

THE HOUSE OF SONGS

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O troupe of little vagrants of the world, leave your footprints in my words.

– Rabindranath Tagore

The professor looked hopelessly at his bird. Sleeping!

How does it manage to sleep through such noise, he thought. The professor noted the tiny feathers, like hatch marks around its eyes and the eyelids smooth as green crepe and closed with the finality of a theater curtain. The bird's head was tucked forward like a sleeping airline passenger's, its claws dug into the small branch on which it stood. How wonderful to sleep. Sleep while the world is burning—what do you care? All the forests clear-cut and sending up smoke, the extinctions, the smog, the traffic, not to mention the squealing of the gate across the street. That gate!

Who was that gate keeping out? Nobody. And why a gate made of scrap metal and installed with rusty, screaming hinges? A policeman had told him, "Oh sir, it's for the traffic only. So many people coming to see Rabindranath's house!" But since then, the professor had never seen the gate actually used to close off the narrow lane he lived on. It was an unremarkable street, disproportionately crowned by the ancestral home of Tagore, a home the professor had never bothered to visit. Rather, he watched resentfully as the overlarge cars full of tourists on their way to the house navigated between the high walls on either side of the street. During the hours in which Tagore's house was open, the cars sat bumper-to-bumper, "horning" as they called it in India. The squeal of the gate rose above the din, a wretched cry, as for humanity.

It was the neighborhood children who controlled the gate. They gathered at it, swung on it, pushed it back and forth just to hear the metal whine. They're like all children, the professor thought, who have to torture something before they realize that they, too, can inflict pain. Then they persist at it for the rest of their lives. The professor knew full well that this was a country entirely devoted to children. It must simply be the greatest place in the world for them. In India, they were doted on—if they weren't orphans or impoverished—and they seemed to have infinite freedoms. He'd seen children wandering the cramped lane with no clothes on, absolutely free of inhibition. It was as though the Indians understood that childhood was an alternate universe in which shame had no place. No Indian, the professor mused, must ever dream of getting on a bus naked or standing before a class without their pants on.

The professor did not like children, or at least never desired one. Still, he had moved here, where their taunting voices echoed through his small apartment with its terrazzo floors and shaded rooms. He left his small apartment in Miami with *its* terrazzo floors and shaded rooms and rarely regretted it. He had lived in that Miami apartment for most of his adult life. When he first saw this house, though it needed a radical overhaul, he felt immediately accustomed to it. But he especially liked the large patio on which he now sat with his bird. It was a rooftop patio with a view onto the street and onto the patios of his neighbors who, during the hot season, stood before him pouring buckets of water over their heads. So accustomed to their public bathing were they that often they waved in the midst of their ablutions, which cheered but confounded him.

Perhaps he was comforted to know that he, too, was observed. "What country?" his neighbors had asked. "Cuba," he'd answered, though he had only the faintest memories of Cuba,

none of which his parents corroborated. That was where he'd spent his own naked days of infancy (surely never naked in public, and never far from powders and baby clothes), before his parents escaped, fearing that their well appointed home would be commandeered by ruthless guerillas. Havana was something they pined over, something they'd lost. After the revolution, it ceased to exist in the present. They wanted Cuba the way it had been, but the way it had been scared them. Neighbors they had known for years were suddenly transformed, their envy showing in their eyes and teeth. The world--once so cushioned and heavy with ornament--was stripped down to its working wires. Their last year in Havana was like a dream in which wild boars chased through their living room and slept on their velvet couches, where the solid, intricately papered walls of the study and vast living room were thin as cardboard, holes punched out and the arms of the needy thrust through.

The family quickly packed their most precious things over the course of two evenings, paid off a private pilot, and left the country. They put their fortune to work in America and, after struggling to arrive at a point of greater resplendence than they'd known in Cuba, life became real for them again. Miami race tracks, yacht clubs and attorneys. Eventually, they opened a nightclub on Miami Beach where Cuban musicians wore white flowing sleeves cinched at the wrists and shook lacquered maracas. The professor remembered watching his mother smoking, an eyebrow painted as though permanently lifted, and a sugar-rimmed glass in hand. His father wandered through the crowd, the smile of someone minting money from others' momentary lapses in judgment--spending too much, boasting too much--his pocket stuffed with embargoed cigars.

The professor thought. America is where you go when the veneer of your former life is scratched away. To live in America is to see the rest of the world as a troubled Arcadia, an unstable paradise that can only be recreated with fake palms and cultural costumes. It was that cloying sentimentality that the professor had always hated in his parents, how they recollected their tobacco plantations with misty eyes. Their own employees, his mother had bemoaned, had set the fields alight. "People we had employed for twenty years!"

By moving to India, the professor had broken with their hypocritical connection to homelands, old or new. He had rejected the idea that there was no other habitable world outside America. Kolkata was as far from Miami as he could get, but somehow not so different. By the time he left Miami, Cuban vendors stood on traffic islands selling mangoes, and little shops proliferated with candles and oils used in Santeria worship. Kolkata had its own *puja* shops, with different gods, but both places had their vendors, dangling fruit like misshapen appendages. People were not so unfamiliar. Everyone likes to feel a cold floor under his or her feet in the summer. Everyone appreciates sweets and bright flowers. In this way, people were not so unlike each other and not so unlike birds.

He loved Kolkata from his very first visit. He had first chosen to go there to affront his mother. It had always been easy to do; in fact, she appeared to invite it. She would gasp or bite her finger, as though her life had become a poorly acted drama.

"*Lococito*," she had pleaded, holding his face with one hand, eyeing him critically the way she would anything she planned to purchase. "Why would you want to go there--to *India*? It's so dirty and poor."

"Because that's the future," he had told her. "We'll all be returned to dirt and poverty."

"Ay, no!" she said, pushing him away with the same hand she had used to hold his chin.

It was 1977 when he first flew there, his mother's entreaties still in his ears. He was 28 years old, and he remembered the tiny shack that was Dum Dum airport. He sat on the hot

tarmac in a bus with a few other passengers. The bus waited until the next plane landed. In the meantime, he watched two boys, apparently employed to bang on the side of the bus and damage luggage as they hurled it on the roof, smacking each other on the tops of their heads.

When the bus finally departed, it was hours later, and all the other passengers had walked off out of frustration, taking cabs instead. But the professor had always been frugal. Not because he cared about money, but because he was slow to recognize inconvenience. Or rather, he liked challenges, anything that reminded him that the world wasn't as easy as his parents imagined it. His parents had mistaken their luck with a birthright, but after the revolution, they practiced Santeria, knowing that wealth, health, even sanity, could be stolen. In the doorway of their house they always kept an ashtray and a cigar for *Eleggua*, a guardian they claimed opened worlds and opportunities, but loved the finer things: cigar smoke, fish, rum and coconuts. Of course they worshipped a god that liked the finer things; it was a god they understood.

The more difficult the professor made his own life, the more able he was to define himself against theirs, to mark his life against the lulling contentment his parents mistook for blessings.

By the time the bus arrived at the center of the city, the two boys were clapping the professor on his head and he had taught them the word “bongo” which they hollered with every smack. Though the boys' aggressiveness would be impossible to tolerate for long, the professor liked their easy amusement. He noted their pants were held up by rope and they were both shirtless and seemingly smudged by ash. They looked like the children of his parents' workers, and from whom he was told to keep his distance. He remembered those children—or thought he had--running through the flaming tobacco fields on the night he and his parents left Cuba.

As the bus lumbered into Kolkata's tourist area, Free School Street, he remembered catching his first sight of the hammer and sickles painted on the walls. For his mother and father, iconic communist imagery had the same effect as hanging garlic before vampires. His father had slapped him when he had once brought home a copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. So when the professor realized that West Bengal was a communist state, he was even more enamored of it. This wasn't because he cared about communism, exactly. It was only because in America he was told it was dead or dying. His parents would have strangled it themselves. But there it was, alive, like some bad brother. It was alive and without shame and appeared naked in the streets. He had pulled the old *Brownie* camera from his bag, and to the amazement and disappointment of the boys who'd been clapping at his head, took a picture of the graffiti. That photograph was still with him, on a small altar he'd erected shortly after moving into his house. Kali and the communists were the pervasive spirits here. The spirits of destruction and renewal, though renewal seemed less likely, or necessary, at the professor's age. And his bird would probably not be awake for it.

Now, thirty years after he'd first come to Kolkata, the Professor looked off his balcony and saw the same hammer and sickles painted on the chalky walls. The same broken-down rickshaw pullers stood before them. Shocking that a communist government, after all this time, couldn't even find a viable alternative to hand-pulled rickshaws. He'd seen the school children in their pressed uniforms carried by those wizened men, legs deep in floodwaters. The rickshaw pullers would then ring their big copper bells, waiting for fares. In the evenings, former communists--now Unilever employees and computer engineers--would fall out of the Park Street bars and heft themselves on the old rickshaws, and blather to the men who pulled them, about the bleary, wonderful night they'd had. Oh, they had earned every star in the sky! Not even a hint of reservation had he seen in those former communists' faces; they were too drunk

on how their fortunes had changed, their Naxalite history something they'd boast about after a few drinks decorated with paper umbrellas, the same drink umbrellas the professor had seen in his father's nightclub, a symbol of leisure, apparently, as enduring as the hammer and sickle.

Indeed, leisure was on everyone's mind, evoked in the billboards cropping up around Kolkata, where white children ran around glittering pools--the next construction project, courtesy of some gulf state development company. Despite the mournful sound of those copper bells in the rickshaw pullers' hands, the professor's neighbors were ever more convinced that prosperity gripped the nation. Foreign products were cramming their way in like all those vehicles pushing past the useless gate on his street. The communists, the professor read, were now advocating putting villagers to work in car manufacturing plants. The villages were becoming factories. The exotic India of his youth was crumbling. Kolkata was being eaten up by business like a crummy biscuit.

Even his parrot had lost interest in the city. Now the bird could sleep most of the day. Dreams must be the only thing one never tires of, the professor thought. But of late, he did not sleep easily. The mattresses they made in India were hard as stone. The electricity cut out in the evenings and during daytime naps, the fan would slowly grow motionless--a perch for mosquitoes. One was always reminded that the world's comforts could be turned off at a switch, just like that. Despite the professor's complaints of these small failures, it was exactly the inability to sustain illusions (that electricity was god-given and plentiful, that water was pure, and beds soft) that made India so appealing to him when he'd first arrived.

What could be better than to see the industriousness of people, to watch them pouring over Howrah Bridge in a vast wave that threatened to collapse the structure? All of it will collapse one day, for the weight of human souls on the earth is not unlike the weight of crowds on a suspension bridge. When the professor thought of an afterlife, which was only rarely and never for comfort, he imagined Howrah Bridge.

Dreams were starker here. You dreamt of rickety boats on gray water, imbalanced by a fat lady in a saree, gorging on sweetmeats. Or you dreamt of following a boy with buckets of hot water up thin muddy steps that continued past the tops of buildings. You dreamt of precariousness and labor and seesawing children and men with legs the thinness and texture of birds'. The machinations of daily life were on display, turning like the large, crooked wheels of hand-pulled rickshaws. Life was human toil. Even retired, the professor enjoyed his proximity to the grinding truth of existence: labor was eternal and above all. For a long time, he could see in his parrot's gaze a shared comprehension of this stinting world.

He leaned forward in his wicker chair and looked closely at the bird. Was it so unhappy? Depression, he knew, could make people sleep for days on end. But do parrots also sleep when they're depressed? A wave of guilt came over him, and he batted down his newspaper on his lap. The bird was housed, surely, in the largest bamboo cage one could find in Kolkata. It was so large he couldn't hang it. It sat near his chair on the back patio in view of all the other birds in the nearby trees, with the sounds of the world rising up and the tallows, polluted sunlight spilling over the patio floor.

Did the bird really desire the company of other birds so much? He wondered. Wasn't it enough to watch them cluster in the trees, enduring their ragged and squabbling associations, forced to steal nuts from vendor sacks and bitter berries from urban gardens? The other parrots were ruthless, ripping at stems, knocking fruit off the trees just to see it fall. But this bird had never ravaged anything. From the moment the professor had rescued it, it seemed happy to sit

still on that branch and watch the street, a few wingbeats away from Rabindranath's landscaped, chirpy courtyard.

"I don't think you could manage life on the street," the professor said aloud, hooking one finger through the bamboo slats of the cage and leaning closer. The bird dipped a little forward, as though its head were weighted. It would have snored if it made any utterance at all.

"Professorji," a man with a stooped back, and one hand behind it, called from the neighboring roof. He flapped his right hand excitedly and stood behind a row of clay pots in which plants suffered and turned brown. "There is a special program tonight at *Jorasanko*." (The name used to refer to Rabindranath's house). "All night they will be playing *Rabindrasangeet!*" (Rabindranath's songs – of which, the professor thought, there were far too many.) The professor had, over the years in Kolkata, heard hundreds of recitations. Strangers would offer to sing them a cappella or would invite him to their homes to play the songs on their harmoniums. Every husband, wife or daughter performed the *sangeet*, and the few times the professor actually went to a home to hear them, great effort would be made to translate the lyrics, but they were always impossibly simple, delighting in some natural abundance that no longer seemed imaginable in Kolkata or anywhere else. Truly, Bengalis lived with one foot in village clay. They could still weep over songs about stars and flowers and rivers. Folk culture was morbid, the professor thought. It doesn't differentiate between the living and the dead, the past or present.

"I won't be going tonight," he called back to the neighbor whose expression noticeably sank. "I'm too busy." He threw his arms out as if helpless. Though he often used that excuse, in that moment he realized how unoccupied he truly was. It was children in their blind cruelty that kept the wheels of life grinding forward, or the wizened laborers, even the dehydrated plants searching the dirt in their pots. A divine circle had been drawn around him and his parrot; they had no need of Tagore's fantasy of abundant nature, its rivers replenished in the monsoons, its nets full of fish. No need at all. Neither of them cared any longer about the wheel of life—whether it continued turning, came to a screeching halt, or dropped off altogether. Let them sing. He and his bird were on strike. Let the guerillas come down from the hills with their torches, let the sun burn away the rivers, and great clouds of exhaust, thick as men, wander the cities. Kolkata had never been an easy place to live, so no need of promises of ease to come.

He purchased the Kolkata house with money left from his father's estate; that was in 1990. After a series of convoluted and grave transactions conducted by a harried lawyer he had hired, a man whose betel-stained teeth made him look like a corpse-eater, and whose head dripped constantly with nervous sweat, the professor was able to strike a deal, though it was never clear with whom. After hours of sharing puffed rice with bureaucrats in vast government offices, where ceilings were seemingly held up by sheaves of yellowing paper, the professor finally settled in the city he loved, ready to live out the last years of his allotted time in a place that, in more ways than most, was unaffected by time. Even the city's resplendent past—the Victorian edifices, the Birla planetarium dome, just looked like cake shaken from a hungry child's fingers. He liked the lack of new paint in the city, that trees grew through the floors and windows of old houses, and that the trolley cars were slower than walking.

He considered moving from the patio to his living room recliner when he heard a key in the front door. "Professorji?" a woman's voice came. "Are you outside?"

"Come, Labonie," he called, closing the newspaper on his lap. The woman was in her twenties now, but the professor could not forget how he'd first seen her. Indeed, that image of her had always been the strongest, and all the years that followed were like watching a river up

close, its surface changes just glints and glare. She was ten or twelve years old when he'd first seen her, though he was not good at guessing the ages of children.

During the long days of negotiating the house, he stayed in a rambling hotel on Free School Street. He settled into a habit of eating banana pancakes in the mornings and reading for hours in the *Maidan*, the lovely park known as the city's lungs. Then one day, as he returned to the hotel, he spotted a girl on her haunches, sloshing the hotel laundry in the water from a fire hydrant. He stopped walking and ordered a tea on the corner (that was when chai was still served in clay cups, not the thin little plastic ones they use today) and watched her twisting his father's *guayabera*. She had withdrawn the shirt from a lump of beaten clothes; it was lemon yellow, with four pockets and ornate white stitching. The girl rummaged every pocket and threw it back down on the pile, rubbing her nose with the back of her hand. The professor had been wearing his father's shirts since the funeral in Miami—not sentimentally (he was surprised by his tears at the graveside; they had come while holding his mother's shoulders, suddenly so narrow) but because the shirt was perfect for the sweltering heat in Kolkata. He had taken many of them, a pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses, and his father's accordion. The instrument was purely obligatory; he couldn't play it, could barely heft it, but he felt he could not leave it.

The professor was startled but not outraged to see his laundry being pounded out on the filthy sidewalk, and children, not even tall enough to spool out the bed sheets to full length, in charge of the operations. That was Kolkata! He had walked over to the children and stood over them disapprovingly, and they had begun that mewling he heard so often from the needy, "Baba, Baba, Baba...school pen!" But Labonie had looked up at him sharply; a look he later saw when she came out of his bathroom in her first school uniform, or when he walked her into shops she normally would have been barred from. She broke that first gaze with the professor and turned it on the other kids, hollering at them in Bangla. The professor imagined she commanded them, '*pay attention to your work. Stop begging!*' because they were quickly silent, their eyes still wide with pleading.

It was the hotel owner who later explained to him that Labonie's parents were revolutionaries, that she was an orphan. He claimed that by providing her a job doing the wash, he was fulfilling an obligation to the girl's parents who had apparently suggested, should anything happen to them, that he take care of her.

"They were very clever," the hotel proprietor said, shaking his head meaningfully. "They must have known the police would discover them. That was how the police handled Naxal fighters—they hunted them down." (The Naxals still regularly make the news; though, as far as revolutionary groups go, they are treated as an ongoing nuisance, a revolution happening in such slow motion that it appears pixilated, perhaps not happening at all, but decaying celestially). The hotel manager reached for a toothpick and jiggled it between two teeth. He returned to writing in his ledger.

At first the professor hadn't trusted the story; it was a convenient excuse for exploiting the child. He remained standing at the manager's desk, pondering if this was an elaborate hoax. But, as if to certify the veracity of his story, the manager opened a drawer, pulled out his battered wallet, and withdrew from it a photograph of a thin, shirtless man, and a small woman with a stripe of red powder in the part of her waist-length hair. They stood erect, arms around each other, behind an almost sepia-colored tangle of reeds.

That night, the professor thought of the girl and her parents, huddled somewhere in a jungle camp outside Kolkata, her parents dreaming they would participate in the revolution, raise their daughter in the optimism of a new world where the hungry were full, the poor united.

In the meantime, they stretched out together under stars on a thin blanket, the moist ground bleeding through. He wondered if the girl had slept easily between them, or if she had been there when the police had shone their flashlights in their eyes and shot them, point blank.

Labonie had never spoken of their deaths; not even years later when she had become fluent in English and he had asked her directly. She had memories: walking through the forest, carrying a gun herself, but never, she said, firing it. She remembered sitting at kindled fires, many people bent forward trying to grab what heat they could. She remembered being cold. The picture of them, which the professor later obtained from the hotel owner, was now on his mantle, and Labonie brought strung flowers from the market and placed them there each week to honor them.

He had never intended to take her in. He thought the very idea of taking a child from his or her environment a kind of brutality. It had started simply enough; he wanted only to buy her clothing. She was a street child, wearing an ice cream-stained t-shirt and a dress with hems that swept the gutters. By simply attempting to buy her clothes, he began to make enemies. The local shopkeepers glowered at her when he took her inside. It didn't matter that they thought he was an American; in those moments, he was just another taken-in fool. The professor was pulled aside by many of them; *she is a street child*, he was warned. *You cannot bring her in here. The others will want to come inside.* It was true. The other orphans stood clustered outside the doors, sucking wooden Popsicle sticks, waiting for Labonie to come back out. They didn't beg, just looked on with sad, jostling astonishment. Labonie would glower back at the shopkeepers with that look the professor had first seen when he saw her washing clothes. She had never stopped resenting them, the people in their street-level shops, selling paan and packets of detergent. For her, they enforced the rigid stratification she had always known. The professor learned quickly that he would have to work diligently to separate her from those who all too readily imagined a life appropriate to her circumstances.

Yet it was the professor who had told her that the boys she once played with on the street she must now avoid. It had all been so painfully difficult. She did not remember being happy during those initial days away from the streets; she remembered how hard it was to say goodbye to the place where she apparently knew her strengths.

Fortunately, the professor's house was far from Free School Street, and when he finally moved in, and introduced Labonie to her room (a simple periwinkle trim had been added to hint at a child's occupancy) he was also able to introduce her as his daughter; she no longer had a troop of little children behind her, each of them with needs as obvious as if they'd carried sacks on their small backs. After the bureaucracy of buying a house, the professor could not imagine undertaking a real adoption. He had not set out with any plan for her, except to educate her. Over the following years he had often considered the legal steps it would have taken. For all the time he spent dodging questions, making excuses, and employing his attorney to create passable documents for her school entrance, it would have been easier for him to adopt her, but he resisted.

Now, a grown woman, Labonie stood in the patio doorway, holding blue daisies.

"These are for you," she said. "Shall I put them in a vase?" She was very tall, like her father, and had her mother's long wavy hair. She had somehow absorbed the professor's Cuban accent, though no one in Kolkata recognized it as such. Labonie was often mistaken for an American, an error the professor loathed, but Labonie found amusing. Indeed, she had come to find much amusing about the vicissitudes of her life, plucked from the street and poured into a

school uniform, given a room in his home, provided tutors, and eventually sent to study writing at Stanford.

After an initial resentment to learning English, she took to the language, a vast, clear aquarium in which she could perform, even show off. She read *Jane Eyre* when she was fifteen and provided lengthy summaries of its plot at the large dinner table they shared. She wrote stories and sewed them like Emily Dickinson's hand-bound poems. She wrote about orphans with special sensitivities and gifts, and this heartened the professor who thought it a good sign of her nascent social consciousness. He had suggested she stay and study in India, but he could not stop her when she was admitted with a full scholarship.

As the day came closer to her departure, in a fit of pique, he used the word "deracinated" as a kind of threat, and felt immediately mortified by the word. He only wanted her to have a homeland, a mother tongue. He did not want her to feel more at home in America, as his parents had. He did not want to meddle with her *Indian-ness*, whatever that was, however unjust it might have been if he had not intervened. But he had. He had pulled her from the other street children and their roughhouse games, and had taken her ill-fitting clothes, her *fate*, and thrown them away. He had insisted that she be educated in English so that Indians or Americans or anyone else could not dictate her opportunities. When she would say, and she often did, that she'd been graced by *Lakshmi*, the goddess of good fortune, the Professor felt both grateful and disappointed, for on the one hand, invoking the goddess was exactly that vague Indian thing he'd hoped to preserve in her, and on the other hand, it was not a world of "fortune" that he wanted her to acknowledge, but a world of revolutionary possibility. Her story could be the story of every street child, but she frowned at such a statement, with such committed disbelief, he wondered if she hadn't become a reactionary.

Sometimes she called the professor 'Father Uncle,' which he allowed. Uncle was a common, affectionate term in Bengal; Father Uncle was one of those strange constructions she enjoyed because it confused nearly everyone. It was an honest confusion, though, suggestive of his entire approach to caring for her. He had always seen himself as a kind of patron, a patron of the revolution that never happened. He provided her opportunities, but never saw his role as an actual parent. He protected her as best he could; but he also felt she had to see the world clearly, and that meant he had to allow her to understand the uniqueness of her opportunities—how rare it was to be provided for—just as he had to acknowledge his own situation as the son of successful Cuban capitalists. Over time, though, his affection for her—his admiration, too—began to blur the distinctions between patronage and fathering. He wondered, isn't adoption just the legal administration of a kind of love? Did it matter if he was a non-legal or legal guardian? And what part did her feelings play? Shouldn't he defer to her feelings after all these years? She had made more sacrifices to adapt to him, after all. If she really wanted him to properly adopt her, she could say so. He remembered her crying over school lessons; swinging her feet angrily under the table at the air-conditioned restaurants he took her to. When she was a teenager, she would accusingly yell at him, "Why did you take me anyway?" He did not want to patronizingly say that he wanted her to have a chance at life. He would pull his glasses down and say, "Because I had a spare room, the size of a small girl."

Now she stood in the patio doorway in jeans and a thin, cotton blouse with hand-stitched flowers on its collar. Her wavy hair was pulled back and her eyes shone with mischief. "I brought these as a provocation," she said. "Aren't you going to comment on them?" She shook the daisies at him, taunting him, as though the bouquet was a feather duster.

"They're absolutely hideous." The professor rose to his feet.

“You’re very critical of the local florist,” she laughed. “You’ve always been too hard on him.”

“His shop looks like a butcher shop—only it’s blue dye that pours into his gutters instead of blood,” the professor said. “They are the most unnatural looking things.” He put them to his face. “But anything coming from you is lovely.” It was true. The most modest of her gestures delighted him. In this case, blue daisies. He had missed her. Continued to miss her. Her years at Stanford had dragged on. She called weekly, and he would make sure to be home for the times she did. He was crushed when she couldn’t call. Her life had become busy, cluttered with American friends, with the cluttering activity of the America he’d escaped. His life had slowed, as though a large, imperceptible birdcage had settled over it. She had returned from the university with a fiancée, an Indian man, also from West Bengal.

“Go figure,” she said, “I’d have to go to California to find a Bengali husband.” She had returned to India just two months earlier, and had spent much of that time in her fiancée’s family’s village. The professor had offered them both to stay in his home—her home. There was plenty of space but it would have been frowned on before the wedding. He did not ask Labonie if she was playing out the cultural conventions for her fiancée or his family. He wasn’t sure if the question would have embarrassed her, or if it embarrassed him. He wasn’t sure if he had raised her to be liberated from such traditions, or to practice them by choice. He wasn’t sure if it was ever a question she had considered.

“Stay there,” she said, putting her hand gently on his shoulder. “I’ll put these in water and I’ll be right back.”

The professor did not return to his chair, but followed her into the house. He could smell the jasmine flowers woven into one thick braid at the back of her head.

Sensing him behind her, Labonie said, “Ranjan and I would like you to come to tonight’s program. I know you don’t like Rabindra’s songs, but Ranjan will be performing. It’s just here--at *Jorasanko*.”

“Yes, yes. I’ve heard. Our half-naked neighbor informed me.” The man was off his balcony now, no doubt napping.

She put the blue daisies in a yellow vase and arranged them.

The professor looked from a window down at the street, at the boys in their grubby clothes, swinging on the gate, and the SUVs, crawling in a slow line, shiny black carapaces.

“I do like Ranjan very much,” the professor said, still watching the procession. “Very much! But I just don’t have the patience for all those songs about forests and rivers.”

Labonie began to sing. “*Aj jyotsna raate....*” She had a lovely voice, and her whole face lifted delicately to emulate the flight of the notes, her fingers also lifted as though she were pulling invisible thread. “*Shobhai geche bone....*”

The Professor knew this song. Someone had translated it for him years ago, and he remembered it had something to do with everyone going out to the river at night. It was a beautiful melody. He imagined Labonie’s parents making their way along the gray banks, wrapped in their handspun shawls, a light mist and the sun dropping rapidly—that magnificent orange sun which spoke to everyone still in Bengal, announcing the end of the day, the end of toil, the culmination of struggle. Labonie stopped singing. She was looking at him with amusement.

“One day I’m going to get you to come out. Ranjan and I are your family, you know.” She went to the picture of her parents. She rearranged the flowers she’d brought them just two days before. The professor looked at her bare feet on the terrazzo. They had been hennaed. The

professor considered how she'd learned to take her shoes off before entering a home, before he'd ever told her to do so and before he'd ever paid for her to learn English or any of the many subjects she was so good at. She had absorbed--as if by osmosis--deference, composure, assuredness, humor, an appreciation of art and music. Had this come from her parents, or Rabindranath, or the children whom he could not rescue, whom he still dreamt of today—orphans that may be carrying water buckets up the steps of the hotels on Free School Street?

Just then, the shrill screams of children rose again from the gate, and the professor asked, "Labonie? You were never one of those awful children, were you?"

"I imagine I was," she said, smiling, with a tenderness that gave the professor a sad satisfaction. "I used to hit the boys on the tops of their heads when they didn't listen to me. I was very brutal. I used to threaten other kids that I'd break their knees if they didn't do the things I wanted them to do."

"That is so charming," the professor said. "You've always known the power of subtlety." Then he helped her position the vase on a highboy before the window's wooden shutters. "And thank you for the alien daisies." He began walking toward his chair in the living room, a large, wicker recliner with cushions he'd had especially sewn, and that were more comfortable than his bed.

"Labonie," the Professor asked, "would you mind bringing my sweater?"

"Of course not," she said, moving silently through the living room and into his bedroom. When she returned, the professor was reclining, an old *Guardian* over his lap. He looked down at his spotted hands. When did his hands become so old looking? He had only turned sixty. I've had the life I wanted, he thought in consolation. *The world is burning itself on a pyre. But I didn't do it too much harm. I tried my best.*

"It occurred to me," he said, leaning forward as Labonie draped the sweater over his shoulders, "that we've stopped dreaming of a world where everybody has what they need." He was not thinking of her, but his bird, his bird's dreams. There were still Naxalites in various parts of the country, but their efforts were being eroded, not by the police so much as a few wealthy businessmen that led Indians to believe, despite the many children still working at tea stalls and pounding laundry, that prosperity was a flower that could bloom in any hand. Perhaps the revolutionary promise of equality had never really been appealing to most. And these days, with the planet catching fire, and every last tree being cut down to feed it, there might simply not be enough to go around. Perhaps humans were better than god; they at least imagined things like justice, whereas gods had only created the situations necessary to imagine it.

"People still dream," Labonie assured the professor, her hands on his shoulders. "There are still good people in the world."

"And I suppose Ranjan is a good person?"

"Of course. Why would I marry someone who isn't good?" she asked with mild alarm.

"So that you could make him good," he said.

She slapped the professor lightly on the head then began to knead his shoulders, and the professor relaxed under the pressure she applied, until—like his bird—his head fell forward.

He said forlornly, "Try not to be disappointed in the world, Labonie. I'm afraid I've influenced you with my skepticism."

"You're silly," she said. "If anything, you've made me an optimist."

Labonie brought Ranjan to meet the professor two months earlier, and the three of them had sat on the patio, eating *mishti doi* and sipping tea that Labonie made with extra cardamon.

Her fiancé was an English PhD., only now he was interested in trying his hand at film. He was alert, a bit formal at first, and clearly wanting to impress the professor. The professor couldn't tell if Ranjan's suit was ill fitting, or if the country made him seem so awkward in it. The professor had been wearing a *lungi* and a *guayabera*.

"Has Labonie told you much about us?" he asked.

"She talks the world of you," the man said. The professor thought he should behave as though he were vetting the young man. He felt a little like a fraud in the process, and found himself annoyed at Labonie for not telling him in advance how she had wanted him to handle his being "father-uncle." Perhaps, like so many in America, she imagined that she could be whatever she believed herself to be, that others would not judge her for having been an orphan, of a low caste. But the professor had spent his first years paying bribes to have officials look the other way, to keep her from being pulled away from him and returned to the streets. There seemed no end to the negotiations, and as it was, he had had to send her to private schools—American schools—to avoid her being stigmatized, and even now he wondered if she had been.

Was Ranjan really prepared to marry a girl of her background? Or had she kept her past from him? It was, of course, her right to leave that stigma behind. Who wouldn't? But what had she told Ranjan? Did it matter? Could he ever condemn her for claiming she had been formally adopted even though it was a lie? Ranjan, meantime, talked about his plans to film a comedy in contemporary Kolkata—"Something like Jerry Lewis," he said. The professor acted like Labonie's disapproving father. He imagined Labonie might want to be figuratively "given away," if only to feel she'd ever really belonged to someone.

"Are you sure Jerry Lewis would work in India?" he found himself asking Ranjan, seriously.

"Indians love slapstick," Ranjan said. "You watch the television. Even the news is slapstick." That was true; the professor loved the Indian use of the split screen, frequently bringing on six talking heads at once, all shouting at each other.

She was patting down the professor's sweater, when he said, "Tell me, Labonie, did you show the photograph of your parents to Ranjan when you introduced him to me?"

She stopped massaging him abruptly. "No," she said. She came around and stood before him, looking at him sharply. "Should I have?"

"I don't know," he said. It should have been easy to ask her what she'd told Ranjan about her parents, or about him, for that matter, the person who'd raised her for the past fifteen years, but it wasn't. It occurred to him that perhaps all along, during those awkward years in which he'd feigned some amount of indifference to her youthful crushes, her academic insecurities, her awkward adolescence in which she shifted back and forth from Indian film heroes to American ones, Bangla to English, he had wondered if he had raised her well. He had never forced her to imagine the just world her parents had fought for. He had worked to keep her from harm, the brute world of inequality her parents had sought to confront. He cared for her, but had not entrusted her with revolutionary aims. And now he wondered what had become of those aims, whether he had ruined her with education. She had been angrier on the street. She had been a leader then, a group of orphans depending on her anger.

"I was introducing him to you," she said. "That was the point of the visit." She was flustered. He heard her voice tighten, had seen her stiffen cat-like before. "I wasn't avoiding showing him the picture, if that's what you're inferring. He knows about them. I just didn't think to show it to him."

Her eyes grew very large, at first ferocious—that gaze he'd seen and admired in her as a child on the street. Then they appeared confused, too vulnerable to look into. "Ranjan and his family are very progressive. They aren't interested in who I was. They don't even want to imagine it."

This stung the professor—was it adequate, commendable, to not want to imagine it? How could he ask her if she didn't find that *wrong*? Wasn't it wrong to not want to know who this girl had been? What might have befallen her?

"I have to help Ranjan prepare for tonight," she said. She reached for the photograph and put it in her purse.

"You're taking the picture?" The professor asked, wanting to grab her hand and take it from her. He had developed his own relationship with that picture, as though the figures in it were his own relatives.

"I thought, for my home, with my husband. I thought that's what you wanted."

"Go then," the professor said. He wasn't sure when he adopted this kind of directness in his speech. He thought of it as an Indian trait—a certain lack of fuss at the end of a conversation.

"You know Ranjan plays the harmonium, and he sings beautifully." She took her purse from the dining room table, and turning to look at him in the doorway, said, "He could probably teach you to play your accordion. You should come tonight. You *are* family."

"Thank you," he said, and the door closed. Had he been so recalcitrant, so stingy, that she felt she needed to remind him he was family? The truth struck him: he had not been family. He had spent years avoiding adopting her officially, reminding her that her family were the couple who had retreated to the jungle, who would have explained to her who she really was in the eyes of her country. They would have told her that the state would have snuffed her out, a nuisance, a terrorist. She had left nothing of them but the flowers on the table.

The professor brooded, for it had been his altar, too. He had adopted the city, and by extension that couple in the photograph. Now she wanted to start her own home. Let them look after her. He would replace the photograph with a small idol. He'd bring his own strung flowers.

The quiet—it was so profound at times. It seemed like something one could sweep up, something that drifted around on shafts of light and gathered near the table legs. The professor remembered how, when Labonie had first left his home to go to Stanford, he had broken down and purchased a television. For years it was enough to read and to listen to the radio—an antique he'd found in a shop crammed with undervalued treasures. Without Labonie's coming and going, his mind was no longer hungry, it couldn't fasten onto anything, and he found himself, a book in his lap, waiting for something—rain that seemed imminent, a letter from his now-dead mother, a visit from an unannounced friend, or the boy who delivered fresh milk from a large tin pail. The television dispensed with all that. It introduced another kind of waiting—an end of the world scenario, but as slow as the once-promised revolution. It brought Chinese and American leaders into his house; Indian billionaires and their reckless children. It filled the air with cheap, high-pitched jingles for skin lighteners and dishwashing detergent. It brought Indian politicians throwing rupee notes to their supporters and firing guns into the air. The professor rose to his feet and turned it on, giving it the quick knock on the side that made its images clearer, for the TV, too, was from a junk shop. It was late afternoon and usually he would fall asleep to the sound of the TV set, but he could not sleep with Labonie gone, the picture swept up from the altar.

He did not know why Labonie's visit so upset him. He knew that Labonie was lucky to find a freethinking young man whose family did not try to imagine her past. Perhaps that was always the freedom he had wished for her, to find someone who would not think of her in that long, filthy dress, pounding out clothes on the sidewalk, like some wretch out of *Oliver Twist*. In not imagining her past, he thought they likely did not imagine others'. That seemed a terrible liberty--to overlook the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of others. But if they took *her* into their lives, wouldn't that be enough?

He had turned the television up too loudly, and rose from his chair to lower it. The local news announcer was sputtering out a story, and above the annoying network logo—a knock-off of CNN's--rotating in a small box on the corner of the screen, the professor saw flames leaping from a building he recognized. My god, he thought, I know all those buildings! The newscaster was announcing that the fire in *Burrabazar* had been raging overnight, jumping building to building like a caped figure in a comic book. It engulfed Kolkata's main wholesale shopping area, the *Nandaram* complex, and the city's antiquated fire engines—easily as old as most of the furnishings in his home--couldn't draw enough water from the local water supply. The hydrants had been used for bathing, washing clothes, thirsty dogs. Only a small trickle emerged from the fire hose nozzles, as weak a stream as that from his shower. Shopkeepers wept, their rummage tables full of underwear and textiles, plastic flowers and cheap Chinese toys blackening before them.

The professor wanted to call for Labonie, to see if she knew about this. The place he'd shopped for her school backpacks, her *tiffin*, the beetle bug barrettes she loved, her first Cinderella watch—all these shops razed, rising in a black funnel at the heart of the city. The smoke was thick and wound around like a stairwell, on which one could imagine the ghosts of sooty water boys, still carrying their heavy buckets.

Suddenly energized, the professor rose to his feet, shut off the television, and determinedly walked out onto his patio. The full disc of the orange sun hung far beyond the neighborhood houses. It set where there once was a wild river, now a sewer, thin as a snake. All the birds were nesting in the nearby trees, prattling, little gossips.

There was his bird, slanted forward. The professor opened the rudimentary doorway of the birdcage and plunged his hand inside. "Enough of this sleeping," he said. Normally, the bird would take a quick peck, before lifting his claws, throwing his wings back, and balancing on the professor's finger. Now it did not peck, seemed oblivious of his intruding hand. The professor gave his parrot a quick stroke along its chest, and the bird roused, clipping its beak to the cage. For a moment, the professor thought the bird was holding itself up, using the cage to steady itself the way a person might use a cane.

"Step it up, bird," the professor said, pushing his finger like a stick beneath its claws. He was able to lift it out of the cage, the bird blinking and ruffling as though its dream world had a greater claim on it, and the world inside the cage--of water bowls and millet and sliced pieces of fruit--no longer warranted much of a response. The professor perched the parrot on his shoulder and walked through the living room. He collected his keys from a hook near the door and left. He walked down the sky blue stairwell of his building, each floor with heavy, bolted, wooden doors and piles of plastic sandals outside. He had to walk against the procession of SUVs to get to the main road. The musicians were already practicing. He could see some walking toward him on the roadside, some without shoes, carrying their flutes toward *Jorsanko*. It was growing cool, and the professor was glad he wore his sweater. The children had abandoned the gate, and

now it hung open, inviting everyone. There was an auto rickshaw mechanic on the corner, and this was a good place for the professor to get a shared auto into town before others got inside.

“Will you go to Burrabazar?” He asked a man smoking a bidi and sitting on a tire, watching the mechanic working on the back of his vividly painted vehicle.

The man shook his head. “Burrabazar is very bad fire, sir.”

“I know,” the professor answered. “I know someone with a shop there.” It was an untruth, but he thought he should make his demand sound more personal; it would have seemed wrong to say he simply wanted to visit the site of such destruction. A memory of children setting fire to his parents’ tobacco fields returned to him. Had he seen them or imagined them, he wasn’t sure. But somehow he had identified with them, with their unconsidered urge to see everything change before their eyes.

The driver rose to his feet, leaning forward and flashing his smiling red teeth at the bird on the professor’s shoulder.

“This is your good friend?” he asked, craning his neck side to side. “These birds are very smart,” he added, but the parrot did not follow the driver’s movements, just looked ahead, and the driver gave one last, mean look at the bird, a reprimand for its insubordination.

“Can you take me?” the professor pressed.

The driver stubbed out his bidi against the wall and walked to his auto rickshaw. The front window was covered with *Hanuman* stickers, the monkey god with his scepter, and a mounted swastika, blinking with green and red Christmas lights, sat on the dashboard. The professor ducked inside the rickshaw. When the motor started up, music blasted from the back speakers, some Bangla disco with a singer creating his own echo effects. *Ah ha, ah ha, ah ha...* The woofers jumped, and the rickshaw driver pointed to them. “Now fixed!” he shouted above the din. The driver continued to raise the volume, and the professor worried that the bird would go deaf. He himself didn’t care if he lost his hearing. What did he need to hear any longer? Some impertinent driver with a penchant for 70s style disco?

They stopped along the way, picking up first a woman in a yellow saree who immediately pulled from her purse a milk biscuit and waved it before the bird. “Why won’t he eat?” she asked, peevishly.

The professor looked at the biscuit. “That’s not his brand,” he said.

Then a school child in a uniform got in the front with the driver and stared at the bird. “Can I touch him?” he asked.

“He bites,” the professor said.

“Why do you have him?” the boy asked.

“Because he fell on my balcony when he was very small. Wouldn’t you want someone to rescue you if you fell out of a tree when you were a baby?”

“Oh,” the boy said, a look of great understanding in his expression. Before they got to the closest navigable corner to the fire, the rickshaw filled with five people, all asking questions about the bird, its favorite foods, if he spoke, had he tried to get away? The professor could feel the bird’s claws dug into his shoulder, and felt it loosen its grip when he paid the driver and exited the rickshaw. “Now no one will ask you any more stupid questions or insist you perform tricks.”

The crowds at the market were unimaginable. This wasn’t merely rubbernecking, but staking out a place as though people had paid for the event. By then, a police cordon had been erected, but some shop owners wouldn’t be deterred and ran wildly toward their businesses, the crowd yelling encouragement or warnings, some people clinging unsuccessfully to their sleeves.

A man was selling roasted peanuts in newspaper cones, and parents gave them to their children, their eyes on the huge towers of flame. Those who did not have shops or endangered property were fascinated by how quickly the fire leapt, the puffing and popping sound of it, as it ate up little girls' dresses and folded *kurta* pajamas. It consumed the costumes of the old and young, reminding those who were watching that youth and old age were indistinguishable to the great disinterested forces that accepted neither the claims of business nor revolution.

To the professor, the fire was a brilliant goddess with many tongues. In a city that worshipped *Kali*, the fire, blown from the nostrils of the building in great papery clouds, was her ultimate embodiment, sucking the past and the future into her maw, displaying the enormous, incinerating power that had always prevailed, always been somehow resonantly understood by the people who called this city their home.

The professor, jostled by children and noticing them pointing at his parrot, realized the poor creature was covered by ash. He attempted to wipe its feathers when the bird pecked at his hand and suddenly lifted off his shoulder and flew toward the flames. It flew just above the heads of the crowd, but with energy it must have been conserving for days. "Bird!" he cried, but his companion was by then a smear of gray passing beyond the trees, and looking more like something blown from the window of a building. The professor stood still for a long time until he had lost sight of the bird, and people began knocking into him as though he was an obstruction. Then, feeling no more connected to himself than if he were watching a character in a black and white film, he moved through the crowds, aware of how everyone had turned gray with ash, their hair the color of smoke. They, too, seemed to move senselessly, smeared in the dust of cheap products, now clinging even to their eyelashes.

He arrived at a place where the people had trampled the cordon. A driver in an old Ambassador taxi waved the professor over. He got inside and asked to go home. For a moment he thought of Labonie and Ranjan, of how he would have to explain to them why he could not go to *Jorosanko*.

You're family, he thought. But Labonie was beginning her real family. And this place, Kolkata, its vicious, ravishing goddess that inevitably swallowed everyone, had adopted him.

The taxi inched forward, surrounded by ghostly people, banging its hood. The professor looked ahead and saw the widening funnel of smoke. He saw it, he imagined, as a true resident of Kolkata might—as a phenomena that drew all life, all energy toward it, consuming toil and accomplishment, injustice and kindness equally. He could hear the roaring behind the windows of the *Nandaram* complex, and saw people moving blindly toward it and also running from it. The air was full of souls, he thought, stretching his head from the window. Souls of dust and paper, receipts, burnt money and plastic—all incinerated together. I should not have taken the bird with me, he said aloud, his eyes watering. But then his bird had found its moment of mayhem. It had flown toward the true city—the one that circled like a gray nimbus above the city below.