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Pirbhai, 1898

THE LAST DAY PIRBHAI SPENT in Gujarat was ignited by a sun that could not last. The heat was a dry beast, scorching the fields yellow as gora hair. He eased himself onto a step by the water's edge, letting his chappals graze the foam. Jamnagar offered him nothing. For as long as he could remember, every day was the same. By foot, or sometimes hitching a ride on the back of a cart, he wandered the streets, pleading for work. Today the landowner barely raised his eyes, and he knew he was probably one of many boys turned away. *Look around you, dikro*, the man had muttered. *Do you see any rice, any grain? Dry, all dry. Come back after monsoon.* When Pirbhai pointed to the white buds bursting across a field, the man laughed until he coughed. His lips cracked and blood pulsed on his stained teeth. *Those are for British exports. Not for us*.

That morning, Pirbhai had watched his ma ask the gods for forgiveness, praying over his middle sister, whose bones clacked as though loose inside her skin. For days her body had expelled water—sweat-water, wiwi-water, chee-water—and now she was limp and dry as the crops outside. When his ma had turned to him and told him to try Jamnagar today, that a neighbour's son had found work there last week, Pirbhai had imagined saying no. He had thought about rolling over on his sleeping mat, refusing to leave home and playing gilli danda with his siblings in the deadened grass instead. They would fight over

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who got to be striker and who fielder, and as the eldest, Pirbhai would get first pick. He would strike the gilli all the way to the sea, and his siblings would whistle, Ma looking on in awe.

But he was thirteen, the oldest son, no longer a boy. If he returned bearing nothing again, Ma would suck in her cheeks, then silently scrape her portion onto his plate; a reminder of the strength he would need for tomorrow. *Bhai*, his mother always called him, *brother*, reminding him of who he was, to whom he was responsible.

The reddening sky warned him to start his journey back, but the wind pulling off the water stilled him. He pressed his palms to his face, the imprint of the sun behind his eyelids a single ember. When he opened his eyes, there was a man. A merchant, his belt buckle polished and skin supple and oiled so that its brown shone almost gold. The man shifted a lump of tobacco in his cheek, exposing teeth like chipped bricks.

"Looking for work, dikro?"

Pirbhai nodded, eyeing him, too weary from the day to believe.

The man opened his fist for a second. It was long enough for Pirbhai to spy a pile of coins, grimy but solid, winking in the late afternoon light.

"You and I, we were meant to find one another," the man said, and pressed a coin into Pirbhai's palm. Pirbhai closed his fingers over the skin-warmed metal, unable to resist its unnatural weight.

"You have work?"

The man pointed out at the water.

"I'm looking for boys just like you. Young, tough, hard-working. You'll work hard, na?"

Now Pirbhai focused, aware that this was his chance. He raked a hand through his hair, relieved that he still appeared strong and capable, even as his stomach curled around itself. He smiled to show the man his teeth, that they were straight and square, his best feature—a sign of inner health, his ma always bragged.

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"I'll work the hardest," he said, and he meant it.

The man clapped him on the shoulder and fished into his pocket, drawing out two things. First, a small tin of tobacco, which he flipped open and offered to Pirbhai. Tentatively, Pirbhai accepted, taking a pinch and dabbing it inside his lip as he'd seen so many men do: languorous restless men, hungry-eyed. His heart leapt knowing that he might no longer be one of them.

Beneath the tin of tobacco, the man shook out a long strip of paper. It was crisp and covered in small black etchings. Pirbhai's spirits sunk. A test. He had hardly been to school, never learned to read. Now he would have to prove himself smart enough for the job, and he would fail.

The man passed him the sheet of paper. He didn't ask Pirbhai to read the words, or to recite a poem like the wealthy boys could, or to take up a pen and write. Instead, he produced a small cap of ink and tapped it open, gesturing to the line at the end of the page.

"If you want to work, you just need to put your thumbprint here," he said.

Marvelling at his luck, Pirbhai let his right thumb sink into the pool of black, all the way until it hit the bottom.

It was nearly dark when they climbed onto the boat. The man hadn't said where they were going, only that Pirbhai should wait until nightfall, when they would begin. Briefly Pirbhai imagined his ma worrying where he was, but he had asked a cart driver who was travelling through Porbandar to send word to his family. He pictured the driver calling to his ma from the cart, how his eldest sister would rush to offer him a glass of salted chaas for bringing such prosperous news. How proud they would be.

The dhow was small and wooden, and it creaked as Pirbhai and the

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others slotted themselves into the narrow hull, side by side like sacks of lott. Some were boys who looked no older than ten, others fully grown men, bearded, speaking of wives and children. Pirbhai recognized them all, though he knew none of them. Like him, they were all thin, dusty, made twitchy from months, perhaps years, of searching. The air glimmered with possibility. Pirbhai felt a greasy fullness, having bought some batata bhajias with the paisa the merchant gave him, upon the man's insistence that he would need energy for the journey. The oil had curdled on his tongue as he thought of his middle sister, who hadn't swallowed food in days, but he forced the thick mash down, sucking away the salt that burned his lips.

Now, Pirbhai didn't see the merchant. Instead, three goras stepped onto the dhow, their shoulders broad and uniforms crisp. Captains, Pirbhai thought, British. The men were speaking, laughing, but the words that tumbled from their lips were unintelligible. He knew only a few words in English, gleaned here and there on his searches for work—*hello, thank you, country, bread*—and he heard none of these now.

"I heard there's work in Karachi, that's maybe where they're taking us," the boy beside Pirbhai said, scratching at a constellation of mosquito bites on his forearm. His name was Jameel and he had skin like midnight. Pirbhai's was more like water-soaked wood. Pirbhai's lungs swelled with relief to know he wasn't the only one unaware of their destination. Not that it mattered: by morning he would be working, pocketing rupees to bring home to his ma, enough that they could buy medicine for his sister, maybe even call on a doctor, enough that they could buy milk and lott from the shop without having to sweep the floors and clean the toilet pit for a discount, or worse, buying the items on credit that his mother repaid later, at night, in secret, though Pirbhai had always known. A breeze lifted the hair from his forehead, and he tasted salt as a spray of seawater covered the men like a shroud. As the dhow groaned into the water, Pirbhai watched the oil lamps on the shore of Gujarat flicker, then fade.

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Pirbhai could not remember how many men started out on the dhow, but there were fewer of them now. One, a boy who reminded Pirbhai of his friends in the village, became sick, the hot white of his eyes rolling as he wheezed. When he died, the captains made some of the stronger men haul him overboard. Pirbhai could still see the curve of his forehead, pale as bone, slipping beneath a black wave. Another, a man with henna-red lips, lost his senses, screaming into the wind, swearing at the goras who hadn't bothered to learn even a word of Gujarati to tell the group where they were going. Or perhaps the goras were just feigning ignorance. The captains beat the man, much and often. One day the man clambered on deck and wrestled the wheel, that fiery circle that never ceased its spinning, from the captain's grip. Chalo, he shrieked, time to go home. He sounded like a father at the sweet shop, and also like a child who'd lost his mother. The goras knocked him to the ground, beat him until blood caked in his ears. That was the last time he fought back. The next day, Jameel woke Pirbhai and asked him if he wanted to see a dead man. Against the crack of waves, the man lay lifeless or maybe just defeated. This time, the captains hauled him overboard.

They might have been at sea for a month or three, Pirbhai wasn't sure. Nor did he know if his ma had given up hope of his return, or if his sister had drawn her last breath. All he could be sure of was the rot snaking up his thighs and bottom from sitting in a damp dhoti all day, the cracked sores lining his lips from mixing water with flour or rice, from eating only this. It was as if the ocean had emptied him of everything. He was gutted. The black waters, the men began calling it, we're crossing the black waters. Whatever parts of himself he had lost, the kala pani absorbed. Some mornings, he had trouble recalling his own name.

It was Jameel and Ganesh's turn to cook that day, and between

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them they lugged a dented pot. Ganesh's arms were peeling from the sun and salt and winds, his brown skin now a chapped grey. Pirbhai groaned, throat tight with thirst, but Jameel, strangely, grinned. Then Pirbhai caught it, the sweet and the tang, a smell that wrenched him back to his family in Porbandar. The shock of smelling something that wasn't shit-sweat-piss-salt or the occasional acid stench of seasick that didn't make it overboard was so acute that he lost his balance, clutching the railing. There was saliva on his lips, streaking across his chin.

The men were laughing, but not at him so much as with him. They were jahaji bhai now, boat brothers bound by the water whether they chose it or not. Those who were still alert enough to notice raised their noses to the air. Pirbhai found himself howling, and the others barked along, hooting, their own pack of dogs.

Jameel raised the metal ladle, where congealed rice dripped in thick globs.

"Onion," he said.

Pirbhai had never been hungrier. The slivers of onion were sparse and thinly diced, but their flavour permeated his entire body, the entire boat. Ganesh joked that they would all be sweating onion for days—the sweetest sweat, he said.

One of the goras emerged, binoculars hooked around his neck. The group grew watchful, the water shushing around them. This one was the big malik, the one with eyes the colour of the sea. The captain showed his teeth. "Enjoying, boys?" he said.

Some grunted appreciation, others cursed quietly in Gujarati. Over the journey they had all learned a little English, picking up phrases from the captains, joking over dirty words when the goras were slack with daru.

The captain was speaking slowly now, emphasizing his vowel sounds like he truly wanted them to understand.

"Land," Pirbhai caught, and his heart stopped.

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“Land?” he repeated in Gujarati, loud so the others heard him, so that they stopped too, eyes bulging, tongues stilled.

The captain was saying something else, a word Pirbhai didn’t know. But he kept repeating it, pitching his voice above the slap of waves. Pirbhai watched his mouth open and close, a fish out of water, moved his own mouth to match the sounds.

“Mombasa,” he was saying.

When Pirbhai crossed paths with Jameel or Ganesh or any of the men from the boat, he averted his eyes. It had been two years since he stumbled down the docks at Mombasa on sea-weakened legs, and since then he had learned what it took to survive. Pausing for too long or wasting time to chat was discouraged, punishable if any of the rail police noticed. He pretended it was this that stopped him. But it wasn’t, not really. It was the gnaw of guilt, that they had all ended up in this servitude entirely unaware. That they had hopes, had really believed they were sailing somewhere better. How greedily they had snatched the chance.

He kept his head low as Jameel’s voice receded, his nose thick with the sweet rot of soil. By now he knew the trees above him, their tangled heads bursting with pungent yellow blooms. Better not to look up at all, to tune out the drone and sting of the tsetse flies, to keep all senses trained on the work. The men were clearing out, drifting back to their camps in clots of two or three so as not to be left alone as the night closed in. Pirbhai lingered, working a rusted sleeper key into the soft mulch and hoping the masters were watching, though he did not look up to check. He pressed down on the sleeper to test its stability, the cool metal a balm on his torn palms. The earth had stained his fingernails—wide, twisted—a muddy red, so that he sometimes recoiled from his own hands.

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He brushed soil from his forearms, where dark hairs wound across his once-smooth skin. In the years that had passed, his voice had cracked and plateaued, and he barely recognized his own odour. He had grown too, so that his toes spilled out across the lip of his chappals, but already his shoulders were curved in like an old man's, his knees knobbed and shins bowed so that his walk was more like a limp. The weight of the railway tracks was warping even the sturdiest of men. Whatever they had carried over, they were burdened with a new weight now: they were here to stay. The only way out was forward. They were bound, to one another and to this land.

He'd started smoking beedis, and his lungs crackled in the moist jungle air. But the momentary relief of it, when the smoke hit that tender place between his eyes, was worth it. He craved it now as he followed the muffled voices toward the camp, threadbare tarps that let in all the sun.

At the tent, he eased off his sandals. Many worked barefoot these days, preferring the grip of their toes on thistle and crushed stone. Feet or boots, the important part was the mind. A slight misstep, a single twitch of the shoulder when laying down a track, could lose you a limb. Early on he found himself distracted by thoughts of his family, dreaming of the day he would return home to his sisters, and if one of the other workers hadn't shoved him aside he might have lost a hand to a wood saw. Since then, he had trained his mind to banish such tempting thoughts and focus only on what lay ahead.

It happened not long ago to Sohum, one of his tentmates. A momentary lapse in the cloudy grind, and Sohum's foot was crushed, ankle down, the remaining flesh pulpy and rank with dirt. The foot had to be cut off entirely. An infection crept up the stumpy leg, the skin mottled and purplish all the way to the groin. One night he screamed so long that a man appeared at the tent, a native with eyes like river rocks. The native workers slept in separate tents, or else out in the open with sheets tucked up to their noses against the macchar. In the

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mornings they set out first with their scythes, slashing away brush and thistle, crushing stone and hauling it down. Only then would the jahaji bhai approach, with wood and saws and metal. Beneath the fierce sun their skins took on the same hues, but the difference was in their hands: black hands, thorn-bloodied and nails split by stone; brown hands, rigid with splinters, oozing dirty pus where infection took root. And all the while the pink-skinned masters watched from the shade, blowing their whistles if ever the workers were caught speaking, ensuring their camps were far apart, even lunchtime quarters split into black and brown. Pirbhai sometimes caught a whiff of the natives' mahamri frying as he slurped at his sorghum porridge and was hit with the deep desire to walk over and dip his fingers into their bowl.

Against Sohum's wails, the native worker spoke fast, but the words were lost on them. The brothers hollered when he approached Sohum's quaking body, but his touch was gentle as he guided Sohum's mouth to a flask, sharing his water rations. He was not a medicine man, just a man with a conscience. Pirbhai watched the flicker of his eyes and remembered his ma the last time he saw her, bent over the shell of his sister. When the man slipped out into the night, Pirbhai followed him and offered him a beedi, which he accepted with a word that sounded like *sorry*. Pirbhai repeated it, sawa, sawa, sorry. He repeated it on the nights the man came back, and to the others who came too, exchanging food and medicines and fragments of language between the barracks and the endless dark.

Even still, Sohum died in a fever. They were shaken, all of them, but the masters used it as a warning. No dawdling, no dilly-dallying, no willy-nilly, they said, these strange English words that Pirbhai repeated as he worked, part mocking, part earnest. Of course, none of them needed a warning. Men died with every mile of railway they laid down. Lately, Pirbhai had heard rumours of man-eating lions stealing workers away at night, leaving only a tooth here, a turban there.

They were building a railroad to Lake Victoria. Pirbhai had no

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idea where this was, and when he worked up the nerve to ask one of the railway police on watch, the man said, "Uganda," and Pirbhai was reminded of that moment on the dhow, the first time he heard of Mombasa. For now, he saw no lake, no town or city, just a flat strip of nothing surrounded by every shade of green. If he stared long enough, he forgot which way was laid down and which way they were headed, direction dissolving into sticky air.

Sometimes he envisioned the track complete, a red engine slicing through the trees. But he couldn't imagine who would sit on these trains. Not his kind, he was certain, who the mzungu called *coolies*, whose bodies were breaking under the weight of the task they were indebted to fulfill. And surely not the natives, who carried makarai of smashed rocks to lay down so that Pirbhai and the others could build on their land. "If we ever get to ride that train," one of Pirbhai's tentmates joked, "it'll be British in first class, Indian in second, African in third." Pirbhai laughed along, but he couldn't imagine them all sitting level like that, even if they were apart.

Kind mattered less than order. He knew that now, after the merchant who tricked him, after the Indian railway police who meted out the British punishments, after the natives with their trades of cowpea leaves and mhogo, with their word for the colonists that captured just how the white spirit hovered, relentless, above them all. *Mzungu*, Pirbhai now said instead of *gora*, and marvelled at how certainly it thrust off the tongue.

Two of his tentmates were bickering. Rakesh, older than Pirbhai but much quicker to laugh, peeled off his shirt and snapped it at him so that Pirbhai gagged at the stench. Sweat, blood, urine, heat, the jungle's decay mingling with their own. But it was something else too, something so mortal and intimate that his eyes moistened. A grin rippled across Rakesh's stubbled face.

"Moody again?"

Pirbhai scraped a wrist across his eyes, smearing the day's grime.

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“You’re one to talk,” he shot back. A few days ago, Pirbhai had found Rakesh slumped against a musizi tree, his head lolling against the blanched bark. When he managed to rouse him, Rakesh’s eyes were dark, squinting as if blinded, a blankness that worried Pirbhai. Back at the tent, Rakesh told the men that he’d caught the sleeping sickness. The tsetse got me, he said, miming a fly pinching his neck. Pirbhai said nothing, but he couldn’t forget the deadened stare. That night he forced himself to stay awake, glancing every few minutes at Rakesh’s silhouette curled atop his sleeping mat as if Rakesh were his own brother.

Back home, they said that crossing the kala pani washed away your caste. They were all here now, a new creed. Not family, but still jahaji bhai. No one wanted another Sohum. It became duty to watch out for each other, to feed, to slap alert. At night, they kept each other alive with stories. Sitting close enough to the fire that their hairs singed, they told tales of their homes, their pasts, their tentative futures. Pirbhai never talked about his family, or at least, not his real one. When asked, he invented fictional relatives, a sister who danced kathak, her body full of breath, a mother who made a living cooking tiffins for the local labourers. His ma had once told him that they were descended from royalty, and though he’d never been certain if this was true, he claimed it in this new land. He wasn’t ashamed of his roots; most of the men here came from villages like his, farming families driven to leave by drought and famine, by the relentless search for work in a country starved by its rulers. But summoning their names in this jungle was a sordid reminder. He had left home to work, and indeed, he was working, and yet he hadn’t sent a single rupee back.

If he was indebted to the British for his passage here, he was even more indebted to his ma, to whatever pain his leaving had caused her. He would work harder, until he could atone for his absence. He would work until he became enough.

Pirbhai walked with Rakesh to the side of the tent to wash up.

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Runnels of brown water cut through the soft ground. Around them, men shivered against one another. They hadn't spoken again about the incident by the tree. They didn't have to. Pirbhai knew it was no sleeping sickness, no mere trick of the body. He had seen it in so many of their stares: the bewilderment, the disbelief. The inability to trust anymore, matched with the ceaseless drive to do better than the next. That loss of something innately human.

Tonight, as they did most nights, they were making khichdi. Pirbhai dug the hole in the ground and Rakesh mixed the lentils, rice, and water in the aluminium pan. Now Pirbhai nestled the pan inside a turban, a ratty one that had belonged to one of the men who had disappeared, and placed the whole turban in the ground. Together they covered the hole with leaves and soil and lit a fire above, holding their faces close to the flames, counting the seconds, waiting, wondering how long they had done this for, and how far off the lake could be, and at what point does the body decide it's had enough, and how long does it take for fingernails to grow back, and could the lions sense when a man fell asleep, and how long could a person go without sleeping, and what did the masters eat tonight, and what had that sheet of paper said, and would it have been better to let the kala pani swallow them, and how many more nights like this could they survive.

In the damp grit of morning, the sky was torn with bloody shreds of cloud. Pirbhai huddled with the others in his group, torquing his back straight when the colonel's grey eyes swept over him. Out of earshot they had a name for him, the Cockerel, for how he stuck out his backside as he walked. He was the one in charge of their wages, ticking off how many yards each worker covered in his leather notebook, deducting the yards not laid, then making some magic calculation that docked more rupees off their pay slips. When one of

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the workers protested their food rations, the calculation magicked his entire wage away.

By now, there were rumours among the jahaji bhai that the British would give them land if they chose to stay after their contracts were completed. Pirbhai himself had heard two overseers discussing it while he worked. *Dangle the carrot*, they'd said, a phrase that Pirbhai couldn't make sense of despite his growing grasp of English, but unmistakable to his ears was that same word he'd heard on the dhow: *land*.

"Over the next stretch," the colonel was saying, pulling his lips over blackened gums, "there are some obstructions. Abandoned huts. Most of you will stay here to lay down the groundwork. Two of you will come with me to clear the path ahead."

Again, he met Pirbhai's eyes. Pirbhai sucked in his breath, thinking of the extra yards he might earn, letting it go only when the colonel summoned him with a flick of his head.

Soon after, Pirbhai stood beside the colonel and Rakesh. Upon choosing them, the colonel had handed them a book of matches and an oily jug, which they clutched clumsily as they cut through the thicket of branches, the colonel two steps behind. Only now, at their destination, did Pirbhai realize what they were expected to do.

Before them, in a wide clearing, was a cluster of huts. They were small and round, their walls constructed with a combination of wood and reeds sanded into poles, brittle hefts of spear grass thatched into roofs that hovered above like malnourished hair. By the nearest hut, an overturned bucket waited beside a blackened firepit, the surrounding ground packed smooth by the pounding of feet. A line of fabric was strung out to dry, a salmon kanga and a series of worn white singlets drooping like dead fish.

The colonel cleared his throat. "Like I said: empty."

Pirbhai risked meeting his eyes and saw a flicker of unease there. A dark heat was building in his chest, the matches and jug by his feet. Rakesh was glaring at the laundry, his shoulders slumped.

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The colonel eyed the roof of the nearest hut. "Rickety things, anyway. No Indian engineering in sight, eh?" He nodded at them, and in that instant Pirbhai understood what he was meant to believe about himself in order to plow through these lands that were not his.

Sweat pooled in the creases of his elbows. Neither of them said a word; Pirbhai didn't dare. For one dazzling second the face of the man on the dhow swam up before him, the ropes of hair plastered around his neck, the desperation in his eyes as he wrested the wheel from the captain's grip.

The colonel slapped his thigh, making them both jump, and tipped his head as if addressing a pair of schoolboys. "You have one hour."

Behind his back, Pirbhai tensed his fists. Yes sir, he heard himself say, though when the colonel walked away he felt his jaw loosen like it had been clenched for hours.

When he turned back to the clearing, Rakesh was staring at him.

"Let's get out," Rakesh hissed, moving so close that the fog of his breath warmed Pirbhai's cheeks. Instinctively, Pirbhai stepped back.

"Su? We can't—" he began, but Rakesh dropped into a squat, cradling his shorn head in his hands.

"You realize what they're asking us to do? Kill for them. Do their bloody deeds. We're their dogs." He looked up at Pirbhai, his eyes glassy, a sickly sweat pulsing out across his temples. "Dogs."

Pirbhai felt the spectre of the colonel behind his back, a ghostly shackle. Before him, he watched his friend tussling with the dirt.

"Rakesh," he murmured, his voice soft, "where would we go? There's nothing around here. We'd die by ourselves—"

"We'll die either way." Rakesh spat between his feet. "We're dying now. Bhaiya! We're dying every day." He scrabbled his fingers in the soil, came up with a fistful of pebbles and red clay. "I can't stay here. I can't stay here. I can't stay. I can't."

Pirbhai dropped to his knees and grasped Rakesh's shoulders,

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murmuring to quiet his blubbering. He had been waiting for something to break since the day he'd found Rakesh by the tree. Above, a monkey howled.

"You go."

Rakesh opened his eyes, his brows gathering.

"You go. I'll tell them I lost sight of you in the fire."

He could see the understanding settling in Rakesh's face. What he was offering and what he was still planning to do.

"They're not abandoned," Rakesh said. Pirbhai gritted his teeth. Why say it? They knew well enough what happened to men who disobeyed. And if he refused, was Rakesh so naive as to believe that it would make any difference? He thought of his name in the colonel's leather notebook, how these huts would turn into numbers in an equation that might let him send money back home.

"We have nobody. No money. Only this."

Rakesh backed away, scooting on his bottom in the dirt like a child.

"Bhaiya, you don't have to do this, you can choose something else," he pleaded, his voice barely a whimper.

For a moment, Pirbhai believed him. He imagined burying the petrol, running until their legs gave out, the only fire he'd light being the one to keep the lions away as he watched Rakesh soften into sleep. Then he remembered where he was. The only way to survive was to last the longest, to prove himself the most loyal of them all. *Like I said: empty*, he heard the colonel say over and over. He stood and brushed the soil from his knees.

"I'm staying," he said with intended finality, though his voice came out ragged, weakened by the thought of losing his friend. Rakesh hesitated, his hands hovering around his throat. Pirbhai grasped the damp book of matches. He watched Rakesh's expression fall, the instant he understood he was alone. Then, kicking his heels, Rakesh was gone.

Pirbhai did not let the moment linger. The sun had grown sharp on the back of his neck, clocking the minutes. He had passed countless

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settlements like this one as they laid down the tracks. All the occupants would likely be working their farms, tending to cattle, labouring in British cotton and coffee fields. And yet. He coughed twice and waited a minute, two, for someone to hear him and come forth. Legs trembling, he broke into the clearing and circled each hut, peering through the doorways, expecting a face to surface, to meet his eyes and change his mind. But there were none. Pirbhai said a prayer for the small mercy that the colonel was half-right: though the huts were not abandoned, they were empty.

He unscrewed the jug and began to pour the petrol, soaking the bases before launching the spout up toward the bundled grass. The smell scalded the inside of his nose, stung his eyes. His face was wet. He tossed the empty jug between two of the huts. His bowels loosened. He struck a match.

The dry thatching snapped into flames. The fire roared, cracked against the muggy air.

Pirbhai stumbled backward, falling on his elbows, cowering. Smoke choked his lungs. From behind the ashen plume he saw the outline of a hut, the yawning mouth, and instinctively he knew what lay inside. The sleeping mats rolled neatly in a corner and the brimming water jug and the steel pot hanging on a nail on the wall, the sagging sack of grain and the bar of red soap and the worn clay floor; he saw his mother holding a tin cup to his sister's lips, every detail he had grown up with, every part his own. Something splintered, a roof caving in, and he leapt to his feet. Chest heaving, he watched his home burn before his eyes.

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Sonal, 1902

When the coolie arrived at her deddy's shop to ask for a job, the first thing Sonal noticed was his arms. They were long, lanky, but tight balls of muscle strained against his dirty cotton shirt. She wondered what kind of work he must have done to get arms like those, but then she saw the missing middle finger on his right hand, the nub puckered and flayed like it never properly healed, and the way he hobbled in his too-small chappals like an old kaka though he looked barely twenty, and she knew his line of work.

Deddy was knee-deep in a mud pit out back, piling scraps of torn packaging and rusty tin cans to burn. It was garbage day, and Deddy was never in a good mood on garbage day. He had put Sonal in charge of both the shop and several of her siblings for the morning, while Mummy rallied the youngest few to feed. At the counter, Sonal peeled a worm of dirt from under her fingernail and clicked her tongue at her brother Nanu, who was pretending to twist open a jar of pickles, rolling his eyes back in fake pleasure.

"If Deddy sees you," she warned, but it was ruined by her grin.

Nanu, buoyed, plucked a small sack of sugar from the shelf and hefted it over his shoulder.

"Don't," Sonal said, the smile gone, but she was too late. Nanu tossed the sack toward her, but his arms were reedy and his calculation off. The bag smacked the counter, and sugar ballooned in a golden

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cloud, the grains settling into every surface like sand. Nanu stared at Sonal, aghast.

Sonal heard the clank of Deddy's shovel and knew there was no time for scolding. She grabbed the rag from the counter and got down on the floor, the crusty granules grating her bare knees. She heard Nanu fetch the broom from the corner, and when a pair of hands appeared next to her, she assumed it was another one of her siblings come to help. But then she noticed the missing finger, the muscled arms, the skin like date palm bark, dark and scarred.

"Almost there," the boy said, as if he knew her, showing his wide, straight teeth. She stood and folded her arms, waiting for him to say who he was, but he just kept working, his head down.

By the time Deddy came back in, Nanu had resacked the dusty sugar and the boy had his hands behind his back as if he had just strolled in to browse. Behind him, out the open door, rows of corrugated iron shanties crowded around the railway tracks, Kisumu Station coated with a blanket of ochre dust. When no one was looking, Sonal brought a finger to her lips and licked, the shiver of sweet settling thick on the back of her tongue.

The boy's name was Pirbhai. Usually, when travelling Indians wandered into the shop, Mummy would serve them a hot plate of rice and tea and Deddy would order one of the children to pack them some biscuits and soda before they left. Most of them were like her family, sailing over after hearing of the economic prospects here in Kenya, better at least than the high British taxes and the famines that came and went in India. Here, like Deddy, they set up shops or were hired by the colonials, staking out a place between the natives and the mzungu, though they couldn't own land. Sonal's family had come over around the same time the railway construction began, knowing that the British liked their comforts—matches, tea, tinned fish, cigarettes, toothpaste—all goods the dukan now sold. This boy with the grubby shirt and quick eyes was the first coolie to come in.

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Deddy was sucking on a date seed, his gaze fixed on Pirbhai, appraising him like he was a horse.

"You're a Hindu?" was the first question Deddy asked him, in response to his plea for work. "You're honest?" was the second. Sonal held her breath even as he answered yes to both, knowing as one of nine children that they could scarcely afford another mouth to feed.

"You'll sleep in the back of the shop, keep an eye on it overnight. I can't pay you but there'll be a roof over your head and food in your stomach," Deddy said finally, inspecting the dirt in the creases of his palms as if he didn't care either way, even as Pirbhai bowed and breathed a hungry "Yes."

For a moment, Sonal was shocked. How Deddy had beaten her when he caught her adding a spoonful of sugar to the watery dal, screaming that he was not a rich man and she was no rani. Every shilling the dukan made, Deddy scrimped and poured right back into the shop. Their own food came from the land, the soil they worked until yams and ginger nosed up, beans and okra flowering around their quarters. She looked back at the boy, his eyes lowered and lips blistered as if he'd been sleeping many days under the sun, and wondered what Deddy had seen to let him stay. But then Deddy turned around and swiped a finger across the counter, and when he lifted it, grains of sugar clung to the pad.

"Show him where he'll sleep," Deddy instructed her, a bent smile on his face as he walked away, and she knew then that he had seen it all.

As far as Sonal could tell, the coolie's arrival changed little in their home. He came with almost nothing—a few shirts and a scroll of paper—and demanded even less. Deddy still lashed out at them and cursed; Mummy still pulled in her lips like she wanted to swallow them as she whisked the little ones away. Sonal wasn't sure how much Pirbhai

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saw: he kept to himself, taking his meals in the storage room where he slept on a gunny sack, not even a mosquito net or a rope mat to his name, and working quietly as he restocked the grain or sharpened the display of knives. She was impressed with how easily he slipped between English, Swahili, and Gujarati depending on the customer, how he didn't hesitate in switching the prices. This was something Deddy had trained them to do for as long as Sonal could remember. Triple the price for the whites who could afford much more, double the price for the Africans who knew no better but couldn't afford as much. By Deddy's rules, only fellow Indians got the actual price.

Pirbhai had worked out quickly which natives they were friendly with, how they'd swap a sack of millet for a bunch of matoke, how they'd share tinctures against the macchar and cart each other's wares inside in the harried moments before the rains. Like her, he'd learned how to slice the cake of soap with a thin string and what it meant when someone wanted kawaida—for the white men, a cigarette that Pirbhai rolled with his good hand, for the local children, simsim or coconut mandazi freshly fried in leftover oil until they pillowed—though unlike her, Pirbhai never snuck himself a bite. She had seen, too, how he chased the dogs from the neighbour's store cupboards, swatting at their toothy snouts with his bare hands, and when a British man walked in and barked orders like Pirbhai was a dog, he did something spectacular: he passed the tub of paraffin over and, in perfectly inflected English, quadrupled the price, the calculation effortless behind his blank eyes.

On several occasions Sonal overheard Deddy chiding Pirbhai for using too much water, although he only bathed once a week, and when Mummy dropped boiling chai on him once she did scarcely more than toss him a rag. But Sonal knew it was all a show, because they couldn't complain: he was careful, focused, and his work was good.

But his arrival changed something for her. She felt his eyes on her sometimes, the way she did now, as she pressed labels onto jars in

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the storage room while he swept. Cartons of salt and rolls of tobacco cluttered the shelves, kept high to guard against rats. She noticed him squinting at the label she'd just pasted to a jug, his lips moving ever so slightly as if trying to make sense of her handwriting.

"Cooking oil," she said, and saw the recognition spark in his eyes. It only now dawned on her that he couldn't read. On the next label, she wrote the letters larger, as if for a child.

"Cloves," she said deliberately as she stuck the label down. Then, afraid she'd been too obvious, she added, "Good for toothaches and for keeping out the bugs."

"Fire ants everywhere," he agreed, swiping the broom in steady, even strokes. Sonal adjusted her misshapen dress over her knees, for the first time wishing Mummy would stitch her something nicer.

"There are ants out there where we sleep too," she said, jerking her head toward the mats lining the extension behind the shop. She wanted him to know that it wasn't intentional, him sleeping with the ants and with rats gnawing his toes every night.

Pirbhai shrugged. "It was worse before."

"On the railway?" she blurted, then bit her lip. Mummy had warned her not to ask about his work before the dukan, and he never brought it up himself. The furthest back he had spoken about was the day he entered the shop, when a sympathetic Indian stationmaster at Kisumu Station had directed him to Sonal's family, where he'd said he might find a hot meal and a roof for the night. Kind helping kind helping kind, Pirbhai said when he told Sonal this story, with a glimmer in his eye that surprised her. Sonal supposed she understood: her memory of the time before her arrival in Kenya was fickle, a blur of cousins and cramped Dhrangadhra streets and a softly spotted cow that her family had owned. But Sonal had seen the mounds of red earth dotting the tracks, graves that she convinced her siblings were termite mounds, and the questions about what came before bubbled up every time she saw Pirbhai's nubby finger.

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He nodded slowly and stilled the fugyo, his injured hand wrapped loose around the handle. Sonal took her chance.

"At the end, when the mzungu said the coolies could go back home. Why stay?"

He glanced away, though she kept her focus on him.

"A lot of my brothers from the camp went back," he said finally.

She remembered the crack of the sea against the ship that had brought her family over, like concrete meeting bone. When their steamer docked in Mombasa she'd seen the weedy dhows rigged up beside it, water pooling as they bayed against the rocks. Wobbly-legged, sick-stomached, she'd wondered how anyone could survive the kala pani in one of those.

Sonal tried to keep him talking. "They're brave, to go back."

He met her gaze. "Brave, hanh. I was afraid of what I might find if I returned. My family . . ." He drifted off, thumbing the nub of his finger.

She wouldn't let herself look away. "They must be missing you?"

Pirbhai had been slouched against the broom, but now he resumed scraping the fronds across the floor, faster than before.

"It's my duty as the eldest . . . and soon I'll have land. I'm taking care of it." He turned his back to shake the broom over the doorstep. She had said the wrong thing. Standing, she swatted the dust from her calves, then stopped.

"I'm the eldest too," she said, fixing her eyes on his poised neck, as sunbaked and cracked as a cow pat. "There's a lot for us to watch over. But sometimes I wonder, who's watching out for us?"

He did not turn around, but the swish of the broom stopped. From her pocket she pulled two sticky dates that she'd filched from the box that Deddy had bought from the handcart in the morning. She peeled the dates apart, the syrupy flesh clinging like fingers, and placed one on the shelf near his sleeping sack. Again, she felt his eyes on her as she walked away.

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It was a year later that Deddy came to Sonal with his proposition, shaking her awake before the sun. Mummy was already up too, skimming the malai off a pot of milk. Sonal's eyes were gummy and her head pulsed. She had forced herself to stay awake the previous night until all her siblings were asleep, humming low until their faces melted. It had been cold, the ground hard beneath them, and Deddy was not yet on his sleeping mat. Those evenings, her body thrummed like a vulture above the brush. On bad days she would hear Deddy careening through the shop, cursing as he took inventory, as he counted the money they didn't have. Nine children was enough to sustain a business, but too many to be sustained. As the eldest, and a daughter, she often took the blame.

Even now, she could feel the wobble of her left canine, knocked loose by Deddy's palm. That time, Sonal had blamed Mummy. "You don't care about me," she cried, "you never have." She was indignant, blazing with the injustice, not that she had been hurt but that she hadn't been protected. Mummy said little, merely smoothed a paste of crushed leaves soaked in oil over the bruises, her heavy hands working fast. "Don't touch," she cautioned as Sonal winced. When Mummy walked away, Sonal wiped off the warm oil, not wanting to give her mother the satisfaction of doing so little and believing it enough. Her fingers came away stinging and bitter.

This time, the night air was still. When Deddy emerged from the shop, adrenaline simmered under her skin. But his step was light and careful as he trod around the small bodies lumped under the sheets. When he passed her, he paused, meeting her eyes through the dark. "Sleep off, dikri," he murmured, and walked to his own mat.

It was so early when Deddy woke her the next morning that only the loneliest birds were calling out, their fragile cries piercing the indigo sky. Then Deddy told her that she would marry the coolie and move

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with him to Kampala to work in Deddy's cousins' pharmacy and send money back here. They would cross the border from Kenya to Uganda and make a new life.

Immediately, Sonal looked at Mummy. Here, finally, would be a sign that her mother cared for her, and she waited for Mummy to fight to keep her as Deddy tried to send her away. But when she met Mummy's eyes over the steaming pot, a plea burned there instead, bright and sure. She knew then that it had been Mummy's idea. And she knew, too, why Deddy had woken her before the birds, before the neighbours, before her brothers and sisters—so that she couldn't yell, couldn't even ask questions, could only sit with her tongue frozen in her mouth, as silent as her mother.

Days later, Sonal overheard Deddy speaking to Pirbhai. She was bathing her sister with a bucket at the end of the yard, her arms soaked to the elbow as wet trails of dirt trickled down the girl's shoulders. Whenever Sonal passed Pirbhai she'd wondered if he knew. She had heard that Kampala was orderly, neat streets of whitewashed government buildings and the whole city split up into different quarters—European, Asian, African—so different from the tangle of banana and cashew trees here and the way Indian groundnut sellers mingled with African barbers, trading this for that and chatting under the long shade of the mbuyu tree. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to exist apart like that, to draw lines through the same soil. She wanted to ask if he had thought about marriage before, if he was imagining it all those times she caught his gaze lingering on her, studying the small stud in her left nostril or the white half-moons of her fingernails. She too had found herself roving his face, the way his top lip protruded when he focused, how his shins were scored like mango bark. But she feared sounding childish, worried she'd make him laugh in that way

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he sometimes did when Mummy-Deddy poked fun at him, a hacking sound peeling from his throat, his eyes black pits.

She watched now as Pirbhai approached Mummy, who was crouched over a pot on the fire. She poured chai into a tin cup, but when he turned to take it back to his quarters, Mummy slapped the wet spoon against his shin.

"My husband wants to talk to you," she said gravely. Deddy emerged from behind the dividing wall at the back of the compound, where the toilet pit collected black flies, and squatted beside them. Sonal worked suds into her sister's hair, not wanting to show that she was listening. Her sister cooed and slapped at the water, and when Sonal next looked up, Pirbhai was clawing his fingers into the rusted ground.

"Uncle, I can work harder, I'll wake up earlier—" he was stuttering.

Sonal paused, confused about what Deddy had told him to make him act this way. Deddy held up a hand.

"Bas. You have served us well, but you can't stay here any longer. I have watched you, and I see you are a careful worker, and becoming a good man."

Pirbhai's face drained of colour. Deddy blew on his tea.

"Thank you," Pirbhai finally croaked.

"Look at him, so scared." Mummy snorted. "Straighten your back, son. These coolies, always looking down."

Pirbhai's spine snapped straight. Deddy laughed with Mummy, but their expressions were warm. Then Deddy boxed his shoulders and told Pirbhai what Sonal knew. She watched, not bothering to look busy, even as her sister tugged at her hair and dribbled water down her kurti.

"But . . . why?" Pirbhai asked.

"You told me you were honest, and you've proved yourself true. You may be simple, but you are noble. It's time for my eldest to marry, and together you can increase our family's fortunes. You can help us more if you leave, make a life for yourself and my daughter." Deddy's

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eyes twinkled. "I'm a businessman, see? I know a good investment when I see one."

Sonal was holding her breath. Pirbhai gazed from one parent to the other, both silent now, their faces expectant. Then he turned to her. His forehead was heavy, but when he saw her the lines softened away.

Instead of looking down as she knew she should, Sonal stared straight back. His eyes searched hers, unmoored. Something in her opened. She wiped the hair off her forehead and left a wet smear there, glistening like sand in the sun.

When Sonal and Pirbhai were ready to leave, only the children cried. Weighed down by a satchel that Mummy had packed full, Sonal lifted her chin as she said goodbye. Pirbhai toed at a bristled caterpillar in the dirt. Deddy planted a light kiss on Sonal's forehead, then mumbled an excuse about checking on the shop and disappeared inside. Several of the children clung onto them, mashing their snotty faces into their clean travelling clothes. Sonal stroked their hair and whispered soothing words, promising to be back. Sniffling, they turned to the dukan.

Nanu stood to the side, holding the muscles of his face tight as a mask. Standing there with his arms behind his back, taller than Sonal now, he appeared almost a man, but the round of his cheeks betrayed him, as did the anxious waver of his eyebrows as Sonal approached. She wanted to fold him into her arms, rock him to sleep as she had all those years. Instead she cupped his chin and said, "You have to take care of them now."

A boyish fear slid across his face; then it was gone, and he tipped back his head and shrugged. "Don't worry, sister," he said.

When it was time to go, Mummy made no move to embrace either of them. Hands hidden in the folds of her sari, she stood before the door, legs wide and feet planted into the soil as if to say she would never leave.

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"Aawjo, Mummy," Sonal said.

"Thank you for everything," Pirbhai added.

Still, Mummy said nothing, her lips pressed together, her breath whistling through her nose. She was solid, unmoving, and she held her posture as they turned toward the road. When Sonal glanced back, she was still there, watching them, and for a moment Sonal considered Pirbhai's mother, and wondered if she too had gone silent with the loss of her child, powerless to do anything but stand and wait for their return.

The wind cracked against the tarp above their heads, the only separation between their bodies and the night. An owl crooned and Pirbhai shuddered at the feral sound. As they moved inland toward Uganda, past the reaches of the railroad, Pirbhai had receded further into himself. They were travelling west, following the curve of Lake Victoria, hitching rides where they could on donkey carts transporting pumpkins and sacks of cassava. "If only the train went this way," Sonal had joked once, to which Pirbhai had not responded.

The sun held them apart, his skin darkening next to her wheatish brown, but in the moonlight they were the same. Sonal stroked her thumb against his breastbone.

"It's okay," he said, to her, to himself, she wasn't sure.

Sonal laughed. "What else scares you?"

Her hair was matted where it had slipped out of her braid, and there were bluish smudges on her shoulder from carrying the bags, which she had refused to let him take. She wondered if her demeanour surprised him now that they were alone, but away from her family she felt loosened, the voice she had scarcely made known in the dukan now liberated. *A married woman*, she kept repeating to herself as they walked, her mangalsutra a new force between her breasts.

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"Having nowhere left to go. And . . ." He faltered.

"And?" When he spoke she could focus on nothing else, his words rising to her from some cloudy place that she desperately wanted to know.

"Being alone," he finished.

She nodded, remembering the panic in his face when he'd thought Deddy was kicking him out. Then she sat up, her tunic shrugging off one shoulder, and grasped his hands in her own. She traced her thumb over the stub of his middle finger, which he'd admitted had been sliced clean by a rock hammer on the railway. He winced, though he'd said there was no pain anymore. But the gesture was intimate, as if she could feel the memory that lived in that space, as if by touching it she was absorbing some of the past.

"My family too," she said. "We had to leave them."

Pirbhai touched her cheek, his eyes urgent. "What your family did for me. When so much was taken—I didn't deserve their kindness. They gave me a home."

Sonal was moved by his disclosure, so vulnerable it had the air of a confession. "Listen." She pressed his palm against her so that he might feel the blood surging beneath her goosefleshed skin. On the previous nights they had touched, their curious mouths finding each other in the dark. But this was different: the insistence of her hand on his, the desire to bear something for him, not offering but simply taking what she could, so that now, held between them, its weight lessened.

"We'll keep carrying them," she murmured, and Pirbhai squeezed her hand back, and she knew he would do everything he could to hold on.

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Sonal, 1917

Sonal eyed her daughters from the outdoor hearth down the lane from their home. Blue tongues of fire licked her bare arms as she slapped a bhakri over the flame. The ground beneath her chappals was littered with foil candy wrappers, the marketplace reclaimed from the swamps. She shifted her squat, the weight of her thickening belly grinding down on her knees.

The girls were playing war with the neighbours' children, hollering and kicking up red dust. A fair-skinned boy had smudged charcoal under his eyes and shouldered a niimu branch like a rifle. Some of the other girls were clasping their fists and crying, playing abandoned wives, but Sonal's two girls had tied Pirbhai's handkerchiefs around their heads like nurses. Her eldest, Sarita, was smoothing a paste of mud over another child's calf, the flick of her wrists reminiscent of Sonal's own hands as she worked. Sonal chuckled. Sarita was practically born in the pharmacy, and now at ten years old she was methodical, attuned to the smallest shifts in the wind. But not Varsha. Sonal watched now as her younger daughter tore the kerchief from her hair and stamped it into the dirt, then grabbed for the rifle in the boy's arms. The boy jabbed the branch into her flat chest and yelled, *DSHOOM*.

"Mumma!" Varsha screamed, clutching her heart as if a wound really bloomed there. The smell of burnt lott surged. Sonal pushed to her feet, but the bulk of her belly rocked her back and the ground swam.

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Inside her, the baby kicked in protest. When her vision settled, she saw that Sarita had already collected Varsha in her arms, covering her sticky hair with kisses. She glanced at Sonal with a stern eye that seemed to say, *you stay there*.

Sonal sighed. Most days she couldn't believe she had another one on the way. Their room was stuffed full, partitioned from the next family only by a row of shorn gunny sacks pinned to the ceiling. Between sending money back to Sonal's parents in Kisumu and to Pirbhai's family in Porbandar, they had barely enough for themselves. But Pirbhai was adamant that they send money to his mother every month, his brow furrowed as he slowly drafted the letters. The previous month he had sent a little extra to support the marriage of his youngest sister; though he was often private about what he wrote in his letters—out of modesty or embarrassment at his fledgling script, Sonal wasn't sure—this time he'd asked Sonal how to write *many happy returns of the day*. "Our girls matter too," Sonal had snapped, but she too felt the tether of her siblings' lives.

It was mere weeks after Varsha's birth when the neighbours began bringing around ghee-soaked gund pak rolled with poppy seeds to encourage the womb to conceive a boy. Sonal had thanked the doting kakis, then buried the sweets in the yard. They never spoke of it, but Pirbhai seemed to agree that they would stop trying. Maybe when things are easier, they thought. After we get our land, Pirbhai once said. This pregnancy, years later, came as a surprise. But Sonal caught the glitter of hope in Pirbhai's eye when she told him, the shine that only the prospect of a boy could elicit.

She dusted ash from her fingertips. The fair-skinned boy had abandoned his gun and was squatted beneath the matunda vine with the rest of the children, playing seven stones. What good was it to bring a boy into this world? It was wartime. Sonal had watched boys with skin as hairless as babies heading to the front line in Tanganyika, looking like mules laden with their tin debe and sleeping bags. Maybe

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once, a boy child meant permanence, continuity, but now it meant only heartbreak.

Sonal tucked the bhakri into her kikapu, brimming with leaves and berries she'd collected to brew dawa, and signalled to her girls that she was heading home. She passed the whitewashed walls of the pharmacy, a chalky replica of the buildings in the European quarters, marked with shaky English letters that read DRUG-STOR. Behind it, Kampala's hills rose high, their dense neighbourhood hidden between the verdant folds. A mzee on a bicycle sped past, the air in his wake scented like salted groundnuts. She paused to retch into the bush before realizing she was ravenous. When she reached the stoop of their home, the women gathered out front shuffled to make room, clucking at her sweaty cheeks and pulling the kikapu from her arms.

"It's peak sun, Sonal, come sit," Meena said, dabbing her hairline with her dupatta.

Sonal obliged, her knees on fire. The women could often be found here in the afternoons, taking refuge from the heat and their responsibilities for a few moments of gossip and cane juice. Afiya, who Sonal had first met at the pharmacy when her son had malaria, pulled a guava from her wrapper and held it out. Only once Sonal had swallowed the pulpy flesh, scraping the skin until no white remained, could she speak.

"This baby thinks I'm a rich woman," she said. "Always wanting me to eat."

Afiya laughed and spat her own guava peel into the dirt. "You're looking low. Surely a boy."

"Ndiyo, girls always sit higher in the womb, closer to the heart," Shilpa kaki said.

"Let's just hope your husband is around to see him," Meena said.

Sonal cocked her head. The sun poured over her face and she squinted to see Meena's mouth forming a grim line. "Where would he go?"

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