somebody's life when you've been fucking the same person for half a decade.

Before we'd even cleaned ourselves, I watched Ayan drift off to snore lightly, and I knew. I had to leave.



I didn't want to go to Kolkata and stay with my parents like I had done whenever it seemed like sharing a house with another person was too much, before the weight of my parents' thirty three year marriage wore me down, and I took a flight back to New Delhi, back to the house Ayan and I shared, happy it was just Ayan I had to deal with. Just Ayan. And I didn't want to go to any other city for some time off because that would be a betrayal to him. And me. Ayan and I have taken all our vacations together. We've been to almost every part of India, from the mountains to the rivers and seas and the big cities. A solo trip would be a rejection. And a lack. I would miss him. And that wouldn't be helpful.

So I had to think of a place out of India and I could only think of France, because of Rishi, and I would rather be somewhere where I can be grounded by someone than at a place where I'd have to start from scratch. Even better, it wouldn't be a betrayal. I was only taking time off to visit my brother.

When I called Rishi and told him I wanted to run and I was considering running to France, he thought I was breaking up with Ayan. I told him I was doing the opposite. I wanted to run to remake myself, so I could stop being depressed and erase this bitterness I feel toward Ayan, and affirm our relationship and love him and love him and love him. Rishi told me it wasn't my fault I was feeling a certain way and I told him to stop therapizing me, I was paying someone to do that anyway, although the plan was to stop with the therapy so I could save up money for France. I was getting a bit tired of explaining myself at every session and listening to how strong and brave I was and could still continue to be even if I did not have a relationship. I'm sure my therapist was projecting; she had recently gotten out of a bad divorce and was getting the flack from her still-married friends (she told me) for putting herself out there on dating apps in her mid-forties. Rishi got mad at me for using the word therapizing at him, but I think it was useful because it stopped him from asking me how are you feeling, which he had started doing ever since the abortion, as if he's an old, friendly family uncle/confidant instead of my seven years younger brother.

Ayan, Rishi and Mahua are the only ones in my life who have information about the abortion. Of course, the doctor who did the anesthesia and before that squeezed my hand to say you'll be okay, and the gynecologist who performed the surgical procedure and woke me up to say Mimi, it's done, and the nurses who kept an eye on me for eight hours to check I wasn't eating anything before and after the surgery knew as well. But I don't consider them "people in my life." I didn't have any "people in my life" with me at the hospital. Rishi was in France, Mahua lives in Mumbai, and Ayan, well, Ayan was away on a weeklong trip to the mountains with his boys. It was a recent thing, the going away with his boys on a trip. They were not his real boys. These were tech bros he met at the gym, whose arms could lift trucks and who were on the hunt for the ideal Indian wife on matrimonial sites. I never got the appeal. But ever since Ayan's Myers Briggs result switched from INFP to ENFP, he has been socializing like a beauty pageant winner who needs to prove he can bring world peace by increasing the number of people he talks to.

"We live together, we work from home, I'm with you all the time. I need some boys around me," Ayan had said.

I suggested he take a trip with his real group of friends, who were now scattered across Mumbai, directing ad films and writing Maximum City scripts with aspirations of making India's next big entry to the Oscars. It would also give him an opportunity to be in Mumbai, which in my opinion is the best city in the country. And Ayan could do with a city that lit up on a regular day through the blood of people's dreams. Especially because his dreams are now limited to the growing breadth of his arm muscles.

Ayan shook his head. "We're different now." Different being Ayan chose to be a tech bro instead of giving filmmaking a shot like his

college group with whom he spent four years making short films and winning awards around the country.

When I found out I was pregnant after a week of wanting to throw up everything from water to biryani, I was already seven weeks along. My doctor said if I wanted an abortion, I should get it done immediately or it gets complicated. It was already complicated. I wasn't supposed to be growing anything inside me. Not a tumor. Not the seeds of another human being. Nothing. But here I was, twenty nine years old, during one of the hottest New Delhi summers, retching in the toilet alone because somehow, despite being obsessively careful for five years, Ayan and I had fooled around right before he wore the condom, very sure he had been nowhere close to ejaculation and nothing was out, and I hadn't taken the morning after pill. There was a reason for this. My already painful periods doubled to intolerable, spasmodic cramps that left me crying on the floor of my bathroom, in a mess of blood and poop, whenever I took the pill. So, sue me for not taking it after not being ejaculated into. Turns out, there is a chance of getting pregnant from pre-cum (I had just never rated my fertility or Ayan's that highly), a 2% chance according to Google and a 1% chance, according to my gynecologist.

I went to my neighborhood pharmacy because I was too sick to go anywhere far, which would have been ideal to avoid gazes and judgment. Oversized wayfarers that covered half my tiny, moon face (my art teacher in school said that enough while making my portrait as I worked on a batik; enough for me to come to think of myself as a paper moon drawn by a child, fragile enough to be crumpled by a careless hand), and a cap's visor pulled down to shade up to my chin. I bought four pregnancy kits, refused to give the chemist my contact details and climbed up the four floors to my apartment on my toes so my landlady who lived on the first floor and was a genuinely gentle lady, bless her soul, wouldn't call out to me and offer me the latest mithai addition to her refrigerator, which I would invariably throw up as I was throwing up everything that went down my digestive tract.

For the next one and a half hour, I peed on three sticks and sent Ayan images of the positive double lines. Kept the last one for the first morning pee. It's the first morning pee that counts, Ayan convinced me with his novice pregnancy Googling. Everything else has a higher chance of being a false positive.

I thought, if it wasn't pregnancy, I must be ridiculously sick. I gathered all the antibiotics around the house, stuffed in tiny boxes and purses packed by Maa whenever I visited Kolkata, and quickly forgotten as I got on with my life in New Delhi. Arranged them by expiry date, sorted into silver bundles.

In the morning, when the fourth pee stick showed the double line, I threw them all out.



Paris, France
Thibault Penin, Unsplash

SALT WATER

BY NAGMA KAPOOR

My arthritis was a lattice of knives pointed at my knees, weighing my joints in a hot pressure. A few months ago, my legs dangled off the hospital bed as the surgeon tolerated his rounds, and the nurses with their oscillating shifts swum in and out of the room, their fish eyes arrested on my body. Arun placed a set of papers in English that I couldn't read, and he said they were important consent forms, so I signed them. He fluttered away. The knees were examined, cleansed, and dried. Cartoonish lines were drawn on with markers. The knees were locked, aching, alone, as I waited.

I never knew relief, or it was so long ago that my memory fails me.

My son Arun was the only one who loved me, I thought then. His wife Smita, would come after work, pouring scalding hot rajma chawal onto my plate in silence, without respect. She would lay on their leather sofa after work, chatting on the phone with a friend about a kitty party or on her laptop hunched over, as if she had no other responsibility. That girl I taught everything to, who came into my home and stripped me of everyone I loved.

In the living room once, Anu yelled at me, "Daadi. You're always on my back. Can you stop it? Can you?" She tugged her journal from my fingertips and rushed out. Was it wrong to want to know my granddaughter? She never talked to me otherwise. She would come back from college with a purposeful scowl on her face and slam her bedroom door shut.

The rest of the world went on. I was inside, always. In the evenings, the pain would grip my knees like tightening screws, but I would muster a walk outside. The sun would be setting – pink sky, orange sky, blue sky, black sky. The neighbour's ugly old Labrador would bark at me like I reminded it of something foreign. The distance to the mailbox is six feet, and I would map it back and forth with my feet until an hour passed, and my phone timer went off.

I was only seventeen in Jammu when they awarded me a rifle for joining the Women's Self Defence Corps. I remember it so clearly. The tension was rising in Jammu & Kashmir. We were the child of a divorce, waiting for custody or freedom. Where would my home go? We all wondered. I was young, and braver then. The butt of a rifle warmed bruises all over my right shoulder but I felt something inside me calm with this newfound power. We would do laps across the compound, lunch at the run-down cafeteria with roti, daal, sabji, walls smelling of piss and swear words – madarchod bhenchod, initials of star-crossed lovers, all carved into the leftover wooden picnic tables. Our legs and hands were worn out like old stamps every day. Men spilled across fields like smashed ripe tomatoes. Women never went into the war, though. We listened to the radio. We did the drills. Then it ended.

I was nineteen with a baby in my arms, and a husband hand-picked by my parents. Control was a family relic, and my husband's mother held it tightly to her chest until the day she died. I remember her in the kitchen, her short plump figure, and black cold eyes on my back as I added the diced tomatoes, dhaniya powder, jeera powder, mounds of salt and ghee dissolving in the tempering tadka, koila lumps burning underneath the vessel, disdain pressed into each turn of the ladle. She said I would amount to nothing. When my daughter-in-law walked into our home on that slurring hot evening in mid-July of 1988, I knew it was finally my turn, the relic was mine.

The hospital staff wheeled me to the operating room. With my glasses off, my son and his wife looked blurry from afar and disappeared round the corner. The ceilings were so pristine white they reminded me of his funeral. In our family we never say our husbands' names, out of respect. I knew his name once but like memories of him, it too has faded. I called him Ji or Woh, a slew of pronouns, like I was taught. He died when my arthritis had shown its little claws, back when I believed with the delusion of a young wife that we would be together forever.

The operating room smelled like Clorox spray, and nitrile gloves. The anesthesiologist placed a clear mask over my nose and lips and told me to count down. Then I was cold. I don't know when, but I stirred in a dream. I was somewhere in between. I saw my body from a spot on the ceiling – white hair splayed across a tray, and beige hands with large veins like rivers on a map. I could hear music playing. I heard the whirring of a machine, and a bright red splatter of blood on white sheets. An animal bone jutting out from the knee. It smelled like rusty coins. I felt nothing.'

When I awoke, they were there – Anu and her gora boyfriend with messy blonde hair who played the guitar and smelled like old cheese, Arun, and his wife Smita. The blurry outline of my son spoke. I could see his shiny teeth, black hole eyes, but his voice was distant like it had travelled submerged through the oceans and arrived heaving, and exhausted by the journey. I couldn't say a word. I faded in and out of consciousness for the next few days. A guttural cry would escape from somewhere inside me; I would feel a sharpness in my arm with a

cold hand pressed to it and then the soft waves of dreams would reel me back in each time.

Arun's disgruntled voice on the phone jangled in my ear like a rattle toy in my stupor.
"She worked for over twenty years. Yes. The motel job."

I remember the motel – changing tattered bedsheets, setting out a simple breakfast of eggs and white bread and salted butter with Keurig coffee, little babies latched to their mothers and fathers eyeing the morning paper, rowdy men spitting profanities in my face in the middle of the night, and their arms wrapped around women with thin pasty legs and doll makeup. I remember crying to Arun, we should leave now, enough of this. Arun was only thirty then, and brimming with wild daydreams of wealth and power, sprouting frantic business ideas while we continued to grow old. All my friends had disappeared after their marriages, my sisters had passed. I was alone. Still, I loved my husband, and I loved my child. They were life itself. One day at a time, it became easier to accept the way things were. There was no one else like us then, just us. It was harder to pull ourselves out of familiarity, out of what felt like comfort.

"Both our names. Correct. She's signed... Thank you very much." He sounded relieved.

It was all cloudy again. I couldn't hear them.

Then Smita's soft voice emerged, striking, and concerned.

"But it's Mom's..."

"This is for us. We're stuck. I'm doing everything. I'm giving up everything."

I kept waking up to searing pain, nothing like the dull sings of my arthritis. My dry mouth. The scent of Arun's Mercedes leather seats. Smita's warm hand against my cold shoulder. Then the bedroom took shape at night – a twin bed, my wooden dresser, and an old, smudged mirror. The bare walls. A photograph of my husband and me. The cricket sounds were everywhere. I knew the window was open with its cold air and the scent of tired grass wafting in. Woh. In the darkness I could see two large fangs protruding from his mouth, and long claw fingernails that rested on my hand. Cold. I shivered. He smiled. I wanted to pull away, but the lull of the painkillers deepened, and what dreams occurred dissipated into the ether.

In the morning, Smita helped me onto my feet with the walker, and ran the warm water. The sponge felt soft and sticky on my skin as she bathed my doughy skin, pressing into the crevices and in between the loose skin that made me feel like a hen. She was quieter than ever. I looked at the growing lines in her face, and her silence and wondered if we could have ever been friends. Then she pressed the towel over my body, and helped me into my yellow salwar dress, the one I wore on Tuesdays. I didn't thank her. There was a time when I enjoyed our sparring – a burning lamp between us, our words oiling it. But one day years ago, she stopped.

I began to take small strides without a walker. The pain dimmed. I began to step out into their back yard. The garden was perfectly trimmed, and the tomatoes ripe and ready to be plucked. I bit into one. The sweetness rushed in through my dry lips. The swallows were in the trees somewhere, looking down at me, and chirping. I thought about the war, and my husband's warm hard body in the night, about the rifles and the anger in their kitchens. In the distance, the cars were rushing by, the sun was setting and there were people out there leaving their homes, seeing the world, falling in love, and everything in between.

Two months after the surgery, we went on a family trip to Tobermory. For these shameful girls to lay almost naked on the beaches.

Thankfully no one we knew was around. I was in a black shirt and shorts that fell over my knees, on Anu's insistence. Smita and Arun were under an umbrella sharing a large towel with their eyes closed. I could see their smooth bodies rising and falling in rhythm.

The sun was so bright my eyes hurt from squinting, but I wanted to keep a watch on Anu. She was ahead already. I slowly trudged behind, making sure she wouldn't spot me. We walked towards the azure water, near the rock formation that resembled a flowerpot. It was beautiful. I looked back occasionally, watching the bodies on the beach as they grew smaller and smaller. There was an old white couple holding hands on their beach chairs, seated right next to each other. The man opened an orange tube, and slathered its wet sticky insides all over her back. He looked up at me, his thin lips moving. Then I looked away.

I stepped into the freezing water, inspecting Anu's perfect swim form as she waded in. She was talking to a tall boy now, his tan skin glistened and their laughter pleated the air. I let the bay water reach my waist. It had been so long. Woh. I could picture him, splashing water onto me like we did once in our community pool when we were newly married. The waves washed over my shoulders then. My



tongue was laced with sea salt even though I hadn't opened my mouth. It was everywhere now, and my legs were rippling the water softly. The soft sand disappeared beneath my feet, replaced by slimy seaweed that tickled my shins.

I looked back and the beach looked like an island in the middle of the ocean. I was a speck. A girl with long dark hair was yelling in my direction. The waves were stronger now, washing over my head, my neck, my white hair stuck to the nape of my neck. Like a television with no signal, a buzzing spilled into my thoughts. Woh, by my side again, his arms holding my head up. We were young again. His beautiful, wrecked teeth, his smile. The world was full, and I was free.

I woke up with salt water in my throat. We were on the beach again. Arun and Smita shadowed over my face in frustration. There was a crowd of strangers with their spider eyes on me. The old man and woman were there too. He was holding her in his arms, their faces shaped into pity. Anu's hair was stuck up in all kinds of angles, the water dripping into my mouth. She was breathing hard. I coughed out more water. They helped me up into a chair, a blur of paramedics checking my vitals and insisting on a hospital visit. I was fine. All I kept saying was na. No, no, no, no.

We went home, listening to no music on this ride back, Anu seething at something outside the window, Arun and Smita fighting about the directions on their map, and our stomachs rumbling. The rest of those days passed by like slow pages in a book. Arun would sit in the living room, his legs spread out as he watched CP24 news. In one hand he'd be on his phone, looking at skimpy women in bathing suits too tiny for their bodies, or chatting erratically with his poker boys club on speakerphone.

Arun was taking a nap one afternoon, and the women were out on an urgent doctor's appointment. I packed my passport in a small suitcase, a few sets of undergarments, some salwar dresses, my M.A.C lipsticks, Nivea handcream, and reading glasses. Only essentials. I found the card to my bank account, and some cash stuffed into a hole in my mattress. There was my gold too. A Kashmiri choker from my wedding day with goddesses imprinted into every dangling pendant. Long jhumkis – earrings shaped like a bell. These sets I had planned to pass down to Anu, and the gold biscuits my mother bought for me. I packed them too. I thought about this country which my children had yearned for, had sought their freedoms. This country where I became a burden and lost my community. Where I stayed despite every death and sickness across the ocean. Locked up like an endangered animal.

Baiting my breath, I took meagre steps towards the front door with my suitcase. Arun shifted. A prayer escaped my lips. I could hear every small sound now – the neighbour's ugly Labrador barking, the CP24 news anchor's cackling, the wooden floorboards creaking under each step, and the high-pitched chirping swallows outside.

I was almost at the door when Arun called out in a stupor, "Mumma?"

"Sair da time ho gya. Main aiyi."

I told him I was going for a walk. He mumbled something still half asleep, and I let the door lock behind me as I stepped out.

The Labrador was wincing in my direction. As usual, his leash was attached to a brick wall near the entrance. I inched slowly towards him, my suitcase's wheels rolling loudly over concrete. I brought a hand close to his head, and he didn't bark this time either. I let my palm touch his head, testing him. He began to wag his tail. I petted him for a few minutes, looking at the windows of the neighbour's home for any sign of life. The windows were shuttered. The driveway was empty. My fingers weren't nimble anymore. I slowly unknotted his leash. His wagging tail was insistent. I dropped the leash by his side and waved towards the street as he stared at me.

It was still bright and sunny as I dragged the suitcase behind me, leaving soft tracks in the mud through the neighbour's front lawn. The mailbox was only six feet away, and I hobbled quickly in my renewed knees to it. The dog followed behind me. The swallows were singing a beautiful melody. I kept going. The streetlights in the distance turned green.



Marine Drive, Mumbai, India
Garvit Jagga, Unsplash



Jama Masjid, New Delhi, India
Dewang Gupta, Unsplash

TRIPPING

BY NINA KEEMA

My mother and I are strangers to each other; we yearn for the opposite, we admire incongruent idols. We live differently, we vacation differently. Yet the skin on my back is variegated like hers. She thinks she was an amazing mother and doesn't deserve any of my animosity. How am I supposed to feel, if not irascible, when I grew up to find that everything my parents taught me was essentially wrong? No, not all "black people" are trying to steal my bag, Dad, you're wrong.

I did not want to run into any of my relatives in Delhi, so I kept my eyes on the ground. Nostalgia pulled me through the side gullies all the way to Jama Masjid, where I had visited with my grandmother before she had evaporated into no-one for me; I had no feelings for her anymore. I was just one of her thirty-odd grandchildren. I had a stronger, clearer, more compassionate relationship with the librarian back home in London. Nevertheless, saudade gripped me around the shoulders before engulfing me with its thick smoke as the photograph of young me clasping Naani's hip inside the serene mosque bobbed to the surface of my melancholy memories.

I stood for a while, motionless. I needed a deep breath but I refrained; I couldn't look at it but I just knew that there was a lot of shitting going on around me. I tried to delete my peripheral view and focused on the open-air mosque-cum-tourist attraction ahead of me. It was centred by a giant rectangle pool of musty water where people with no qualms about personal hygiene were ritually washing their feet and, *gulp*, their faces. Outside from whence I had come the incessant beeping, barking, and bashing of traffic wailed unrelentingly; inside, the masjid was mercifully silent.

I searched for a piece of the stoned floor that was in the shade and calmed a level. The sky was pink, just like in Aladdin. I felt so positively not negative that I started to laugh internally; I was overjoyed by the broad, pink brushstrokes that the setting sun made over the stoic blue sky. I closed my eyes to focus and tried to meditate. The aching heat helped to still my body, but my mind continued to track and chase the various sounds; the low hum of men praying, for women are not allowed to pray in mosques lest they provoke someone into raping them, and the pitter-patter of quick feet on the hot stone.

Just as I had managed to sink into the moment, a tug on my arm brought me back. A little old lady looked up at me quite blankly, hand stretched out expectantly. Now, I know I had enough rupees only to get me back by rickshaw (because fuck if I was walking back in this heat) so I shook my head as kindly as I could. She threw her arms in the air and started screeching right in the middle of the mosque.

"TERE BACHEY KI BACHEY MARJAIN!" She wouldn't stop cursing my unborn children, and their children's children. I was a little shocked. As she went on, I was even a little upset; I'm not planning on having any children, but the way this churell was cursing them out had me worried that harm might reach them in their unborn dwellings, wherever the fuck that was. I gaped at her in a stupor, but not for too long; I had to quickly shut my mouth as I was aware of the swarms of flies around us both. I backed away as far as I could. I had to jog away. In the heat, I had to jog away, because some old lady was cursing my unborn children, because I didn't give her any money, because I needed it myself that very moment. For someone who intends not to irate, irk or stress anyone else, I find myself often, irritated, irked and stressed.

Enraged mostly by an attack on my personal space in this sweltering, infested heat, I stumbled blindly into the road. Legally, this was fine since there are absolutely no traffic rules in this particular area, but as I just barely saved my right foot from the wheels of a rickshaw, I was overcome with anger. Here I was, trying to die, but also trying to be mindful, and no one will let me fucking live! I was outraged by the sheer audacity of the old woman to attack me, the rickshaw walla to run me over, my mother to blame me for my own rape. I stood for a second.

Let this be how I die.

Crushed to death in the stupid Delhi traffic from whence I had been wretched from the heavens. Being suicidal is evolution; it is futile to try and survive in this chaotic world. This is the smart solution.

"Girl, you gotta move".

I never thought I would say this, but I was relieved to hear the American accent catch me and pull me to safety.

"Hey, I'm Rowan," she said.



LUV (UN)ARRANGED

(BOOK 3 OF LUV SHUV SERIES)
BY N.M. PATEL

“You are lucky, arranged marriages are rarely so well arranged.”
- Jamie Lannister from Game of Thrones

Kriti

Marriage might not be all bad, but the journey to marriage had slowly started to ruin my life, one arranged meeting at a time. Like the one I was getting ready for.

“Stop making that face, Kriti. You look like we’re forcing you to marry,” Maa said, as she entered my room, carrying three dupattas draped over her arm. Gently, she laid them on the bed, and handed me one after the other, as we saw which one suited the best with my salwaar kameez.

“You’re clearly forcing me to meet this guy today. I told you I had to go to Meera’s place to support her.” I draped the peacock blue-colored dupatta, with thin golden lace along the edges, over my shoulder. My friend Meera needed me to stand by her side as she finally paid off all her loan to the loan shark who had been hounding her for years.

Maa came behind me and pinned the dupatta to my yellow kameez. As she tied the string at the back of my kurta, she muttered, “If you follow the diet I tell you to, you could lose more weight. But no. Noone listens to me in the house.”

This wasn’t new. Yes, I wasn’t the slim and trim girl that was the most common requirement of all the men as well as their moms in the arranged marriage market. Ever since I turned twenty-one, Maa has been trying to get me to diet. Be it sending me bland tomatoes and cucumbers for lunch or putting less sugar in my chai. But, the more she insisted on keeping up with the ridiculous antics, the more Pappa sneaked out my favorite food for me.

So, I didn’t concern myself with her complaints. I had been hearing this for over five years now. “Maa, if a guy doesn't like me, he is free to reject me. I don’t need the pressure and negativity. Especially today.”

“Rashmi told me they’re coming to the village just for the day. And the boy’s biodata seems good. Rashmi has also WhatsApped me his picture. They’re also Brahmin. His father was born in our village too. You know, Meera’s father was a friend of their family.”

Rashmi is my mother’s point of contact for all the gossip in town as well as my self-appointed matchmaker. Maa kept up her list of why the guy would be a great match, like she did every time, while I applied some light make-up. Just because I had no inclination to meet this guy today did not mean I wanted to look unprepared. I expected a guy to bring his best in these meetings.

After all, we did not get more than three to four meetings before we had to make the final decisions.

Maa was still on and on about the guy’s family when the doorbell rang. I turned to her in shock, expecting that the guy and his family were already here. Maa shook her head. “It’s your pappa. I’d sent him to get some snacks.”

And then she shouted, “Rati, Kartik, open the door. Now.”

Maa and I were in my bedroom upstairs. But within a few seconds, excited chatter of my 17yrs old siblings had me itching to go downstairs. I knew Pappa would’ve gotten some good snacks.

Maa was arranging the bangle combinations, which could easily be done downstairs. I checked my kaajal, put a small bindi on my forehead, and I was good to go. “Let’s go downstairs, Maa. You can arrange the bangles at the dining table too. I want to eat something before everyone arrives.”

Maa complained a little about the inconvenience of carrying all the bangles downstairs, but I quickly plucked her bangle pouch, and ran downstairs. Her shout followed me all the way to the kitchen.

The kitchen countertop was covered in opened newspaper packaging. I opened each package wider to find aloo-samosa in one, kachori in the next, and fafda with shaved papaya chutney in the last one. My stomach gave out a loud rumble, and I picked up a plate from the drying rack near the sink, and started filling it up.

“Didi, can you please bring the packages at the dining table?” asked Kartik, his words jumbled because of the food in his mouth.

Before I could agree, Maa entered the kitchen. “We have guests coming soon. We don’t have time to sit and have snacks. Your brother can eat more with the guests. You can eat while you make chai. And do not forget to add some ginger.”

Before I could argue and convince her to make the chai, she gave me the look— where she only had to turn her unblinking eyes at me without turning her head— that held no arguments from me. I sighed, took a big bite of kachori, and started preparing the chai.

Seeing things were in control, Maa left the kitchen and went to sit at the dining table. I poured the coriander chutney and tamarind chutney in my samosa and kachori. With my attention on the boiling chai, my one hand busy eating, I opened the

biodata of today's guy that Maa had sent me.

What a boring biodata. No hobbies. No little summary of dreams or goals. Nothing that could indicate his interest. Clearly, this was a work under parents' pressure. I, then, opened his picture. Dark brown eyes stared at me, barest of smile hidden behind the neatly trimmed beard.

The hiss of the overflowing chai touching the flame had me jump in panic. I turned off the stove, and checked how much chai I'd wasted looking at that face. Thankfully, not much. I poured the chai in our fancy kettle that we kept for these arranged meetings, and resisted the urge to see that photo once more.

Well, at least he looked decent. And was educated. Both of his parents too were educated. So, hopefully they would value my education too, and be open to let me continue working. And the fact that I started looking for good things about the guy right after seeing his photo was just a coincidence.

And as I polished off my plate of samosa, kachori and fafda with half a cup of chai, I wondered who would disappoint whom in the meeting. Because if not that, we could end up married.

BIODATA

Name: Aakar Mishra
Height: 5' 11"
Birth Date: 12th August 1991
Age: 30
Birth Place: Ahmedabad
Birth Time: 7:12 AM
Religion: Hindu
Caste: Brahmin

Education:

Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Product Management from L.D. College of Engineering; Bachelor in Textile Engineering (B. Tech) from L.D. College of Engineering

Work: Manager at Mishra & Sons Textile Group

Family Background:

Father: Pravin Mishra, Co-Founder of Mishra & Sons
Education: B.Sc in Mathematics
Mother: Noor Mishra, Homemaker
Education: B.Com

SHATTERED STONES, SHATTERED SOULS

BY SAMIHA QUDDUS

Marwan stood before the Court and bowed before making his way out of the cabinet. "You cannot do this, Maharaja," one of the advisors sprung up, trying to stop him. Marwan hadn't bothered to learn anyone's names. After all, he wouldn't be here for long. He stopped to let the advisor continue, "This is a blessing from the Chaand. You cannot just throw away the moon's powers."

"I'm not throwing anything away. The Chaand picked me to do what is best for Ruhaniyat, and that is simply what I'm going to do." Marwan could understand why people were hesitant to support his decisions. It wasn't easy to put their trust in a commoner who had suddenly been named the realm's ruler whose first order would change the entire system forever.

"This has never been done before. We cannot be certain to conquer the catastrophes this could lead to," said the army general.

"What if there were no catastrophes? Why must we always assume the worst?" Marwan had been fighting against the Court for weeks now. He didn't need their permission. He could complete the process on his own, but he wanted the Court to be present to witness history. He wanted this moment to be written down in books to every minute detail, and for that, he needed a credible audience.

"The beauty of you is that you are a romantic, Marwan. Do not let it become your fatal flaw." For the first time, his smile slipped. Even as the circle under his eyes had darkened and his shoulders had slumped, his smile was the one thing that never faltered. Marwan never thought Acacius would also go against him. Not when he was doing it all for him.

"Maharaja!" Marwan glared at the man who dared to chastise Acacius. He could call him as he wished. Their lives had been intertwined for much longer than either of their presence on the Court. Such ridiculous customs did not apply between them.

"Clear out the room!" Everyone looked between themselves before rising up and doing as they were ordered. As Acacius peeled himself off the back wall where he had been standing, Marwan spoke up again, "Not you, Acacius." Once it was just the two of them, Acacius sat down at his usual spot.

Yes, Maharaja?" Acacius said in a mocking tone with a playful smile on his face. Marwan sighed in satisfaction and sat down, leaning back in his seat. His friend didn't let the earlier comment get to him.

"I can't do this without your support. Don't let those fools sway

you!"

"Those fools are right. They are the reason why Ruhaniyat is prospering"

"We both know the Chaand should have picked you on Innayat. You always wanted this," Marwan said, placing his hand over the crescent-shaped moonstone in between his collarbones, "I never did; I'm not built to rule."

Acacius slid back his chair, walking until he was standing next to Marwan. The chair squeaked against the floor as the reluctant king moved to face Acacius. "Look at me." A hand rested on Marwan's cheek, "Yes, you are."

"Perhaps, but I don't want this. I want to paint." A light laughter echoed through the room. "You can still paint."

"This responsibility is already draining my light." With Marwan's new powers, he should be shining the brightest in the realm. Yet, it was true that ever since Innayat, his light had been dimming slowly. "Don't make me go through this alone, Acacius."

Acacius dropped his head back for a few moments with his eyes closed. When he looked back at Marwan, he sighed loudly, shaking his head at him. "You promise you are doing this because it is what you want, not for me."

"I am doing it for me, but I am also doing it for you. There is no me without you."

"Oh, Marwan... I wish it was not so." Marwan's chest constricted a little with each passing second. The room was too silent, every breath making his skin tingle more and more.

"Say something. Please."

"I would do anything for your sukh." If only Acacius knew that he was Marwan's happiness. "So, you have my support." Marwan jumped up and enveloped Acacius in a hug. He held him by his shoulders to push him away slightly, so he could see Acacius' face as he beamed at him. Then, Marwan brought him back in for a hug as he whispered into his ears, "I will go tell the others the good news."

The entire Court gathered at the palace's garden that same night. The Chaand was covered by the clouds, which was a rarity in Ruhaniyat. Despite the palace being built on clouds, they rarely ever blocked out the moon. Tonight was just one of the nights when no one could get the clouds to move no matter how hard



they tried. Marwan's light was the weakest of all of theirs, barely even reaching outside the garden. Lanterns would have to do for tonight.

"I suppose it must be customary for the Maharaja to give a speech at such events. However, I won't hold that title for much longer. Instead I will invite my dearest friend and your future king, Acacius Lucci, to say a few words." Marwan stepped back, letting Acacius be everyone's center of attention, not just his.

He wishes he could say he caught every word, but that would be a lie. His head was heavy, a buzzing enveloping his every sense. He looked at Nida, Ruhaniyat's most renowned scribe, to ensure she was getting everything. While he wished he could hear the happiness in Acacius' voice right now, he knew reading through the book would have to suffice.

When Acacius finally looked back at him to invite him back to the front, he did get to catch the part meant for his ears only.

And so, the ritual began as Marwan and Acacius intertwined their hands, the tip of their shoes touching. Marwan focused his entire energy on the moonstone lodged within him. The more he tapped into the chaandni inside it, the brighter it glowed. Once the light became too blinding, forcing the two to close their eyes, Marwan focused all his light behind the moonstone. He used it to push the stone out of his body. He screamed as it ripped out of him, blood seeping out of the crescent-shaped hole. He had hoped his skin around the empty space would close on its own but it seemed he would need his light to heal himself. He didn't have enough so he let himself bleed, biting down on lips to stop his scream and tightening his grip around Acacius.

He forced his eyes open, noticing how tightly shut Acacius' ones were. He moved the stone in between his friend's collarbones, pushing it with all the strength he had left in him.

By the end of the night, Acacius would have the blessing and he would be the king as he had always wished. That was the only thought still pushing him while he felt himself tear from the inside out. Not that Acacius might feel the very same pain he's feeling at the moment.

Once the moonstone touched Acacius, he screamed so loud that the lanterns had broken in the garden. Marwan felt Acacius try to pull himself away, and he let him go, but it was already too late. The stone had already broken, chaandni seeped out of it and fell onto Acacius' chest. More screams were forced out of him as the contact burned him, smoke escaping into the air.

Marwan stood still, his hands trembling as he looked at the

horror before him. He rushed right in front Acacius, blocking him from the remaining droplets of moonlight. It was being absorbed by the remaining light in his body, shielding him from their assault. Marwan couldn't understand why he was spared but he knew his light saved him. So, without second thought, he pushed all of his light saved him. So, without second thought, he pushed all of his light to his hand to heal Acacius. The skin slowly mended itself. Acacius held onto Marwan's hand, trying to push it back towards him. "Stop... this is... no good for you."

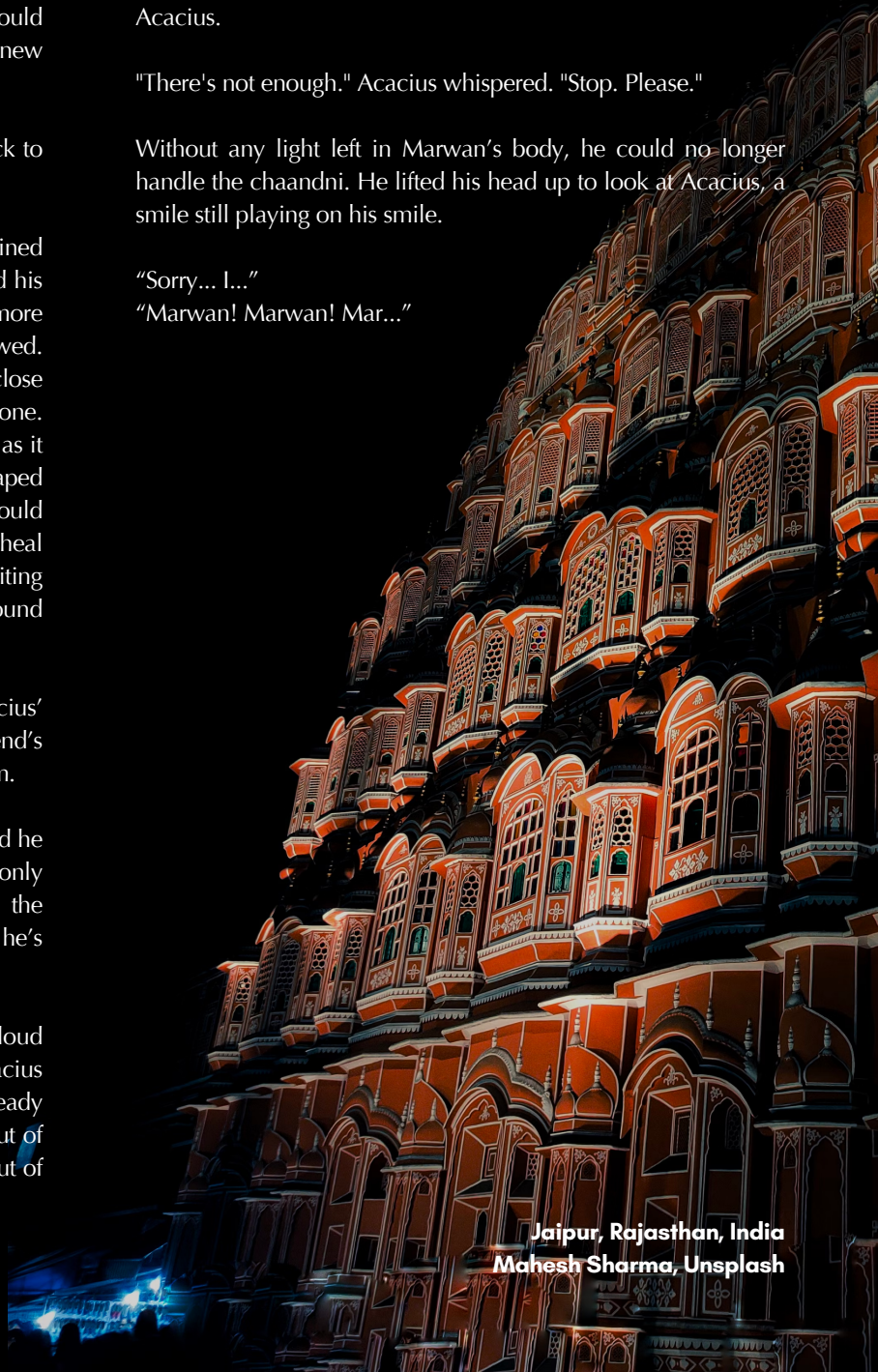
"Shhh. I got you, Acacius. I have always got you." They both fell to the ground as Marwan could no longer hold Acacius or himself up. He used his remaining energy to keep healing Acacius.

"There's not enough." Acacius whispered. "Stop. Please."

Without any light left in Marwan's body, he could no longer handle the chaandni. He lifted his head up to look at Acacius, a smile still playing on his smile.

"Sorry... I..."

"Marwan! Marwan! Mar..."



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STRANGERS

BY SHOBANA RAMASAMY

"Give it a rest, would you?" he said.

"Come on, one time? I won't hurt anyone," she urged.

It had been a long two hours. More than anyone, definitely more than Atheel, had bargained for. For him, this day was about waiting, watchful waiting, and nothing more. The two were currently seated on top of a thatch roof of a small fruit stand in the middle of the bustling Kalyan market.

Atheel had little interest in indulging in the playful nonsense of Aqsa, who hardly four years the younger, 24 to be exact, had the countenance of a 13 year old. He fortunately had a will of steel, and had taken to reminding himself throughout the afternoon of their purpose for being there, often out loud.

"You're doing it again," she sighed.

"Doing what Aqsa? Being the adult? Being responsible while you try to boomerang a triad of pocket knives at an innocent stranger wandering the market? Is that what I'm doing?" He exclaimed.

He paused as he inhaled slowly and methodically from his cigarette. She huffed and balled her hands into fists.

"Brother, you may think you are an adult, but let me assure you that you are nothing more than a..."

He tugged her sleeve and signaled her to knock it off. She followed his finger and looked down below.

There, slowly meandering his way through the dusty clouds and crowded pathways, he was.

He was older looking than they had expected, maybe even hoped, draped in a fine set of emerald green robes, and supported by a walking stick, lined at the bottom by gold trim.

"You sure that's him?" Aqsa muttered.

Atheel glanced upward, looking into the distance, taking a moment to recall the last time he had seen this man.

The memory, worn by time, had become more like a panel in a comic. It had very little preamble or epilogue, just the single still image of a young man with shaggy curls, and dark green eyes, saying earnestly and yet decisively, "Don't cry. I won't be long." This was followed by the man turning and hastily walking away, pulling his tattered brown robes tight around his body.

Atheel could feel a panic travel quickly through him, as though he was back in the moment once more. As though he was once again holding Aqsa in his arms, shaking his head fervently, reaching out, begging, "no, no, no. Don't go, please." All as he watched the man whom he once knew as father disappearing into the night.

"Hello? How do we make this plan work if every time I ask you a question, you stop talking?" Aqsa commented.

He cleared his throat, threw his cigarette out, and inhaled deeply.

"That's him."



THE LAST STAND OF LAKSH-UDHRA

BY TEJAL TAILOR

The first day

The world burnt beneath her feet. And, for once in her life, Tara didn't care. She didn't care about the torn skin on her soles, the bruises blooming on her toes or the blood that fell in a steady stream from her thigh. Shankar was dead. And, it was her fault. He had given his life for her and for what reason? She had failed him. Laksh-Udhra had lost. They had fought together but in the end her weakness had cost them their home. She looked down at the flames flickering across the sand, his body disappearing until there was nothing left but ashes. Ignoring the pain shooting through her back, she knelt down to take a handful of his ashes. She walked further down to the ocean and turned around, her back to the sea, as she slowly poured them over her left shoulder. He was gone. And, she was alone. Tara's hands crept to the slim gold chain at her neck and she held it for a moment, thinking of him.

Shankar had been the greatest love of her life. She missed the way he held her, the way his dark eyes looked at her when they made love and the way he held her hand even when they were in public. Her mother had hated him. Her father had exiled her for loving him. And, now the future they had dreamt of together was broken into a thousand sharp edges. A tear slipped out of her eye. And then another. And then a third until her cheeks were dripping and her vision obscured by a film of tears threatening to burst. She rubbed her eyes. Unbidden, a memory floated into her mind.

"Your eyes are precious, anbe, you should not hurt them so."

He removed her prying fingers and replaced them with his own as he wiped away her tears with touches as gentle as the petal of a lotus. The gesture made her cry harder. He pulled her closer into her arms and pressed kisses to her cheeks.

"Abhimanyu was valiant, he will not be forgotten," Shankar said.
She summoned her strength. "We will not allow him to be forgotten."
"Exactly, my Tara. We will not allow him to be forgotten."



They had lost their son in this war. Abhimanyu had been the bravest warrior of them all and now he would be reunited with his father whilst Tara remained. She was cursed to live alone for the rest of her life and spend her days in the agony of remembrance. Her one consolation after Abhimanyu was that she had Shankar by her side. Even without their son, they had each other.

And, now she had no-one.

She sank down by the sea, the water whipping at her feet. The salt stung her cuts but it was unnoticeable when compared to the pain bursting through her heart. Her mind raced. The circles it went round were extraordinary. If she had done this or that or that, then she would have been sitting here with Shankar and her son. That's what her mind told her. She tried to concentrate on the cold of the water, willing herself to fight the thoughts that threatened to overwhelm her because there were still lives to save. Tara lay down. Her head rested on the warm, soft sand whilst her toes were squashed against the rocks. Maybe, she could allow herself a moment's rest. The fighting would never stop. She took a deep breath and felt a wave of dizziness wash over her. Her head grew heavy against the sand. Not a single movement passed through her body. The thoughts began to slow. All Tara could think about was Shankar. The feel of his curly hair in her hands, the sweetness of his speech and the way his body felt like it was moulded for hers. She lost consciousness. Her arms and legs were splayed out, burdened by the events of today.

A nuzzling at her cheek awoke her. She ignored it at first, thinking she was only dreaming, but the gesture grew more insistent. It felt like a child's peck. Tara opened her eyes, the lids taking their time to return to their place, and was greeted by the sight of a dog pressed into her side. Through her blurry vision, she could see that it was a soft brown colour and skinny like a stick of kulfi. Confusion coloured her thoughts. What was a dog doing here? And where had it come from? She tried to set up but her head spun. The pain was still present, biding its time before it struck again. The dog let out a woof. She lay back down. Maybe, it was too soon to get up. That's when she heard a voice in the distance.

Chana! Chana!"

Chickpea. The dog's name must be Chickpea. Unless, the person was hungry. It wouldn't be the strangest thing she had encountered. But, the dog - Chana - was responding with little yaps even though it hadn't moved from her side yet. She moved her hand to stroke Chana's



soft fur and was gratified with a lick.

“Namaste, Chana,” Tara said. Her throat was sore and dry, a result of the tears and the lack of water. Chana lifted their paw and put it on top of her hand, almost as if to reassure her.

“There you are, Chana!” a woman said as she approached. Her shadow fell over Tara and for a moment, just for a moment, she felt a shiver trickle down her body.

The woman hugged Chana, her arms wrapped tight around Chana’s body. To Tara’s surprise, she had tears beading in her eyes. The shiver disappeared. Seeing the woman’s face, the look within her dark black eyes was almost like looking at a mirror. She imagined that’s what her face looked like at the moment. There was a strange familiarity about her. Her features were like Tara’s but sharper and leaner with jet black eyes embedded into her face. But, she wasn’t from Laksh-Udhra. She could tell from the outfit the woman wore. It was some kind of top and trouser combination, a far cry from the saris that populated Tara’s home. No woman here wore trousers like a man. It was wartime and still the women wore their saris to fight off the invaders. Tara herself was cocooned in a dark green sari, the thick cotton helping to protect her from injury. In contrast, this woman wore a short cut top with wide billowing trousers that swept up the sand with each movement.

Tara lifted herself with care off the scorching sand and managed to sit up, her back screaming in agony.

“You must stay still,” the woman said. “You’re badly injured.”

“Who are you?”

“I know it has been a while, little Tara, but I’m surprised you don’t remember me.”

Tara racked her brain. The woman before her did seem familiar but she couldn’t remember despite her best efforts. Had they met before? And, why did she call her little Tara? She must be older than Tara but her face was unlined and her short hair gave her a youthful appearance.

“Then again, you were but a child when I left.”

“Lalita Jiji?” The word for sister burst out of Tara’s mouth.

“You do remember, I am impressed.”

She had never truly known her Lalita Jiji but had heard plenty of stories about her brave sister who had fought off a tiger when she was just a teenager. That had won the approval of Seerang’s neighbours, Kinnari, who quickly arranged a marriage between her Lalita Jiji and their Crown Prince. Within three years of their marriage, Lalita Jiji had negotiated peace with their other neighbours, Rekshaka, and given birth to a son and a daughter which had been a great point of pride for their parents. Tara had been six when she left and did not remember much of her older sister. And, Lalita Jiji did not return to Seerang after her marriage. Nor did she respond to the letters that Tara had sent. She had grown too busy after her marriage. And, yet here she was.

“I don’t understand,” Tara said.

News of the invaders reached Kinnari. The whole of Jarata is terrified of them. I have come with an army to secure Laksh-Udhra. Where is your husband?”

Tears burnt down her cheeks. “Shankar is dead, you’re too late.” The words shot out of her mouth with ferocity.

“I am sorry to hear that, little one,” Lalita said.

Tara felt arms enfold her in their warmth. She resisted the urge to put her head on Lalita Jiji’s shoulder. It was comforting but she did not yet know the full story. Her parents had cast her out for marrying Shankar and Lalita Jiji had followed suit. She pulled away.

“You have not spoken to me in years, I have not seen you since I was a child and yet you hug me as if I am a loved one.”

A wounded look shot over Lalita’s face. “I have come for you.”

“No, you have come for Jarata. The Jarata that has shown no interest in Laksh-Udhra in the last hundred years. They have left us

undefended, to be raided and attacked, and it is only through our own spirit that we have survived.”

Thoughts of Shankar swam to the top of her mind. His family had fought since birth to preserve Laksh-Udhra for their people and now Jarata wanted to be of use. They had given up their wealth to make sure the ordinary people could eat and their nobility for equality. Shankar had governed as a Rajkumar Elect, he had been chosen by the people to lead Laksh-Udhra. His family were nobles like many other families but they had all chosen to give away their wealth and titles. It was only at the people’s insistence that Shankar had become the Rajkumar Elect. Before him, it had been one of his distant cousins. She had fought hard for Laksh-Udhra and now they honoured her every year.

“The threat is leaking into Jarata. There have been stories about the invaders in Oridai and Sharapur. They must be stopped before they get to Kinnari. That’s why I have come with other leaders from each state to join forces and protect Laksh-Udhra so that we might protect Jarata,” Lalita explained.

Tara felt fury rise up from beneath the sadness. “So, now it is convenient you have come? Well, it is too late. The war is lost. Shankar is dead. His family is dead. Three-quarters of the people are dead.”

“But, you are alive.”

“How did you find me? I wanted to part from my husband in peace.” Her hand twitched up to her thaali.

“I allowed Chana to sniff my clothes, my hair, everything. As we are kin, I thought it would be enough. And, it has worked. She is excellent at finding people,” Lalita said as she stroked Chana’s fur.

“Enough, I’m leaving.” Tara turned around, her legs were wobbly but she was determined to be alone.

A hand stopped her. “Do you not care about your people?”

“I have given my husband and son to them. I have nothing more to give.”

“Stay until the doctor has seen you. Allow me to convince you that we can save Laksh-Udhra together. I ask nothing except that you allow the other leaders to have their say too. ”

Resistance shone in Tara’s eyes. Why should she give Lalita Jiji any more of her time? She had been abandoned by her and now she had come along as if they had been best of friends for all of these years. But, the chance to save Laksh-Udhra was dangling in front of her. Shankar would have given anything to defeat the invaders. He had lost his father, his mother and many cousins and uncles to this war. They had all sacrificed for the greater good. His grandmother had burnt herself to a cinder rather than let the invaders into Mataji’s mandir. How could she ignore their sacrifices? If Lalita Jiji had a plan, then she ought to listen. Perhaps, they could fight together. Perhaps, Laksh-Udhra could be saved.



Clifton Beach, Karachi, Pakistan
Abuzar Xheikh, Unsplash

UNDONE

BY EVANKA WEERASINGHE

I would not pay for my own services. That's what Samantha is thinking as she runs down the quiet street of her suburban neighborhood. It's jarring, your feet pounding the ground when you are running. No one knows that her legs are on fire as she passes the houses on her right. That it feels like something is about to snap behind her knees as she ducks under a tree branch that has made its way over the sidewalk. That she may be on track to run a 12 minute mile, a personal best, but her thoughts are zooming a mile a second as she makes eye contact with the old man watering his plants and they both smile at each other.

She feels the run everywhere. Her breath, puffing in and out. Her ponytail brushing her neck, swinging to the left, then the right, as she's moving along the bend of the road. She suggests running to her patients as a coping mechanism, as a distraction from whatever one needs to distract themselves from. That's usually what they are coming to her for anyways. Help to figure something out that they can't on their own. Time away from what they consider is their overwhelming reality. Among other things. Meanwhile, all running does for her is focus more on everything she has going on, instead of leaving it behind, it's just clouding her attempts at mindfulness as she tries to also concentrate on running back to her home.

At this moment, Samantha is thinking about the dinner party her and her partner decided to host next weekend. Their friends are in the mood for Sinhalese cuisine and refuse to wait for her mom to come back, so she chose to do it on her own. Inevitably, she will need to call her mom for assistance, but that's not to knock her own cooking skills, she just needs to double check things with the master every now and again. When to call her mom to reconfirm the cucumber curry recipe is what is going through Samantha's mind when she starts to slow down as she gets closer to her home.

As she begins her cool down walk towards her house, Samantha twists her body with her arms on her waist, left and right, and takes in her neighborhood. The development is an older one, which is surprising given the city that they live in. Every other development surrounding them is filled with newer, cookie cutter homes that differ by a singular aesthetic piece or color palette. Samantha could have easily ended up in one of those homes. Samantha and her husband almost closed on one before the tudor style home standing before her fell into their laps. With its tall north facing windows and their neighbors being a good 50 feet away on either side, it leaves them with enough space to take a deep breath in their bubble.

Samantha jogs up her steps, opens her front door and is immediately welcomed by a savory smell. Hunter has started dinner. She slips off her sneakers and puts down her phone and earphones on the table next to the door, catching a glimpse of her sweaty self in the mirror above the table, before making her way to the kitchen. As she pokes around the corner she sees him across the island, his back is to her and he's moving as if he is stirring something. She creeps up behind him, slides her hands up his back and lazily crosses them above his shoulders where she rests her head. Hunter chuckles, "Woman, we could have both been burned to death if I had jumped and flipped this sauce over us."

"You knew I was here, and you would have taken the brunt of it."

"You're right," she can hear the smile in his voice. "How was your run?" She feels him shift under her so she takes a step back until she is leaning against the island. Hunter wipes his hands on the dish cloth in front of him before turning around to face her. His light eyes find her dark ones with a smile.

"Good good. Ran two miles, went as far as Treat Street before looping back. I took the long way around so I could see how far they have gotten with the renovations on that house, you know that one with that big dogwood tree outside? They decided to go with a stone facade, in shades of grey. It looks very posh."

Hunter raises both his eyebrows. "Did either of us guess stone?" Samantha shakes her head. "I didn't think so. Hey, any updates on Mrs. Ronson?" Since moving into their neighborhood three years ago, they had both become particularly fascinated in one of their neighbors, Mrs. Ronson. It had all started when she stopped by to drop off a key lime pie, welcoming them to the neighborhood. With her fresh blowout, immaculate makeup, and flared dress, all she was missing was an apron tied around her waist to make her the epitome of what they considered an old school trophy wife. They both couldn't help but be charmed. But, as time went on, what started off as endearing, turned annoying, and then just seemed plain weird. Her kids were too perfect, her yard too kept up but no workers in sight, and the part that drives Hunter to paranoia, a husband that they have never, ever seen. So whenever they are out, they make a habit of trying to get a glimpse of this elusive partner. It's no coincidence that all of Samantha's running routes go past the Ronson home.

"Nothing. All the lights were off and there wasn't a car in the driveway. You know what I just realized, I've never seen Mrs. Ronson drive before. Do you think they have a driver? How else is she going to get around with no mister?"

Hunter gasped, "Sam! How anti-feminist of you!" Sam rolls her eyes.

"Come on. You know what I mean." Sam grabs some utensils and walks towards the kitchen table to set their places to eat. She takes a seat at the table and watches Hunter as he grabs a wine bottle and glasses and heads over to her. It never gets old, watching him. Apparently love is finding even the mundane of tasks fascinating. Hunter looks up at Samantha while he is pouring her wine.

"Mrs. Ronson probably pours the drinks for her husband, as you just sit there, staring" Hunter shakes his head as he pours his own glass. "Here I am, thinking moving here would turn you into a Stepford Wife like the rest of them. I played myself."

Samantha laughs out loud. "I can't believe you. You didn't even believe me when I tried to tell you we were moving into Stepford territory. Meanwhile, you know exactly who you married." Hunter finally brings dinner to the table and takes his seat. "All jokes aside, I am too nosy and need to know what goes on in the house, specifically because my newest theory is that I think Mr. Ronson is in danger. He's probably tied up in the basement somewhere. Maybe one night I'll break into the house to save him. And will probably find all of Mrs. Ronson's clones in the process. I'll save Mr. Ronson, destroy the clones, and be the hero of the neighborhood!"

"Or," says Hunter as he plates Samantha's food, "your crazy ass will end up in prison because you are a nut. I'll leave you there too. Only for a little bit though, so you can learn your lesson...and also make some friends on the inside who can protect us from the clones and the rest of the neighborhood's prying eyes after I've sprung you. Cheers, Sherlock."

Samantha takes a drink of her wine as she thinks about the community they call home. Having grown up as city people, while the bustle and independence worked for them growing up, they both agreed that they wanted a change especially when they began their life together. Some more space didn't hurt either. However, they hadn't realized how not ready they were for suburban living. Space does not equate to privacy, not in the slightest.

Their realtor enthusiastically described this "hidden small town oasis" just outside the city. Considered a generally safe and cozy community, where kids run around as they please, driving the local vendors mad with their chatter and hijinx. Local vendors, as in the community has its own main avenue, with small shops, cafes and even a corner store. It honestly sounded ridiculous, especially considering that it wasn't more than 30 minutes away from a loud metropolitan city. But at that point Hunter and Samantha were willing to see anything and were pleasantly surprised by what they were shown. Although this place was created to embody another time, if you look a little closer it is hard to miss the luxury cars and brand name strollers, all funded by the jobs that many of the breadwinners have in the big city.

Samantha shakes her head with a smirk, "You love it here."

"Yea, I do, I do. It's beautiful, diverse, safe, a great place to have babies..." Hunter makes eyes at Samantha, "How did I get so lucky to live this life here with you?"

"I ask myself that every day. You must have been a really good person in your past life to get me."

"I don't think that is how it works" says Hunter as he takes a bite.

In disbelief, "Yes it is," says Samantha. "They definitely told me that at temple. I'll ask my mom to ask Buddha."

They laugh. Samantha always looks forward to meals with Hunter, as they don't have many of them together. Hunter is a consultant, with his work taking him all over the world. And spending close to eight months out the year away makes any time together even that much more special. Their relationship didn't start off this way. They met in college, and after graduation immediately moved in together to save money on rent. Samantha was convinced that they would break up after having to spend all of that time together and not having space to themselves, but to her surprise, it only made her want to be around him even more. Marriage followed soon after, and their days have been nothing but content, together and apart.

They eat in silence for a couple of minutes. The silence is one of Samantha's favorite parts of where they live. With their neighborhood out of the way and not near a main road, when the windows or door are open, all she ever really hears are the faint sounds of people living their lives and nature. It allows her to go inward in a way that she was never able to before, and that peace is priceless.

"What time is your flight tomorrow," Samantha asks. "You still need a ride to the airport?" Although work allows him to book transportation, Samantha tries to drop off and pick up Hunter whenever she can, which is almost always. "I'll go straight to my office if it's in the morning, so it could work out perfectly."

"Thanks bub. Flight is at 10 AM." Samantha mouths "perfect" from her seat and smiles into her plate. "Do you have a lot of appointments tomorrow?"

Samantha thinks about her schedule, "Only my evening house call, but I have some preparation to do for some newer patients that I am seeing this week. So I'll be doing a lot of research, especially since I'm playing catch up a little." Samantha continues eating.

Sam can feel Hunter looking at her, so she looks up. Hunter puts his fork down. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, Hunt."

"Don't work too hard, please, especially since you-"

Samantha cuts him off forcefully, "OK. Ok. Don't worry, I'm okay. Anyways, how can I work too hard when you are going to be hounding me every hour of every day like something is wrong with me, I'm not going to get anything done." Samantha laughs softly, but when she looks at Hunter she can see that he doesn't find her comments as humorous.

"We talk everyday anyways, this isn't any different, Sam. I'm sorry you feel that way." Hunter gets up with his plate. "Are you done, I'm going to do the dishes."

Samantha picks up her own empty plate. "No, I'm sorry, Hunt." She grabs the dishes out of his hands, "I'm excited to go back to work, I'm ready to go back to normal. Thank you for taking care of me." Sam gives Hunter a peck before making her way to the sink. She can hear him clearing the rest of the items off the table.

"I can work remotely for another week." Samantha tenses, and turns to look at Hunt, but his back is to her.

She relaxes and says jokingly, "Didn't I just say that I am ready to go back to normal? Everything is okay. And you're so excited to go to Argentina, and I am too because hello, good wine?! Don't bother coming back unless you come back with wine."

Hunter still hasn't said anything as she finishes putting everything in the dishwasher and turns it on. Sam is wiping her hands on a dish cloth when she feels him wrap his arms around her and nuzzles the back of her head. They stand like that for a while, Sam too afraid to break the moment.

Hunter loosens his grip a little, "You smell sweaty." Sam whips around, eyes wide, and laughs out loud. As the tension leaves the room she wraps her sweat dried body around him and whispers in his ear that he should come up and take a shower with her. They run up the steps to make the most of their night together before he leaves.





San Carlos de Bariloche, Río Negro, Argentina
Emilio Luján, Unsplash

NOT ALL HONEY IS SWEET

BY AMINA B WEST

My shriek pierces through the still air. It circles upwards, getting wider and wider until it explodes against the beams of the low, sloping roof. The vibrations ripple out and my devastation cascades down, filling the small foyer.

I am bereft.

Kimball reaches out to stroke my small brown shoulder, to offer some comfort, and I quickly shrug her off. I am in no mood to receive any solace.

The lone bee circles us both, trying valiantly, to plot its escape from The Little Montessori Nursery.

Instead, I shuffle closer to the series of diamonds in the window and press my already upturned nose against it, as hard as I can. For once, even the small squeaks my brightly coloured Garfield sandals emit do nothing to bring joy to my tear streaked face. The flashing lights in the pads of my feet do not amuse me today.

Through her diaphanous *orna* fluttering in the English summer breeze, I can see my mothers back as she fades further away, away from me.

Although she's too far for me to really hear, in my mind I listen to her sandals clacking. Each alternating a sharp slap of betrayal across my round cheeks.

I swat the bee away from my wet chin as I pout harder still, valiantly trying not to let any more tears fall.

I only wanted to spend the day with her, why wouldn't she want to spend time with me? I didn't want to go to stupid nursery today. I didn't want to play with blocks, I didn't want to listen to Kimball as she talks.

"We'll have a good day, Amina. We can read a book, you can choose, look! And then your mother will be back before you know it, eh?" I nod to placate Kimball but I don't believe a word she says.

I want to be at home with my *Ammu*. To spend a day together, just us, playing our own games that Kimball doesn't know about, nobody knows about. I could play cooking with *Ammu*. We could reach under the sofa for the sagging box filled with miniature pots and pans, the largest no bigger than my palm. My aunt had brought them back from the homeland, just for me. She told me their special name, *hari patil*. Their shiny stainless steel reflects ethereal light that draws us both together, entwined in our shared heritage.

Or we could do real cooking. I love squishing my star shaped palms in oily malleable dough, feeling it rise up around my short fingers and watch *Ammu* magically transform it into my favourite food, crispy parathas! I could eat a hundred of them.

I could climb onto *Ammu's* lap and she could plait my hair, the unforgettable smell of Amla oil encircling us both and perfuming our wonderland.

We could go to the big shop and *Ammu* could set me a quest; find the milk, four pints blue top, whilst she set off to liberate some thickly sliced brown bread, the good kind bejewelled with all the different seeds, like a spilled bottle of glitter, and race you to the till!

But she didn't want to do that. Not today. Not with me.

The bee buzzed closer still, piercing my reverie and distracting me from my daydreams.

My palm rises clumsily to swat it away again but I miss, and the bee perches on the very end of my little nose. I gasp with horror but it's too late.

I have been stung.

My nose swells to three times its size, throbbing and aching and immediately turning scarlet.

I throw myself to the floor, beating my fists and wailing.

Kimball resignedly picks me up and takes me to her office where she gently applies a wet paper towel to the tomato that has sprouted where my nose once was.

She sighs.

"I'll call your mother."



OUR WRITERS



SARAYU ADENI

NANOWRIMO: @CINDERNOVELLA

Sarayu Adeni writes fiction, memoirs, and poetry. She has seventeen years' worth of messy NaNoWriMo novel sprints. A second-gen South Indian American and a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Sarayu lives in Austin, Texas with her husband and Lab mix puppy. When not writing, she builds partnerships in global education and health, spends time with family and write-minded friends, dances Bharatanatyam, enjoys nature, and drinks way more tea than is necessary.



BIDISHA DAS

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Bidisha is a South Asian author based in New Delhi, India. A former editor, she now works as a writing coach for researchers and analysts in management, and works on her adult literary manuscript during lunch break. She lives with the world's best dog, Zola.



NAGMA KAPOOR

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Nagma Kapoor is a software engineer by day, fiction writer and poet by night. She resides in Toronto, with the occasional stint in New York.



NINA KEEMA

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Hailing from London, She enjoy' turning my experiences into satirical stories to help me understand them better. Nina is inspired by the contemporary voices of Mona Awad and Ottessa Moshfegh, as well as the bizzare comedy of David Sedaris and Simon Rich. Currently, she is reading Isabel Allende and developing her second novel, with the help of my wonderful writing group at Pardesi.



N.M. PATEL

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N.M. Patel is a passionate author who writes romance novels inspired by her love for Bollywood movies. Her books are filled with humor, steam, and plenty of love, featuring strong heroines and swoon-worthy heroes. Get ready to be transported into a world of desi culture, unforgettable characters, and a romantic escape that will leave you feeling warm and fuzzy inside.

SHOBANA RAMASAMY

Dr. Shobana Ramasamy is a Tamil American poet, primary care doctor and musician from Georgia. Shobana's written work seeks to express the complexity and nuance of the immigrant American experience, particularly through her own journey of being at the intersection of multiple cultural experiences as a woman of color. She is currently working on her first fiction piece that explores themes of fantasy, the South Asian diaspora, and historical fiction.



SAMIHA

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Samiha is a Bangladeshi-Canadian community worker at a non-profit. She loves to write poetry, short stories, and is currently working on a novel. She explores different genres and themes, including fantasy, thriller, and romance. Currently, she's working on a poetry book focused on the complexity of relationships and a Desi-inspired fantasy novel.



TEJAL TAILOR

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Tejal Tailor was born and raised in Leicester where she lives with her family. By day, she's a marketing manager experimenting with email campaigns and by night, a creative writer who's inspired by the nuances of the Mahabharata for her work. She's currently working on her first novel, an Indian-inspired fantasy, and a couple of short stories.



EVANKA WEERASINGHE

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Evanka Weerasinghe is an American-born Sri-Lankan, searching for stories that she can relate to, but more than that, hoping to tell those stories herself. When she isn't working at her job in philanthropy, she enjoys writing, eating, spending time with loved ones, and bothering her mother.



AMINA BHUIYAN WEST

IG: @AMSTERSMCSPICY

Amina Bhuiyan West is a 34 year old, North London council estate bred, British Bangladeshi dreamer. When she's not rereading one of her favourite books, her favourite pastime is telling her lovely husband elaborate stories over coffee and then scribbling them down when she should be working. Amina's stories celebrate the many facets of life and humanity that entwine us together across continents, under the same stars, as we imagine together...



Kathmandu, Nepal
Sagar Bhujel, Unsplash

OUR TEAM



LAIBA SARWAR

EDITOR

Laiba joined Pardesi because she wanted to reconnect with her culture and to find a great community. She LOVES everything film, books, and art and is trying to get more into poetry lately. Laiba is the website designer at Pardesi and designer of the FWG Zine.



ANU KUMAR

PROGRAMME MANAGER

Anu Kumar is a writer and biotech professional based in Paris, France. Born to South-Indian immigrants in the USA then later moving to France, she's passionate about authentic exploration of cultural identity in the global South Asian diaspora. Anu joined Pardesi in early 2021 as Head Editor to help community members hone their voices to tell engaging and impactful stories through personal essays. She currently serves Pardesi as Communications Director and leads the Fiction Writing Group.



EVANKA WEERASINGSHE

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Sarayu Adeni writes fiction, memoirs, and poetry. She has seventeen years' worth of messy NaNoWriMo novel sprints. A second-gen South Indian American and a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Sarayu lives in Austin, Texas with her husband and Lab mix puppy. When not writing, she builds partnerships in global education and health, spends time with family and write-minded friends, dances Bharatanatyam, enjoys nature, and drinks way more tea than is necessary.





Udaipur, India
Mitchell Ng, Unsplash