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Kuchaji

SK Kalsi

No, I'm not. Not a bad girl. But Mama said so because I was brain-scattered and slow with my homework. But you never said it, you called me pretty and said I was a good girl. Mama said we were going away because she got a new job selling makeup at the Sears counter. No more working for Aunty helping her with selling saris door to door. We already packed our things in the suitcase. Just three. Two big ones and my small one with the roses on it. It was already in the other room with the lumpy-bumpy bed and we were leaving your apartment just as quick as Mama came home early with Aunty. But I still had lots more homework, even though I really wanted to be outside because the sun was lemon yellow and shiny.

Outside two *kalis* were playing jumping games. *Kith-kith* I called it. Hopscotch here. Maybe they were just seven like me. The playing girls were not in my class but still they always never smiled at me when I passed them on the stairs. One, her hair click-clicking when jumping, because of the red and yellow stones in it, and other one with hair like black cotton candy that needed Mama's coconut oil to make it smooth and shiny like me. *Kalis*, not *gauris*, like pepper not salt. I said to them my name once climbing the stairs but they stuck out their tongues at me, called me names that were not nice. But still they looked so happy jumping, clapping and skipping and hopping over chalk drawn numbered squares on the stone walk. I was not smiling like them. Just watching, chewing my hair tail that tasted like coconuts, face fuzzy –looking on the glass. A Kuchaji's eyes sad, I thought. Just looking. Just looking.

I breathed onto the window glass and my face went away, then I wiped it and my face came back and the girls were still playing. A stupid *gaura* boy rode over their squares on his bicycle and didn't say nothing with his gold hair blowing. The *kalis* name-called him, too, not nice words but I laughed anyway. Their sneakers went squeak-squeak, then they shouted *Liar! Liar! Pants on fire!* Still the boy said nothing and pedalled away and from down the hall you said,

“Is my *Chaa* ready, *Betah*.”

I was not *betah*. *Betah* was son. I was a *bethi*, daughter, but not yours, because you had a face like spoiled fruit and old man's knees. You said,

“And my sandwich, *nah?*”

The kettle was already on. I had already made the stupid banana and peanut butter sandwich you liked with the woody brown bread. I just didn't cut it yet. It became very hot in the kitchen, so I opened the window a little because the kitchen was smelling verily from Mama's nice dinner the night before when she told you and aunty we were going forever. You kept smiling, scooping up huge bites of *sabzhi* in your fork and spilling peas on your wiry beard and the fork going *chink-chink* on the plate. Aunty said it was *achaa* we were going now. Good. Even though she said her *clants* would miss Mama because she was so nice. I looked on the wall at the big round clock with the white face going *tick-tick-tick-tick*, like fingers snapping. No one said nothing after that, just the *chink-chink* of the forks on the plates and the *tick tick tick* of the clock.

Ethay auo!

You shouted it from your room and I don't like it when you shout. It was not nice. The sound was not nice like Papa's singing voice. I would not come there, like you asked just now, because you shouted and because the water kettle was not boiling yet.

"Not ready, Uncle", I shouted back. You were not uncle, but I said it because Mama said to say so.

My book was still open on the kitchen table and I read it with my legs kicking at nothing. The words were like a game, Mrs. Smithson said, she smelled like armpits. I read:

Many an anemone sees an enemy anemone.

Why? I didn't want to study, but white Mrs. Smithson said I was learning too slow. I got Ds and sometimes a C plus which was still better than Fs because that meant you were like Nando, who always picked his nose and sat in the corner with the white pointy cap on. But it was so hot in the kitchen with the window closed and the blinds clicking together like when you clicked your pen and wrote checks to the *gurudwara*, giving your money to them for stuff like prayer tapes and flowers. Mama said you were so nice for doing that. I read,

How can a clam cram in a clean cream can?

Papa used to make me say funny things like that, too, *Mera nam tera nam aur tera nam mera nam*. But now he was still over the ocean, still in India. I looked at a map once and tried to see if I could find papa there but mama said I was silly for trying to see him on a map. Aunty called me *dhili*, loose in the head, and mama didn't say nothing to protect. She laughed and I was angry at her for laughing.

I read because if I read and Mama came home and saw me doing my homework, she would think I'm smart, and then maybe you didn't want me to watch movie games with you. You were mostly always in your room with your *dhoti* on watching American kissing movies or listening to prayer music while aunty and mama were out all the time, all the time doing their own busy things. You always gave me *burfee* and chocolate kisses wrapped in tin foil when Mama wasn't looking, because she didn't like me eating so many sweets because I was getting fat. You said it was our little secret, giving me sweets, and said not to tell. I didn't tell. Mama gave me a key I had around my neck in a string and said to use it.

Tom threw Tim three thumbtacks.

The kettle screamed and I turned off the gas. The blue flame puffed. Homework made my head hurt and I told you that, but you forgot, but still you said I was a good girl even though I was in summer school and Mrs. Smithson who smelled like armpits said I was not that behind, but just a little. Always respect your teachers, Mama said. She said to, always be quiet. And also, Don't be bad girl and ask too many questions. She said that the first day had summer school, too.

I poured hot water in your mug and heard the noisy girls shout again. *Dummy Dummy, you cheated!* Not nice. I used to play just like them with my besties, Bubbly and Vandana, that was last year when Mama and Papa and me were all together and I was in the 2nd grade. In my India town we didn't have a stone walk like here, and my besties Bubbly and Vandana and me made the squares to jump in on the dirt with sticks and rocks. Mama didn't let me play with the *kalis* here because she said they were bad. Mama said it wasn't nice for *gauri* girls like me to play with *kali* girls because their color

could come off on me and then I would be black like them and Mama said that was not good. “A shudra? Do you want to look like a shudra?” she asked. I shook my head, no. Because then I would have to clean toilets and pick up other people’s *tati* on the road and live without a husband forever making beaded necklaces to sell at other people’s weddings. But still they looked so happy outside in the lemon yellow sun so bright with their puffy hair waving, braids clicking, white teeth smiling and black Mrs. Johnson who said I was smart wasn’t so bad like them either.

The *kith-kith* rules were simple ones: Toss your rock onto square one. Hop over square one and onto squares two and three all the way to square nine. Turn with one foot on square nine and hop all the way back, stopping at square’s two and three to pick up the stone from square one and safely out. Simple. If you didn’t step on a line, didn’t wobble, didn’t hop on a wrong square, didn’t put your hand down, or didn’t put both feet down on a single square, then you won. Simple. I read:

She sells seashells by the seashore.

I imagined the sea. Waves kissing the shore. Blue waves cracking like eggs. Blue water. Sun making diamond marks on the water, like the sparkles in the *kali* girls’ hair after a bath. I imagined myself swimming. It was funny how you could be two places at the same time. Funny. But mama said I was bad because I was always not listening and always being in many places at the same time in my head. Brain-scattered, Mama said. *Chulhi*, aunty said.

“*Mehri Chaa thandi hauri, nah?*”

No, I whispered, your tea won’t get cold, silly Uncle. I heard you cough and spit. Papa said to always wait the turn before speaking and never shout from far away and never spit.

Okay, I shouted. I shouted too this time because you shouted and heard my voice bounce off the walls and then just the sound of the clock going *tick-tick-tick*. The Taj Mahal photo was next to the clock which was next to auntie’s Norge fridge with all the postcards from American places: *Red Gold Bridge*, *Skyscraper City*, *Park of Big White Fountains*. You always promised to take us to places like that, but mama said we couldn’t go because she had to work with aunty and you secretly surprised me with chocolate kisses.

For my last birthday Papa also gave me a surprise. He took Mama and me to the Taj Mahal. It was the most beautiful thing in the whole world. It looked like it was made of sugar. Papa said it was built when love was all that mattered. I could hear myself echo off the white stone walls. How funny the way a voice can echo. And Papa told me once upon a time how all the walls were with emeralds, sapphires and diamonds as large as mangoes (I love mangoes) and when the sun rose and fell the whole palace even the pool in the front exploded in a trillion-gazillion twinkles of light, like the diamond sparkles in the *kali*’s hair after a swim. We went down into the floor and saw the two huge stones placed side by side. Here is where the king and his queen sleep forever and ever. Then papa sang to u, because he was a singer poet, and people watched him but still didn’t give him money much, and this made Mama and Papa fight so much.

Mama first loved he him singing *ghazals* and then didn’t like it because we never had food, much. Mama said Papa was starry-eyed but she loved his voice and at night we all slept in the same bed and he would sing to us sleepy. Papa said he was born on a comet’s tail and I laughed, thinking him like Surya riding his chariot over the sky. Mama

said I was like him and I was brain-scattered. I asked papa afterwards in the Tempo if he and mama had the kind of love that Shah Jahan and Rani Mumtaz had and that if that was what real love was like, and he looked at mama and mama didn't look back. So while the my-age girls on the sidewalk were hopping numbered squares chalk-drawn against the sidewalk, I imagined myself roaming the beautiful halls of another place, my voice jumping and bouncing and me sleeping forever next to a king.

No need to light a night light on a light night like tonight

Oops, I forgot. You liked your tea with butter even though Auntie said it was bad for you, but I took a spoonful of butter from the fridge and put it in the mug like you liked and put in the tea bag and one blue Equal packet. Papa loved his tea, too. Black tea. Mama would make it for him with goat's milk and two spoons of sugar. Papa stayed in India because Mama said he couldn't get his visa. When Mama wanted to leave Lucknow Papa told her people in America could help us. But when we came over the ocean without Papa those friends said they couldn't take us so we met you in the *gurdwara* and after Mama told the *ghiani* our story the *ghiani* made us stay with you. Papa said to me on the phone that the *ghiani* was a good man because he had a white beard and that you could always trust a person with a white beard, like Guru Nanak, our holiest father. I told Papa that the Christians here had a Guru Nanak who wore a red suit and brought good girls and boys presents on their December holy day and the fat man with the white beard came down the chimney and ate cookies and went *Ho Ho Ho!* And papa laughed and said the name was Santa Claus while Mama listened and said to Papa I was naughty but earlier papa said I was his twinkle.

The *ghiani* told Mama you had helped others before and because you had salt and pepper beard and dark circles under your ping-pong eyes and a blue turban on your head and auntie had bad knees and the sweet blood disease, you could help us, too. But your ping-pong ball eyes were scary looking and before I could say *No*, Mama said, *Yes* and we came and lived with you and auntie in your Avalon apartment 3F.

First there were ugly smells everywhere, like spoiled wheat smells and medicines and dirty socks and armpit sweat. But Mama spent whole day cleaning all these away and your place smelled nice like roses and forests and water. You gave us a little room with no window and a lumpy-bumpy bed for both mama and me. At night it went *squeaky-squeaky* when Mama snored.

Papa used to call every other week and sing to me and call me his twinkle, and one day he stopped. Before he stopped calling I told him I missed him and that I loved him so much, making my arms wide, but he just cried and told me always to listen to Mama, and do what mama said, "*Achaa, Twinkle?*" he said. Then Mama and Papa talked quietly and then she put the phone down before going to the room and crying and I sat on the lumpy-bumpy bed beside Mama and I said to Mama, "*Dil dikhda dukhre na sunda na sunanda sunde sunde dukhre dil dukhda no dukhanda.*"

Chup, mama said and twisted my ear. But I didn't cry like mama.

Which witch snatched the stitched switch for which the Swiss witch wished?

I carried your tea and the sandwich I cut down the middle in half into your room walking so slow I didn't want to spill a drop. What a thing? Hot tea on a hot day. Silly Uncle. The butter made the tea look scummy, but with rainbows in it. You told me how milk tea with butter kept old persons young and strong and smart. *Like me, see?* you had said, showing me your wrinkly arm muscle. You had said you could break a cricket bat in

two over your knee. You had said you could kill a lion with bare hands. You liked it when I giggled. You had so many stories.

After we came to you, Mama never told me singing stories before I slept like Papa did. But you told me stories, uncle. You told me that the English-whites stole all our jewels and how they were not good--not like us—because they didn't love each other like we did. You had said the American-whites never believed in children and left their babies to die in the river. You had said they had stolen the land from the Indians.

Us?

Not us. Like us. And you had said the Blacks were bad people because they were burnt by the sun like the *shudras*; and that the Browns from American South were dumb because they slept all day with their hats on and wore shoes indoors; but the Yellows were okay because they loved their families, like us, but were only okay and not good because they drank their own pee-pee. You said the Indians got an A plus, the American Indians not like us a B, the Yellows a C, and the Blacks were *shudras* and got an F. I asked who got the A-plus? But you just laughed when I asked you and said, *Clever girl.*

I want to be A-Plus girl, I had said. And you grinned at me with your yellow teeth you kept in a glass at night and said,

Good girl.

One black beetle bled only black blood, the other black beetle bled blue.

You were not in your room when I came in. Even your movie TV was off. The floor fan was on. The stereo was not even playing your prayer music very very low. Your things were very messy. Your *dhoti* and *granth sahib* and swimsuit magazines were on the floor in a pile. There was your video camera on its stand with the red light on and pointing at the wall. Aunty's dressing table was neatly arranged with her creams and perfumes and *bhindis* like little colored fish eyes and plastic gold bangles and her colored lipsticks and creams on the dresser. By your bed, the alarm clock time with the red numbers read 4:21 and I stood there and counted to thirty. Before hearing your shower and your coughing and spitting and before I got to the number twelve the clock changed to 4:22 and I knew that Mama's early time to come home had gone.

The shower was going nicely against the tiles in your bathroom and I smelled auntie's lavender soap coming from beneath the door. I put the tea where you always said to, next to the glass of bubbly water where your teeth were and I started tiptoeing out the room, but the floor fan was going nicely round and round and pushing thick woolly air and the room felt cooler than the kitchen room. So I went to the fan and placed my lips close to the spinning blades and hummed. The sound sounded like a shivering voice: *SheeZellzzZeeShellzzByyZeShoore.* So funny, the sound.

Your shower stopped and the pipes in the walls shook and made a monster sound like a big fart. Where was Mama? We were packed and Mama promised to be home early by four and I didn't want to watch kissing movies with you today if you asked me to. Maybe you forgot today. Where was Mama? Maybe Mama was still out delivering aunty's saris packed in cellophane to the not-like-us Punjabis living south at the *chunga* beach houses where there was no smoking allowed and no trash on the sand and how even if Mama rushed home it would take her a whole hour. Where was Mama? Sometimes aunty called them *kuthees* and *bhen chots*, not nice words, sometimes, coming home without a sale; but when she made sales how wonderful they were--*devi mas* and *suryanis*. Where was Mama? Me and mama both kept quiet because aunty sometimes

was very loud with her angry words, *Hirami, Kothee*, she called Mama that and Mama cried in her room and still she wouldn't let me hug her.

Sheena leads, Sheila needs

Before Mama said I was a bad girl, I went with her once with her and aunty to a white beach palace. Mama put one red ribbon in my hair braid to match my unwrinkled dress with prints of roses. Mama's voice was so quiet, always listening, nodding nicely, and always saying what aunty said. That time Mama looked like a fireball in her red sari with gold trim with her brown cheeks powdered white and blushed from the heat looking so pretty. Her red *bhindi* looking like drop of shiny blood. Mama with her red lipstick sticky bright and black hair pulled tight in a bun and glistening with coconut oil. Mama and her thin brown arms piled high with auntie's colored cloths--starburst yellow, baby blue, sunset, purple like eggplant—and fatty aunty leading us up the palm lined walkway of gray slate and through a big iron gate she had to press a glowing red button on a wall to open and then up ten steps exactly made of white marble and up to a huge, heavy wood door that went to the sky and with little colored red and blue glass windows, too.

"Stop eating your hair and don't say anything", Mama had said.

"It's like Taj Mahal", I said, looking up at the white columns.

Listen to your Mama, *bhetah*, aunty said smiling with specks of lipstick on her teeth.

"Can we live here, instead of with you?" I said making a pretty face and then twirled and twirled around.

"Look, she thinks she's an actress", Aunty laughed.

Chup, mama said to me, pulling my ear.

Did Doug dig Dick's garden or did Dick dig Doug's garden?

The bathroom door creaked open and you stood there with a green towel around your waist and water steaming off your shoulders. I saw your body looked like melted chocolate in some parts, like your chest and belly sides. Your wet white hair fell like webby strands and stuck flatly across your neck-shoulders. It was first time I saw you like that without the blue turban and your bald crown had little black spots on it like ink. You said, *Shabash, betah*, when you saw the tea. Water beads stuck like drops of glue on your boobies and when you smiled at me with red gums I got really cold. I didn't like to see you out of the shower without your teeth like that but you said this time was okay and so I thought it was too. You said,

Today we play a new game. Goodbye game. Memory game. All in one.

Games were nice. Games were fun. Games made me not think of phonetics and word riddles and math homework and the stupid chores mama and aunty made me do. But still I asked,

"Where's Mama"?

"She is with Aunty on business".

"Why"?

"*Be-cause*, clever girl."

That was no answer. Even I knew it was no answer but I said,

"What kind of game?"

Something for us to remember our nice times.

You went to the video camera player and angled it to the bed. Then you pressed a button and the red light turned green. Your belly looked like you swallowed a big ball and it didn't jiggle-jaggle at all when you moved. I said,

"Are we making movie?"

"For my actress".

Your thick glasses were not on and I saw how your big nose had a big groove mark on the top from where your glasses always were. Your ping-pong eyes looked so puffy. Blinking big and bigly sticking out like ping-pong balls. You came close to me and I smelled the lavender smoking off your skin. You said,

"Sit for the audition test?"

"I don't like tests."

"A game, I mean. I ask questions and you answer. Simple."

"I like games."

"Sit up here on the bed so camera can see you."

I slowly crept up onto the bed. My chest was hurting for some reason and my heart was pumping but I didn't say nothing like a good girl and pointed to the table where the tea sat growing cold. I said,

"Do I get A-plus for bringing tea for Uncle ji?"

"Very, very good girl," you said.

Your thin beard was loose and fell down your face and you were twirling it now round and round your long spider fingers when you looked at me, still grinning. Still grinning. I shivered. The fan hummed loud. You said,

"Pretty girl. My Kajol. My actress."

My name wasn't Kajol. I told you so many times my name wasn't even Kajal. Maybe you thought I looked like Kajol, the pretty actress in the films you and Auntie and Mama liked, because she was like a prettier Mama. Mama had big brown eyes like her and she had nice-shaped lips like her, and a square face. But my face shape was like Papa's, shaped like a pearl, Papa said, and brown twinkle eyes but I always chewed my hair and Mama always slapped my cheek and said to stop because she said I looked like a *kuthee* when I did it.

Now next door someone started playing American music very loud. You said the singer was Elvis, the singer who was king of the Americans. The singer was telling someone that they cried all the time and that they were nothing but a *hown-dog*. The nice voice, so deep, so dark, so rich like Shah Jahan's I thought, came through the walls and I thought of papa and papa's nice singing voice, too. You said,

"I have a surprise for you".

I crossed my hands on my lap and said, "Okay".

Surprise was Papa taking us to the Taj Mahal.

Elvis the King sang so nicely, his voice so nice and deep like Papa's but you coughed into your hand and cleared your throat, again again again and said, This game makes you free like a bird.

Flies fly but a fly flies.

One birthday before we left Lucknow, Mama told Papa she wanted freedom, like what Gandhiji got from the English Whites, because Papa's singing couldn't feed us. While Papa wrote songs on the veranda, staring at the white clouds and powder blue sky,

or taking long walks by the canal full of turtles by our home, Mama worked to buy rice and flour for *roti* and *ghee* and *daal* and always looked tired. While Papa listened to the music of the clouds, watched leaves fall from trees, or banged on his silly *tablas* until Mama was sick with headaches, Mama made us leave so we could have our own marbled patios to idle on and slate walkways to play hoops and where I could draw my own chalk lines and play *kith-kith* with my own friends. Mama worked for me, she said, all for me. She worked and cleaned and helped aunty with selling saris and cooked for me and all I had to do was listen.

Last week when mama and me made dinner and you were out at the movies with aunty, Mama was cooking *aloo gobhi*, potatoes and cauliflower in lots of spices--*garam masala* mixed with onions and peas because she said it was my favorite. But it wasn't. *Bhengan Aloo* was my favorite. Mama forgot so many things.

Who's Kuchaji? I asked. I was helping and I was searching the drawers for a knife. Banging and unbanging the drawers.

"Stop that", Mama said.

Two unpeeled onions sat on the plastic chopping board. A red potato, too. Why?

"Uncle said if I didn't watch movies with him I was a Kuchaji."

"Kuchaji was a bad bad girl," Mama said.

Why was she so bad?

And the skillet sizzled with peanut oil. I took out a big knife.

"No, the other, the other one, smaller."

Did she curse? And I closed the drawer and heard the spoons and knives and forks jangle like mama's bracelets.

I don't know. Just bad.

Did she not believe in Nanakji?

She never listened to people.

"Like who? Why?" I asked. And I cut off the ends of the onion.

"Not too big now, small slices."

My eyes stung and tears came up in my eyes. I sniffled.

What did she do? Did she not do homework?

And the knife blade still went chok-chok against the chopping block.

Even smaller than that.

"Mama?"

"It doesn't matter, *bheti*. Stop crying and stop asking stupid questions."

I sniffled and wiped my runny eyes with the back of my hand.

"When is papa coming?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

I didn't see the skillet come towards me but felt the oil burning my arm. Tears. New ones. Different ones.

I wish to wish the wish you wish to wish, but if you wish the wish the witch wishes, I won't wish the wish you wish to wish.

"Be quiet, *betah*, it's not so bad," you said.

My cheeks were wet. Was I quiet for you, Uncle, because you said I was good and pretty and gave me chocolate kisses in shiny foil? Maybe I wanted to show Mama I

was good girl and that I could really really listen if I tried hard so she would love me again and bring papa back? When the oil accidentally spilled on my arm, Mama told me to never ask such questions. Mama told me Papa was gone and not coming back because he didn't love me anymore. She told me this as she cried and wrapped my little arm in the white bandage. She cried and told me that sometimes people do things they didn't mean and that it didn't make them bad because they didn't mean to hurt you and that I should always be nice and not ask questions. And I cried and held Mama and we cried together and I said to Mama that I was sorry and she said she was sorry and then we loved each other again, but still Papa wasn't back. You stroked my hair and looked back at the camera and said,

Very pretty hair, and smells so nice. Like roses.

No, coconuts. The bed had a blanket with pictures of roses on it. Aunty liked roses, she told me so. She said you were a gardener for the big houses once and used to bring fresh roses to her because you loved her but that you didn't bring fresh roses anymore.

Mama was still not back early yet and the singer king of the Americans from the wall was next door saying how someone fooled him with kisses. In a game? A test? Why? Even though the fan was on, I was hot. Mama said to be a good girl and not ask questions and to be thankful to you and Aunty for letting us stay because without you we would be without anything. She said you were my uncle, my new uncle. So nice that word.

"Uncleji"? I asked, *Ji*, the term of respect. "Uncleji, why did Shally shyly shend the shweet cakesh shouth to Sheila she shaid shilly Sheila, Shilly Shally. Why? "

Too clever you. You wagged your finger and laughed. Good girl is too clever.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. I felt tears in my eyes but not sad tears not onion tears just sleepy tears. I thought of Sally and Peter and the sea. I thought of anemone.

You cleared your throat and looked at me with your ping-pong eyes with those chocolate circles that mama said was tired from reading the *Guru Granth Sahib* all day.

Simple rules, you whispered in my ear.

Okay.

My head was down staring at the fading vacuum marks going zig-zag on the carpet.

Rule number one. "Always trust Uncle, okay?"

Trust? Why trust?

"Okay."

Rule number two. "Always remain quiet, okay?"

Quiet? Was this like hide and seek?

"Okay."

Rule number three. "Always do as uncle says. Okay?"

"Like Simon says?"

"Like Simon says. To win the game you have to keep our secret. Simple?"

I nodded. Simple game. Simple rules. No movies. Good.

Your purple lips looked swollen and wrinkled as dried fruit. I took a deep breath, inhaling the sickly cloud of lavender lifting off your skin. Though it was fanny and cool, still water snaked down your neck, over the silver necklace with Nanak's picture buried in your white chest hair. My stomach started to be achy. I said,

“I have to go pee-pee.”

“Open eyes”, you said.

I shook my head.

“Open,” you said, more forceful.

I did. I couldn't hear my heart beating, but still felt it hard in my chest there dizzying my head. I took the corner of the blanket in my fist, red roses the pattern, crushed them in my small hands. Then you kissed me on the cheek and forehead. Why did I let you? I heard Mama's voice, *be good and listen*. But even though the fan was still going high blast round and round I was sweating breathing heavy, my armpits were sweaty, did you notice? Did you notice my short and heavy breaths that came one upon the other, one after the other, again and again and again? Then I went back to the white beach palace.

The crow flew over the river with a lump of raw liver.

“Stop eating your hair and don't touch nothing!” Aunty scolded. Mama was quiet. So quiet. We were standing at the big wooden doors with the glass windows again. The doorbell was singing and falling away. My no-name doll with the curly black hair, fat cute face, and cream skin was in my arms and I looked at her large brown eye winking at me and the house had marble columns and I thought maybe every big house had stone coffins in the basement where kings and queens slept together for ever and ever.

“It's like the Taj Mahal, right mama?” I said.

Chup.

Before we stood there before the big door and the doorbell chimey in the walls, we were in the car and aunty was talking with Mama in the front seat about how important something called “*clant*” was. She said,

“This *clant* will buy very much from me if we show proper respect, or This *clant* is the best *clant*. Last year she buy from me one hundred fifty pieces.” I could almost hear Mama imagining how much big that was.

When the big door opened a fat-hipped Indian *clant* lady in American clothes that Aunty wanted to impress stood there with her silver sparkly blouse that showed her big bosoms with sparkly glitter on her chest. She smelled nice. Like a million roses. She wore lots of jangly bracelets with sparkly diamonds and had sparkly diamond earrings and a sparkly big diamond on her sausage finger. I could almost hear Mama thinking how much it all cost. She had huge lips, bigger than mine and Mama's put together and they were purple like eggplant. And she bent down and said how pretty I was, and I hid behind Mama's legs. So scary. Her eyes were black and her eyelashes were spider's legs and had purple shadow above her eyes and she smelled like millions of roses.

Inside, the big purple lady took me to the kitchen and gave me milk and cookies. There was a lazy brown woman cleaning the big steel stove and she looked up at me and smiled but I didn't smile back because you told me if I smiled at them I would be lazy too. The purple lady said something to the brown woman and they both looked at me. I sat at the small round glass table and the brown lady brought me cookies but I didn't eat them because you said never to eat cookies in a strange house, but they looked yummy but then I would be sleepy and that was bad.

I felt my shoulder's slouch and I sat up straight. I didn't eat my hair. I didn't touch nothing. See, Mama, I was good. Not at all like Kuchaji. The brown woman looked

at me and yawned then smiled and I remember how Uncle said they liked to sleep and when she cleaned the already shiny clean counters I wondered what was she cleaning.

“*Que llamo, es, nina?*”

I shrugged.

“What you name?”

I liked how she talked, though. Her voice was so simple, but Uncle said not to talk to strangers and never to give my name so I didn’t say nothing.

“What you baby name?”

“No-name.”

“She look very nice.”

I kept my head down because I already broke Auntie’s rule not to say nothing.

“She pretty like you.”

I shrugged.

“Maybe give her pretty name, no?”

When I didn’t say nothing again, the brown maid woman who smelled like plastic went away.

Holding no-name doll close to my chest I got up after a minute because the cookies smelled so nice and I wanted to eat them. The walls were white. Millions of windows that made the light come in white and bright. Soft rugs lay on the yellow wood floors and all around there were pictures of peacocks and red and yellow and green vases full of plastic flowers and plastic vines in a million-gazillion colors. There were paintings of the golden bridge and one of a white fountain but no pictures of girls or boys my age. I went into a big room and sat up straight on the couch and I didn’t touch nothing. There were no pictures of Punjabi gurus, no drunk looking bearded saints on the walls and no little temple closet with flower covered photos of bearded men with blue turbans and incense sticks smoking across their sleepy faces. And I heard Aunty’s voice wheezing and flattering down the hall. Aunty said it was a kitty, with other *clants* who paid money for Aunty’s fashions, Mama said.

If you wear this you will be Kajol in *Kuch Kuch Hota He*.

Six sleek swans swam swiftly southwards.

My Kajol. My actress, you said in the bedroom where I sat on the bed after you kissed my cheeks and forehead, the roses crushed in my hands. My name was still not Kajol. My no-name doll was Kajol. At the dressing table you splashed scented water onto your hands from the green bottle with the picture of a shield in white curlicue patterns. You patted down your face, arms, chest, belly, and reached under your towel and wiped your inside legs.

“Clean body equals clean mind,” you said.

“Is this for the game?” I asked.

It is not part of the rules, but part of the game, you hissed, then looked at the camera.

The smell of a million limes was so strong I held my breath. You took something shiny from aunty’s side of the dresser and came towards me and said something to me but the music next door was very loud and I shook my head not knowing if this was the right thing to do or not. You twisted the base of a silver tube and a stick of pinkish-red slid out. Aunty’s lipstick. What were you doing with it? Stupid uncle.

Dressing up for our game, you said.

You lifted my chin with your palm. The curly white hairs on your belly looked trampled down like dead wet grass. You streaked my cheeks with the lipstick, made two stripes, and then rubbed it in with your thumb. You stippled my lips with the lipstick and rubbed it in with your finger.

Look at me now. Good girl.

I didn't want to look at your greedy face and stared at the picture of Nanak on the wall, hand raised, the *OM* symbol tattooed on his palm, the wise and knowing face and flowing white beard that looked like cotton candy. But you were too close to me, smelling so loud like the music coming from the wall next door I couldn't think. I had to pee-pee really really bad. I said,

"It hurts."

Uncle would never hurt you. Uncle loves you.

"Like Mumtaz and Shah Jahan?"

So clever. Clever good pretty sweet quiet girl.

Why were there no pictures of your daughters and grand-daughters in that room? Was it because having their pictures up reminded you so much of them and how you missed them? But Nanak was there. Gobind the protector was there. You pecked my lips with your soured lips. They felt cold and dry.

Sea sells sea shells by the sea shore.

"See? Kiss kiss."

"Kith kith."

"Marvelous, say it again. Kiss kiss."

"Kith kith."

"Love it."

You slapped your hands together and showed me your yellow teeth. When you kissed my mouth your breath tasted funny, like ash and your teeth felt sticky. *Sells seashells she seashore.* I thought of Shah Jahan. Of love. Of Mumtaz lying next to a king who built her a palace of diamonds and rubies and emeralds and sapphires as big as mangoes, a palace of love that twinkled in the sun to stand for all time. I whispered, "Papa? "

"Papa is right here," you said.

The American king singer was still complaining that someone was not his friend anymore. His voice was nice, deep, like the *ghiani's* voice in the temple.

You said, "Uncle says to do like the actress in the movie. Remember?"

I remembered. I shivered. I felt like throwing up because I tasted your lime smell in my mouth and now my pee-pee was dripping. *Shells sea by the sells she hore.* You told me to look at you. I looked at you. Your eyes were brown like mine. Your skin was dark like mine. *Shore shells by sea sells she the.* You pushed my head towards your boy. You said,

"Just like that actress on movie. Good girl," you groaned.

I thought of that white palace by the sea.

I wish I were what I was when I wished I were what I am.

In that big sofa chair in that big white room with the tall ceilings up to the sky I was kicking my legs but didn't touch the floor. I quietly tore off Kajal's arms and legs, peeking again and again under her green plaid skirt from time to time. I looked over at

the fat-hipped Indian lady with her hair dyed dark red and I snickered to myself at her clowny face painted up like a clown, stuffing big *pan* leaves into her mouth and gyrating her jowly face with that dim witted, glassy look of goats.

“Amay-zing,” I heard Aunty say, putting on her false voice. “*Tum rani, heh!*” And mama draped a sari across her arm as if presenting a newborn baby to a queen. Aunty was so clever, making that woman to believe she was just like Mumtaz or Aishwarya in such and such and so and so film.

That big room didn’t smell like spices and curries and *garam masala* or pee-pee and dirty socks and armpits and there were no dirty dishes in the sink crusted with *rajmah*. That big room with big white water lily painting on one wall and the big square mirror with the gold frame above the mantel smelled like mama used to, like jasmine. It smelled just like what I pictured our house to be, when Papa would come back and live with us again. My no-name doll winked her sleepy eyes and I pushed her eyes open and made her see.

Someday this is mine and yours and Papa’s, I said to her, and kissed her head.

Then I swung her head around and somehow her head came off and bounced twice then rolled under the big leather chaise with a clickety-clack sound. I didn’t bump the table but the nice lamp with the beaded glass fringe fell to the hardwood anyway with an ugly shattering noise.

Mama made me stay home with you after that.

Seven slick slimey snakes slowly sliding southward.

Good girl, your tongue is like a little snail, you said. Stick it out.

I did.

Good girl.

Why did it please me to please you? Why? When was Mama coming home?

Now the American king singer from the wall was saying that his baby had left him and he had no place to “de-well.” He was broken hearted and lonely now, poor man. Like uncle. Your ping-pong eyes looked hungry. Silver sweat was on your forehead and fell down your wire beard and hit my nose and I sneezed. You kissed me again in the mouth very hard with your tongue coming in and out and in and out and I tasted salt. You took down my drawers and rolled me over.

I said, “Is this like love?”

This *is* love, the best love.

Now came pain. I shut my eyes tight and prayed just like I did in *gurudwara*. I asked myself where was Nanak to protect me? Where was Gobind the warrior saint to defend me?

A-plus, you groaned. A-plus.

Near an ear Do you love me? *a nearer ear* I think I *a nearly eerie ear* muttered. But you couldn’t hear me. Do you love me? My mouth covered still with your lime hand. So stupid I am, Mama said I was a *kuthee* Aunty said a *bhen chot* folding money into her purse, the liquid clash of rocks against *scissors sizzle*, the stone walk and girls girls I thought where are the black girls with beads and flowers all in the big room with the cushy rugs with rose pictures the *ghiani* sings to Mrs. Smithson so white and bright and and and *thistles sizzle* then the stupid thing to ask it was about love when my mouth was covered and you couldn’t hear me. I am sorry, I said to myself. I am sorry for you not hearing me. I thought of papa and Shah Jahan and Mumtaz in her sari of diamonds and

then *I am a tati I am tati tati tati* the green light from the camera blinked and blinked and maybe you were done but shadow blinked and blinked and said nothing like no name and the clouds in the sky and hot sun drifted over my little heart and numbers, sticks, squares, rules, rules, simon says oneplus one is two two plus two is four four lus four is eight is what uncle says and where was he now, Nanak? Save us all Gobind? *On a lazy laser* of the ugly girls playing kith-kith outside. I thought of my math *raiser* homework *lies a laser ray* erase erase and no name? No name? How I hated long division. Mrs. Johnson the nice black woman teacher said I was smart. I was smart. Smart. I was good. Good. Mr. Yin the principal said I could be anything, a lawyer because I asked lots of questions.

Over now. You were panting so hard like you had been in a race. Your ugly lime smell was all over me. It was in me. I cried and cried and cried because I smelled *tati* and pee-pee and your limes and sweat and *garam masala* and it hurt so bad and you said,

“Love is hard sometime, *betah*.”

I wanted to run out as fast as I could but it hurt so bad, still. I cried.

You said, Something to remember uncle, *nah*? He picked up his tea cup, already cold, and took a long sip.

I felt my bladder go. I said sorry sorry sorry, but you said it was okay that the pee was on the bed and you tasted it with your finger and you said,

Mmm-mmm, not so bad. Like lemons.

The king singer from the wall next door wasn't singing anymore.

You said, “Our secret, okay? Uncle says, so. So, what do you say? What does good girl say?”

“Th-thank you,” I said, because Mama told me to thank you before I go.

“A-plus.”

I didn't tell mama all what happened after we left Avalon Apartment 3F the things you did. When I sleep beside my American husband I sometimes think of you touching my skin and I prickle all over and my husband asks me what the matter is and I have no courage to tell him. When I hear our child gurgling in my belly, I promise it a different life, of protection, because even then, when my Mama put me to sleep every night I smiled to her, my happy face, because Mama always looked worried and tired and sleepy because she worked so hard for me and believed the temple people were good people and had helped us.

I didn't say nothing that day, because I wanted to win our game. But because of something else you said, too. You said you would be angry with me for telling the secret and that Mama would be angry at me for playing like the actress in the movie like a bad girl and you would not give me chocolates anymore and would put a curse on Mama and make her ugly like aunty.

And you told me that if I told anyone, you would make Mama go away forever. You told me the reason Papa was not with you was because you made him go away because he couldn't keep secrets. I believed you. I wanted to ask you again if you loved me. But I felt very sick. My stomach hurt. My heart felt gone away and my head was without thoughts, spinning as if the room was without lines. Mama came in with aunty and they went into the kitchen where I stood before my schoolbooks staring at the words.

Mama said, “Good girls study hard and get A-plus also next time”, and I said nothing but wanted to say that Uncle gave me A-plus already.

Aunty laughed and they put packages of sweets on the counter and Aunty asked if I wanted one. I didn't say nothing. My lips trembled and I felt like crying more.

I thought a thought, but the thought I thought wasn't the thought I thought I thought.

Ready to go to our new place? Mama asked. But I didn't say nothing.

I looked out the window at the girls still playing *kith-kith* outside.

"*Bheti?*" she said. "Where are you"?

"She gone to *fehzabad*," Aunty said.

A shadow passed before my eyes. And I could not see my face in the glass. Just eyes. Staring. Sad eyes. Just staring.