

HOPE – by Jethro Perkins

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1.

She cannot draw anything.

Outside, amber streetlights burn in false constellations, strange pictures and secret words read into their alignment. Traffic endlessly recedes, the red glare of rank upon rank of devil eyes, tongueless roar spilling up into the dirty sky. The river of cold, coloured metal flows unsteadily towards the diced meat block of the shopping centre, violent pink flesh seeming to bleed into the air about it, run through the cracks of the pavements and roads, clog the eyes and nostrils of passers-by. It is a temple of swirling litter and pigeon shit, scarred by the angry faces of illegible graffiti, market stalls huddled against its flanks like transfixed worshippers about a sacrificial slab, waiting for the kill. A temple fed on petrol fumes, the lament of sirens, the heat of desperate sex in squalid back alleys, hungry switchblades in the hours before dawn. Pathetic offerings of discarded fast food wait for an unknown God to coagulate from the filth and rise above it all, hands like destruction reaching down from the sky.

Amrita waits too. Strangely expectant, a glitter of quicksilver in her blood. Unable to ruin the blank page in front of her with so much as a mark. She watches the life run through the city's veins, all the dreams and the unheard conversations, the flood of dark suited commuters heading back towards home, the petty tragedies of missed buses and stolen mobile phones. The switch of traffic lights, engines choking and horns honking like so many geese, trains rumbling overhead towards London Bridge, everything falling

into place as if awaiting meaning, the shape that will guide her pencil across the blank page.

But it does not come.

She gathers up her things to leave.

2.

The bar is still decked out in a cheap imitation of yesterday's fashions, cocktail-lounge style, bright walls and pine furnishings. Still the same songs on the Jukebox, the same people playing pool. Amrita buys herself a pint from familiar bar staff, a repeat performance, listening to herself talking, handing over the money and turning away. She doesn't even have to think where Mike and Priya will be; just lets her body weave a passage through the scattered tables.

Sure enough, they've taken the table in the furthest corner, near the phones. As they always do. With them is Mike's cousin Mandeep. Amrita feels she is walking back through layers of her past. Acting out the same things again and again.

Priya notices her first, lips breaking into a sly smile. "Hello stranger. How's the artwork coming along?"

"Oh, don't ask." Amrita laughs.

"That bad?"

"Worse. I haven't managed to do anything at all."

"So Picasso won't be spinning in his grave just yet?"

"I wouldn't have thought so. It's just not happening. Maybe I should have stuck to accountancy, like my parents wanted. Right now, I've got all the artistic instincts of a

farmyard animal.” Amrita nods to Mike, before forcing Mandeep to move up so that she wouldn't have to sit next to him. Feeling Priya's eyes on her, watching her for the tiniest hint of emotion. In her weaker moments, Priya had sometimes asked Amrita if she still had a thing for Mike. Amrita always smiled and said no, face hard and brittle. Not after all this time. “How was Mauritius?”

Priya gives a theatrical sigh. “Well, the hotel was divine, the weather was gorgeous, we had lovely food and incredible beaches. It should have been perfect, but –”

“But?”

Mike sinks further into his beer. “The number of times I've had to put up with this. It was one moment of madness, that's all.”

“Once was enough.” And although Priya is laughing Amrita thinks she sees real malice in her eyes. “Now, Amrita, you guess. What do you think is the worst thing Mike could have done to wreck our holiday? You know, this paradise holiday, that we'd saved for all year? The holiday that nothing was supposed to spoil?”

“Certainly not anything I'd want to say.”

“Now come on, don't be like that. Guess.” And Priya's laughing sounds tightly bundled with anger. Amrita looks at Mandeep who stares away, embarrassed. Mike stares into his pint, pissed off. “It's quite easy. Just think of the most stupid thing that he could possibly say to me.”

It hits home. She giggles despite herself, horrified and disbelieving, watching Mike. “You didn't.”

“He did. It was a proper wedding proposal. He even got down on one knee, everything. He looked ridiculous!”

“One second of feeling genuinely romantic and look what I get for it.”

“This isn't the movies, Michael. I don't know, all it takes is one evening with a Hollywood sky and you have to spoil it by turning it into a film cliché. What was I meant to do - swoon into your arms?”

“I don't see why not.”

“You learn to act like someone in the movies and then maybe I'll swoon into your arms.”

“Don't hold your breath.”

“I wasn't,” said as Priya did her best movie Withering Stare, before turning to Amrita with a too-bright smile. “But enough of us. It's rather pathetic, don't you think? I want to hear about you. What did you get up to?”

“Working.”

“You're too coy. If I ask that to Mandeep he'll mumble on about computers until he bores himself into silence, and if I ask Mike I'll get a marriage proposal.” Priya giggles again. “You don't tell me anything.”

“That's really all there was to it. I worked.”

“Just in what, that horrible pub? The Charlie Chaplin?”

“Yeah.”

“No juicy gossip for us?”

“Do I ever have?”

“I live in hope.” Priya's eyes are hooded, playful. She leans in towards Amrita, gripping her shoulder. “What about Jay?”

Amrita rubs her face and laughs, embarrassed. “What about him?”

“We all know he fancies you.”

Amrita rummages in her bag for a packet of cigarettes. “He's just a friend.”

“Look at her, look, lying.”

“No.”

“Yes! He's a good catch. Good prospects, as my mother would say. I'm intrigued as to why you haven't got your leg over yet. What is it? Do you just enjoy teasing the poor guy, or are you just afraid of hitting the sack?”

Annoyed that this should be dragged out in front of Mandeep, who she didn't properly know, Amrita glares at Priya. “He's just a friend. I'm not about to sleep with him.”

Priya laughs dismissively. “You mean he's not well provided down below?”

“We're not just dicks on legs,” Mandeep says.

“Aren't you? Nobody told Michael.”

Mike raises his eyes and looks away.

“So Amrita, what about your art project?” Priya cups her chin in her hand, indulgent amusement shining from her eyes. Amrita sucks back the last smoke from her cigarette, grinds the stub into the ashtray.

“I haven't started it yet.”

“But you had all summer.”

“It wasn't like I didn't try. It just...” Amrita shrugs, “didn't come.”

Priya's look is sharp. “Get a grip, babe. No project, no pass.”

“Yeah, I know. But it just wasn't going to happen.” She shrugs again and tries to look nonchalant about it. “I've got loads of time.”

“Oh. Well, I guess you're right, we've got plenty of time really.” Priya still stares, circumspect. Then looks at her watch. “Unlike for my tutorial. I hope the others turn up. That way they can do the talking and let me fall asleep.”

She stands, tall, slender, finely modelled, shaking her hair back into place. Amrita watches with a curious mix of admiration and jealousy. Lights another fag as she watches Priya bend over to give Mike a surprisingly tender kiss, something whispered in his ear to make him laugh.

“Have fun, babes. And don't bore poor Amrita with your boys' stuff, please.”

“It's okay. I'm, er, coming.” Mandeep gulping back his beer and getting up.

“To my art tutorial? I'm sure our tutor will be pleased.” Priya glares acidly at him. Hating to leave Mike and Amrita alone.

“No.” Mandeep does a good job of looking innocent. “I've just got, um, stuff to do.”

“Where?”

“Um, the same way that you're going, just about.” He wilts into silence under Priya's disdain.

“Well don't do anything I wouldn't.” Amrita watches as Priya directs the phrase at her, glibly ironic. Watches the careful control in the body language, the easy and charming smile. Priya turns and stalks out from the bar, trailing Mandeep in her wake, furious tight motion in her body sucking Mike's eyes after her.

I don't know why she worries, Amrita thinks, watching Mike watching. I never stood a chance.

One of the rare moments the two of them have alone together. Amrita no longer knows what to say to him. Even if she wanted to prove Priya's fears correct, she wouldn't know where to begin. They sit at either side of the table, staring at each other, strangers bound by one point in time, unsure.

“Do you want another pint?”

“Why not? Cheers.” She sinks the last of her drink and lets him take the empty glass.

What must it be like being Priya? Amrita stretches out her hand, palm down, staring at the yellow lumps of knuckle, the splayed fingers. She'd always wanted to be like that, another dream she'd had to kiss goodbye after the accident, getting use to the snarl in her lip where the scar was, the changed shape of her nose. When she lost her dreams of fairy princesses.

Dreams she suspects Priya still holds. Priya retained that childish sense about her of being special, somehow better than everyone else around her.

Mike came back with the drinks.

“You're such a fool,” she told him.

“What? Oh, the marriage thing.” His features draw in an amused frown.

Good couple, she thinks. They look good together. Handsome, effortless, graceful. Same sort of background. She could see it in both of them, a sense of shared values and assumptions that was almost arrogance. They reaffirmed to each other the way that the world worked, effortlessly ignoring anything they didn't like. Class, she thought. Or caste, maybe.

I could never have gone out with him. I could never have even touched him.

She sucks the bitter toxins from the cigarette and blows the smoke in a veil about her.

He's looking at her with the good-natured equality he assumes with everyone. That she'd mistaken for interest.

“You should know Priya better than that. She'll get rid of you if she thinks you're going all soft on her. She could get that from anyone.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Then what did you think you were doing?”

“I don't know.” Mike smiles at her and leans back in his seat. “I guess we were just...having such a great time. You know, the best. Really. And I guess everything just seemed so perfect that I...”

“Fucked it up.”

“Yeah.” Mike sighs, taking a long swig from his beer. “Everything was going so well that it just seemed like the thing to do. I was convinced she felt the same things that I did.”

Amrita swallows, watching him open into unknown emotion. A reflected light from his eyes as she imagines the heat of his words, laying himself like a sacrifice for Priya.

“And when you told her, what did she do?”

“She went all silent for a bit. You know, just not moving at all. Then I realized she was crying and I didn't know what the fuck was going on. I mean, was this a good or a bad sign? Then she just told me in this Hellraiser voice not to ever say anything like that ever again. Then she went sort of cold. Like, for the rest of the holiday. It was fucking

miserable.” He grins, eyes deep and unreadable. “She's mellowed slightly since we got back.”

“I bet.” Amrita stares frankly at him, the thrill of dropping all her defences for a brief moment and letting him read whatever he wished from her. “Don't blow this. I think she'll forgive anything once, but whatever, don't fuck things up again. Don't fuck it up because I think you'll always regret it if you do.”

“I know, I know. But shit, sometimes you just gotta say things. I mean, I'm in love.”

“Well don't. Don't say any of that to her. Promise me that, yeah?”

“But what's it all about if I can't say?”

“Just don't. Don't drop anything heavy on her. She's liable to freak.”

“Well I know that now.”

“Well make sure you don't do it again.”

Mike laughs, throwing the whole thing off. It's getting to him, she thinks.

“Listen to you. You should write for the papers. You can be such an agony aunt sometimes.”

“I'd rather die.”

He grins. “I've missed you. Welcome back.”

They touch drinks, lightly, too civilized. She feels there is something false in it, the motion of bodies, different languages and meanings swirling unseen through her blood. She smiles at him softly, then drinks, feeling the poison slide down like hands clutched inside her body.

“Have you ever been in love like that?” Mike asks.

“Like what?”

“Like I said. Sort of needing to say it - whatever. Something that really takes you over.”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

She sighs, pressing one hand to her face. “It was the first time I'd ever really wanted anyone. And I was totally besotted. He was a guy I knew back when I was doing accountancy at Guildhall and I just fell head over heels for him. He was much older, and he had a wife and a kid.” She shrugs, face deliberately careless, pulling another cigarette out from the packet.

“I can't see you as the type to have an affair.”

She shrugs again. “It happens.”

“And who ended it?”

“Me, I suppose. But not because he proposed to me. Rather the opposite.”

Mike laughs. “This isn't helping. Damned if we do, damned if we don't.”

Amrita stares at him slyly. “That's just called being a man.”

“Great. So what do I do? How do I even know what Priya feels, if she isn't going to marry me and she hates me just for asking?”

“Well, if I were going out with you, if I were Priya, I'd just want you to go back to acting the way you did before. You should know that I love you and that you shouldn't have to ask me about it.”

“But there's no knowing Priya. I never know what's going through her head.”

“Just act like you used to. Act like her.”

“And then what? Everything just drifts, because we're too scared to say what we want?”

“I don't know,” Amrita stares at him through a cloud of cigarette smoke. Almost two years to the day since they first met. She remembers the hope that she felt, emotion still stinging through her veins, a ghost inside her body. “Maybe I'm not the best person to ask.”

3.

They leave after a few more pints. “I can't get too drunk,” Mike tells her. “Priya would kill me. Anyway, I've got to go to hers tonight. She's cooking a meal.”

Amrita laughs, remembering Priya's cooking. “The joys of a relationship.”

“Sometimes I envy you the freedom you've got.”

“What - returning alone to an empty flat?”

Mike gives her an odd look which she pretends not to notice, stepping smartly out through the door he's opened for her. Darkness has bled into the sky, the streetlights shimmering like trails of precious stones.

“You could come back to Priya's with me. I'm sure she wouldn't mind.”

“And have to put up with another reel of marriage jokes? Not to mention Priya's cooking. I think I'll bow out of this one. Anyway,” she adds, staring at him with a hollow grin, “I should try to do something for my project.”

“That. Priya barely talks about anything else. You'll be okay, you watch.”

“I don't know. This is the first time that I've had to prove that I'm something more than a sham and I can't.” She splays her fingers, holding out her hand. “I can't see

anything beneath the skin. I can't get to anything that needs me to create it. It makes me wonder why I ever bothered.”

“Aw, c'mon.” He opens his arms and she slips gratefully inside them, this the first body she has touched in a long time. Shocked by the warmth, life cracking her dead skin. She lets herself be crushed by Mike's hug. “You'll be okay. You're not a sham and you'll be okay. Something'll happen to sort you, you'll see.”

“It'd better.” She draws back, holding both of his hands, face composed. Sensation flooding through her, tearing at the blankness of her flesh and muscle. She smiles, looking up into the warm brown of his irises, the twin dizzying holes of her desire. “You're a soft-hearted git. No wonder you drive Priya mad.”

“I dunno. Either you're a bastard or you're soft. A man can do no right.” He grins at her. “It's good to be back.”

“You must be the first person ever to say that about Elephant and Castle.” Her thumbs run over his knuckles, fingers clutching at his palms. “But it's good to have you back. I missed you.” She lets go, and rubs her eyes. “Look, it's catching. I must be as soft as you. What would Priya say to all this?”

“Yeah, well, that I know only too well. And talking of which, I'd better go.” He gives her a brief salute and a smile that hurts her. “Catch you later then.”

“Sure.”

She turns away abruptly, cursing herself for her weakness. For trying to make him feel something for her, as if it would mean anything anyway.

The brick and concrete of the university juts across the sky in harsh angles, the glassy ghost reflections from dark windows, an occasional burst of luminescence where

some name and number toils in thrall of the relentless system. She turns into Southwark Bridge Road, already feeling the pull of the roundabouts, the binary stars that form the fractured heart of Elephant and Castle. City radiation, haleated pollution diffracted into a gentle shine. Shrunken into herself amongst the commerce of sex and fashion, stream of figures ripped by the headlights from the relentless rush of traffic, this is when she always remembers, feels the ghost of memories embracing her, wishes she could just take one step forwards and fall through the beat of the clock and find herself back, five years before, able to undo everything that she had done.

Newington Causeway. Tower blocks rip up into the black air, slashes of brutal brightness dwarfing the figures huddled below at bus stops, sunk in dreams of home and food, wives, kids, boyfriends. Amrita walks, descending into the labyrinthine underpasses, graffiti spilling obliquely across the tiles, the hiss of breath, echoes of traffic and footsteps, ghosts slipping besides her body like a second her stealing softly behind. Onto the Shopping Centre concourse, the skeletons of market stalls, flapping rags of plastic sheeting and drifting flocks of rubbish. So close up, the pinkness radiates violently, exploding into shifting incandescent islands every time a car marks its passage. She turns the corner, more bones left from the day's shopping, plastic bags and cardboard boxes, wrapping slithering like rats, crosses into the next subway and up to Newington Butts. Considers dropping into Ruby Tuesday's for a couple of pints but then remembers she's got to save on money, a night in front of the waiting eye of the television. Doubt nagging at her; she should start her project, try anything, see what blood would flow from the end of her pencil, but she knows already that it is hopeless. Nothing there. She looks

up at the eye of the security camera as she enters Draper House, expecting not to see herself caught in its lens and staring back.

4.

The cold eye passively commits her ghost to some distant, unwatched tape. Grainy, drained of all colour and washed with shadow, she is carelessly observed as she pulls open the main door. Everything recorded, her fumbling with her keys, the apprehensive glance at the stairwell, pulling at her top as she waits for the elevator: all the banal comings and goings, the secrets of motion, the traces of forgotten people. There is no drama and no romance, no beauty in the blurred transitory forms flitting across the dark entrance. Scars in the air, nothing more. Denuded of the trickery she feels in her own eyes, wishes she could see out from its compact circuitry, stripped of lies and dreams, watching the secret life opened like a lotus before her.

5.

Ten floors up. So many times in the small hours, unable to sleep, that she's just sat here and watched. City bathed in the bleak and constant glare of streetlights, lone cars roaring through arterial roads, night buses jammed with tourists and clubbers, groaning their way out towards where the city disintegrates into hills and fields. This silence, a hideous violent absence, buildings screaming into it like upraised bones, skeletal fingers clutching up from the rim of the earth.

She remembers walking through Farringdon at three in the morning, thump from huge soundsystems heightening the emptiness, still a small gaggle of people queuing to

get in to clubs, Amrita admiring their clothes, their confidence, their hermetic little world. Stumbling through the ghastly stillness away from the bubble of sound, a shadow in sick orange light, she couldn't help but see it as a twin of Smithfield Market just a few hundred metres further down the road, the racks of frozen meat swinging on hooks under bright fluorescent light, crowded together in the chill of frozen air, porters' breath hissing like dry ice as they heave the carcasses through.

She closes the curtains abruptly.

Turns to that other stage, the television. Settles down on the sofa with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, still feeling the alcohol lacing her body. Commercial break: a car shoots across a computer generated landscape, driven by a white woman with a short skirt and great legs, more leg than gearstick shown as she tenderly grasps the knob and eases into a higher gear, the punchline rolls; magically formulated shampoo with cod-scientific vitamin bullshit, an executive woman rolls her head crazily, hair fanning into a studio whiteout; insurance, the trustworthy bloke in a suit perched on his secretary's desk, the winning smile, Amrita points the remote and kills him mid-soundbite, crack of static as the scene changes, a gout of blood as ordinary extras run round screaming, hospital drama, made-up nurses halfway through a twelve hour shift, sotto voce good guys sorting through the mess, old lovers, unknown brothers and well worked medical dilemmas slip through scenes into good old guilt-ridden steamy sex in the consultants' room, white coats and blouses unbuttoning themselves as if by magic, mouths swallowing each other as the window blinds go down.

Later the two doctors return to reception, carefully not staring, riding the risk, doomed lovers if ever she saw some, remembering herself with Geoff, feeling that she'd

let go, that her fragile love had tumbled out of her hands and span ever faster downwards. Slipping into his office between lectures and during lunchbreaks, the time they'd stolen after hours, lost all control and just hooked on the motion, the ritual, the sheer animal rage of emotions. How would it end up here? She wondered. Love crushed between the ratings war and the beauty of the actors, plot writers hacking dreams into fifty minute episodes, life as a TV dinner. She watched them driven on by the wants of millions of viewers.

Tiny. Locked in the concrete warren.

She smokes, swallowing the last of her coffee. These fantasies reaching out from the screen, colours gently slid across her skin, marking her out as theirs.

6.

Asha would have been six, Sita sixteen and Amrita nineteen. It had been a bright day in October, and all the Hindus in the block were preparing for the start of Diwali, the smell of food hanging heavy in the air and excited kids charging through the corridors screaming, fighting, playing football.

Amrita felt her heart like a rotten fruit, about to burst. Drowning in the claustrophobia of the family.

The Lakhani sisters had never been allowed to celebrate Diwali. "Good Catholics," their mother told them, "don't deal in such nonsense." She even objected to the little festival held at school. Diwali, as far as she was concerned, was just another ordinary day.

Except that it wasn't, even ignoring the Hindu community's effort beyond the walls. Amrita always suspected that her father missed Diwali terribly, and he got grumpy, sitting in his chair relentlessly reading the paper, not speaking much to anyone. Her mother would try to overcompensate by talking about Christmas, God, the television, anything but the rising sense of Diwali that gripped the whole household.

Sita had probably been winding mum up, and Amrita, not listening, torn inside, trying to reconcile love and family, had suddenly been dropped in the middle of it.

“Calcutta wasn't so nice!” Suddenly snapped into her ear, making her start, tea slopping out from her cup and all down her jeans.

“Shit! Mum...”

“Don't swear.”

“What was that for?”

“Telling Sita we'd be better off in India.”

“I never!”

“Don't lie.” Her mother bends over her, waving a finger. “India isn't just the Beatles sitting around in Goa. It wasn't all sunshine and elephants.”

“I never said it was.”

“Well don't think it! All that poverty and muck on the streets -“

“We've got muck on the streets,” Sita adds helpfully.

“No we don't, not like this. And then there were the beggars -“

“We've got them too.”

“Shut up. I'm talking to your sister, not you.”

“Yes, mum.”

Not all this again, Amrita thinks, staring upwards at her mother, skin moulded as calmly and impassively as she can manage. She's sure her mother can smell the chemical change, the excess of hormones burning her body. All the peculiar hints her mother has dropped, the strange probing questions, strange little looks. Like she's gradually working up to asking me outright, Amrita thinks. She'll work it and work it. But I'm not yours anymore, she silently tells the lecturing face. You can't pull these strings anymore and watch me dance. I won't just do what you want me to do.

Her mother stares at her, expecting a response.

“You've told me. More than once.”

“Well, remember it. Remember that if this was India there would be very few chances for the three of you. You and Sita would be married by now and would be spending your lives washing clothes, making food and having babies.”

“What, you mean all the things that you've done over here?” Sita again. “Big fat difference that's made. I don't think I've ever seen Dad cook.”

“I cooked when you and Asha were born.”

“Oh, wow, twice. Steady on, Dad.”

“Sita, your father goes out and works all day, so someone has to do the washing and cooking. And besides, I wasn't talking about me. I was talking about you three. Being here gives you three a better chance.”

“Rubbish.” Sita leans back into the sofa, giving her mother a smug smile. “India's changed, you know. It's not like when you were there.”

“And what would you know about it? It's fine if you're Brahmin but we're not, if you haven't noticed. And nothing's changed for those without much money. Would you like to see Amrita washing clothes all day and dragging babies around all over the place?”

Sita giggled. “It'd be an improvement on accountancy.”

Amrita covers her face with her hands, feeling sick. Her mother clenches up with rage, and for one moment Amrita thinks she is going to hit Sita. She picks up Amrita's tea-cup instead and bashes it down on the table to emphasize every word. “THIS ISN'T FUNNY!” tea slopping everywhere and Sita howling with laughter. Amrita looks up to see her mother staring at her with terrible intent, tears in her eyes and a hopeless, frantic desperation about her, then she storms out towards the bedroom.

Paper lowered, her father frowns, his face severe. Sita stifles her laughing and Amrita sighs, rubbing the side of her face like she's been slapped. He never says what he thinks, Amrita realizes as he stares over at them both. Maybe he doesn't care, or maybe he's afraid. I don't know.

“Go speak to your mother,” he tells her. And to Sita: “Mop up the tea.”

“Oh, great. And what about you?”

He doesn't bother to answer. Sita rolls her eyes at Amrita as she heads for the kitchen.

Amrita climbs the stairs to her parents' bedroom. She can't hear anything from inside, doesn't know whether to knock or just enter. In the end just enters, her skin prickling at the threshold, unfamiliar smells, the suggestions of a very private intimacy about which she knows nothing. Such secret lives, she thinks, trying not to look round at the spilling dressers, the books by the bedside tables, pills and glasses of half-drunk

water. And she suddenly feels old, remembering rushing in here to open birthday or Christmas presents, parents still in bed and staring bleary eyed at their children, all the time that has gone. Stares down at her body, breasts and hips, hands, suddenly weary, wondering what happened. Why it all still feels like a game.

“I’m going grey.”

Amrita's mother is sitting by the dresser, holding out her long hair. Amrita gingerly perches on the bed next to her. “That’ll be Sita's doing.”

She's not sure if her mother heard. “I’m going grey and you're all growing up so fast...”

Amrita catches herself in the mirror. A woman now, she supposes, watching the shape of her figure next to her mother. She's never really felt that before, like an extra weight in her bones.

“We're only doing our best for you, you know. I don't understand why you want to throw it all away.”

“It was Sita who was arguing.”

“Well you should have stopped her. You're the eldest. You have to set an example to the other two.”

Amrita hangs her head. “I don't think I can always be your idea of a good daughter. I've got my own life.”

“What does that mean, eh?”

She hates speaking like this. Feeling her words fall like stones. “One day you're going to have to let me go.”

“Do you want to end up like me and your father? Just struggling? You've got the opportunity to do so much better. I know you hate accountancy, Amrita, but life isn't all about doing what you want. And I know you - you might have other things in your life.” Drawing back from the edge of saying it, Amrita's age, the change in her, still unspeakable. People get married, Amrita thought, and that's it. “It's three years, that's all. Three years. Please. Can't we agree for that long?”

Amrita catches her breath, wondering. Watches her future in the mirror, a kaleidoscope of pictures, different selves.

She looks across at her mother, getting older now, body crumpling into fat and heavy drooping lines, dreams clinging about her like her slowly thinning, slowly greying hair.

“Okay, mum. Okay.” Hates herself for the compromise, for not knowing how much of a lie she has told. I'm just as bad as my mother, she thinks. Sweeping it all under the carpet.

She gives her mother a soft kiss on the cheek and then leaves.

Afterwards she drags Sita out, desperate for escape, her parents' desires bearing down like the concrete walls all around, thousands of tons pushed into the earth, the hive, all the other little boxes piled above and below spilling out dreams and wants, a yantra locked into the architecture of the building. She takes a football from Asha's side of the bedroom and the two girls head out, through the corridor and the smell of cooking and down through the hollow spine of the lift to the outside world.

“God, it's really beautiful today.” Sita blinks, shielding her eyes with her hand.

The sky hangs expansively over them, cloudless, a dazzling azure fading to an opaque white near the horizon, shadows faded to grey, colours bleached.

“Where's Asha?” Amrita squints, trying to stare across the green.

“Over there. Playing football. Where else?”

Eldritch forms cavort as Amrita squints further, trying to stretch a line across from her to them. Yes, there's Asha, all flying curls and crazy grin, charging across the left wing, a trail of defeated boys in her wake. Finally slips the ball across the box to some clodhopper who skies the thing. Cue an argument about the height of the goal conducted in pre-teen squawks, the usual insults and expletives drifting up on the breeze. Amrita grins, remembering.

“Asha's a genius with a ball,” says Sita, her slim body moving easily, her face curiously pensive, hungry.

“What, and you weren't?”

“Oh, she's much better than I ever was.”

“She's only six.”

“There's enough there to tell.”

“Bollocks.”

“No, really.”

“Well, if she's really better than you, and you were better than me... And I was always considered a bit of a footballing prodigy. At least until these grew,” hands to her tits, “and it became like playing with three footballs.”

Sita giggles.

“Do you ever worry that each generation may be far more brilliant than the last? Faster, stronger, more intelligent? I sometimes feel redundant at nineteen. It makes me feel old.”

“Speak for yourself, grandma. Myself, I feel great. I mean, okay, Asha may be great at football but otherwise the girl's a total airhead.”

“Oh, come on. What do you expect her to be at six? Einstein?”

“If she could hold any kind of conversation about something that wasn't football it'd be a start. The girl is dense.”

“Do you think she'll go off it as quickly as you did?”

“No. Asha lives it. She's a bit like you were in that respect. I was never really that much into it. I only got involved to prove that I was better than you.”

“Such sisterly fucking love.”

They come to a halt by what, nominally, must be the halfway line. The ball bounces about the pitch seemingly of its own accord, surrounded by a seething mess of Parka hoods, cheap tracksuits and even cheaper trainers. Kids shout, fall over, swear with impressive volubility before looking over at the two sisters and grinning with embarrassment.

“I think what bugged me is that you saw it as an art. I just thought it was a game. But then you've always had artistic pretensions.”

Amrita stares at her sister, troubled. “That's a closed book now. I'm doing accountancy, just like they wanted, and that's an end to it.”

“Bollocks. There's about as much of the accountant in you as there is the philosopher in Asha.”

“You're wrong there,” Amrita tells her with a sick smile, not laughing at a private joke that, anyway, isn't very funny.

“Come off it.” Sita continues, oblivious. “I can't see this new altruistic you lasting. What about wanting to be an artist? You're too obsessed with it to just let go.”

“I just...enjoy it.”

“Right.” Sita's smile is surprisingly bitter. “Don't forget that I traded football in for fashion. That was more important to me. I think you're stupid to just give in. Make the sacrifices you want to make, not the ones you think you should. But whatever, for God's sake be honest about it.”

They look at each other awkwardly, shared memories played out over each other's skin. Rash adolescence, the damage stretching out from the past to scar them. Amrita turns her head away, hears the other girl sigh.

“I just hope Asha keeps it up,” Sita continues, voice lower, eyes guarded and arms crossed, “rather than chucking it all away for nothing. I think she's just about dumb enough to pull it off. She's got such a talent it'd be a waste otherwise.”

“Yeah, but women's fucking football. Even if she goes to the top, it's hardly the Premier League, is it?”

“It's a man's world, babe.”

“It's bloody unfair, is what.”

“You sound like mum.”

Amrita gives an edgy laugh. “It's not funny.”

“That's exactly what she said. I think it's hilarious. I don't know why you two can't just talk honestly with each other.”

“Don't start. I came out to get away from all that. Where's Asha gone? Asha!”

Asha is the one hopping about the ball, bending its will to her own. She ghosts past the ragged excuse for a defence, calmly plops the ball between the two piles of coats and then turns and charges off the pitch towards Amrita, her arms spread wide, big grin on her face.

“Oof! Christ.” As the small body cannons into her, arms grabbed round her waist. She folds over the kid. “You're really too big to be doing that anymore.”

“Don't care.” And Asha laughs.

“You cow.” Amrita picks her up, holds her upside down for Sita to tickle as the clothes flop in flags of surrender over Asha's head. She screams and twists, hitting out wildly with her hands. Eventually, after being smacked in the face one too many times, Sita gives in, and Amrita drops Asha into an exhausted heap.

“She's got your fists,” Sita says, rubbing her jaw.

“And she's got your vindictiveness.”

“Worst of both worlds, then. That's no good. Let's take her to the market and sell her.”

“Fine.” Asha's a bit old for this one, but as Amrita reaches down, there's a flash of apprehension in her eyes. “You've heard of the stall at Roman Road where they buy naughty little girls? Well that's where you're going.” But she can't stop herself from smiling, and, cupping Asha's hand with her own, she can't help but feel happy at the warmth that spreads across Asha's face.

The three of them head across the park towards the main road.

7.

A green world behind the black sheen of glass. Amrita feels she could just reach out, lay her hand against the surface and be pulled though, back, herself unmade.

Watching figures and shadows from her mind playing upon the window, eyes wide, black holes in reflection, the ghost of herself watching in, a woman who did it all differently.

Amrita wonders. Could she have changed? Could she have done what they wanted? The doubt gnaws through her. She tells herself that she did what she had to do, that she could not have done anything else. The ghost, dumb, watched as she did, face shadowed, brought the cigarette up to its lips and sucked back smoke. Cracked map of her palm echoing the roads and paths of the city below, as through the translucent body the streetlights still shone, the huge billboards peddling dreams, passing cars heading towards the city, the Shopping Centre looming like a burst lotus bud beneath the huge ring of tower blocks, Tabernacle church floodlit like a Pompeii ruin, the dead lights of the bingo hall waiting for the morning.

She presses her hand against the glass. Watches a convoy of police cars snake across the roads, lights flashing, howl of sirens a call to prayer.

The sun rises, sky set on fire.

A new day.