

SONG

I.

A Saturday afternoon with the Jusujas and over mugs of beer Arvind revealed himself with the usual phrases: I'm a very frank man, I'm a very simple man, and later, I believe a person should always be happy, I don't believe in having regrets. When Sanam came into the room, in her checkered maroon pantsuit, carrying the chips and cashews, Look who wears the pants in this house! he cried. And, Thank you boss, as she set the brass bowls on the newly varnished coffee table. A shrug and muttering in Punjabi that it was his fate, what could a man do. I don't regret anything, I say let it go, right boss? Sanam, bored with the lines, twisted her modest, sensible face in a grimace, passed the cashews to Kishore, who was slumped in the crushed velvet recliner.

Lalita Jusuja fingered the diaphonous mauve *chunni* around her shoulders, said she was going to India for five or six months, had she told them? She wanted to sing *ghazals* on stage, make a record maybe — but that was just a dream, she laughed, a longshot as they say. She'd heard of an Indian lady singer from England who'd made it big in Bombay, appeared on TV there. There's a *ghazal* mania throughout the country! she leaned forward urgently, the fleshy mounds of her torso straining against her purple satin *salwaar*. All the old songs are back again!

Arvind stretched his arms, a pleasant sigh, wondering, Why give yourself the headache of doing anything in that country? Why not perform here? So many Indo-American organizations here or call up a university, they like such cultural events, oh no, it doesn't matter if they don't understand the words. But Lalita shook her head in despair, disagreement, her abundant black curls bouncing heavily against her shoulders. I'm serious about it, there's no opportunity in this country, no one understands the poetry. Arvind looked at Kishore sleeping lightly on the gold recliner, said, You're so

well-settled, why create problems for poor Kishore. Lalita's smooth maternal face withered in disgust, what is the great attraction in this place, she struck out, with so much housework and loneliness?

She was too grave. Arvind tossed cashews into his mouth, looked into space. A buzzer rang for Sanam to check the rice, only Kishore's deep breathing softened the silence. Lalita, eyes down, long curls and gold filigree earrings falling forward, was absorbed in thought, anxiously tying and untying a knot at the end of her *chunni*. Arvind glanced at the downcast silver-shadowed eyes and, unbalanced by their sad reflection, rubbed his hands and cheerily called, is the lunch ready, boss?

II.

Arvind brought the reluctant twins out from their bedrooms for lunch. Very rude for children to stay in their rooms watching TV when auntie and uncle are here, he ushered them into the living room. Here are our shy little artist and athlete, he announced, and the girls scowled at him discreetly. They wore the same dotted shorts outfits, Mona in pink, Minnie in yellow, with the same white sandals on both pairs of delicate feet. Mona, with a wider mouth and nose than Minnie, wore the white wristbands of tennis lessons, absently flexed her fingers and circled her wrists. Minnie, the pianist, hid messily painted scarlet fingernails in her palms.

After lunch Arvind insisted on the usual show, Mona's Junior All-Stars tennis trophy for uncle and auntie to see, Minnie's original melody for Welmont's bicentennial on the spinet. The girls ignored him with the natural hesitation of eight-year-olds, but Sanam urged them too, come on, my big girls, nothing to be afraid of. Minnie earnestly struck the

chords of her bicentennial jingle and Arvind said, You see? What's the point of teaching children sitar and tabla in this country? He turned to Lalita with her large melancholy eyes, You're musically talented, why not take up the piano? Why go back to *ghazals*? Out of sight, out of mind, he stroked Minnie's fine black hair. But of course, he admitted a lagging thought, *Ghazals* are such beautiful melodies, why don't you sing one? Come on, don't be shy like the girls. . . Kishore, tell her, let's have a song. And he coaxed Lalita into a few lines of *Abista*, wistfully closing his eyes as she sang.

III.

The self-advertisement in *India Abroad* said, "Arvind C. Bhatia, Salesman Of The Year Award." Below this a passport picture: tinted glasses, a thick moustache, a vibrant optimistic smile. Below the picture: "Let Me Take Care Of All Your Life Insurance Needs," and in small print, the name of the company, address, telephone numbers. Sanam, hurriedly putting together dinner, ran hot water over a package of frozen chicken, said, You should get more clients now, can you chop some onions please? Of course it pays to advertise here, he came up behind her, squeezed her shoulder, marketing is everything.

How much did they give you? Mona asked her mother at dinner, practicing her backhand as she tilted back in her chair. Sanam, breaking into a small smile, but keeping her gaze firm as always, announced,

I'll send you girls to India for the summer with my raise. How much? Mona insisted. Come on, Minnie cried, you guys never tell us anything. Did they make you president of the bank? You guys! *Guys!* Arvind shouted. Is that how they teach you to talk to your parents in school?

I'll send you for two months, Sanam said. Not India, the girls whined, too boring with just grandparents, aunts, such old cousins. They wanted camps, a tennis camp for Mona. *I'll send you to camp*, Arvind agreed, rubbing their thin shoulders, while Sanam complained, No, they should go back; it's been three years, they'll forget everything. But the girls cried camp, camp, camp. Trywoodie Camp, Minnie sang.

IV.

A buxom singer with large feline gray eyes and a diamond stud in her nose mesmerized Arvind in front of the TV, a Sunday morning ethnic channel. An old song of his childhood streamed out of her glistening Punjabi mouth.

Lathe di chaadar
Utte salethi rangh maiya
Avo samne, Avo samne
Kolon di rus ke na langh maiya

The smooth bloated words flowed out her throat onto his ears, neck, arms, and rhapsodically he murmured the chorus, "Lathe di chaadar, Utte salethi rangh maiya. . ." leaning against the pillows, his eyes closed to hold in the dream of those soft, low lyrics which had once reached him from the dark interior rooms of the house in Kanpur. Come and listen, he called out to Sanam, but his voice wouldn't rise above a whisper.

The glimmering words spun an evanescent net around him: "Lathe di chaadar, Utte salethi. . ." The cotton bedsheet, dyed slate gray — the singer pointed this out to her lover, pleaded with him not to slip past her in his anger. Arvind opened his eyes to watch her, exquisite smoky eyes cast down in desire, black hair draped over her back, her sequined blue *salwar-kameez* glittering against her fawn skin. Who'd sung this song while he'd thrown stones or wrestling with his brothers in the courtyard of that Kanpur house, beyond whose gates the Ganges flowed. A liquid voice full of longing — an aunt, a cousin, a servant woman? Who was it? The voice had resonated along the cool arched veranda, hung like the heat itself over the weathered brick courtyard. At night the words had fluttered in his head, that pure obsessive refrain about gray cotton sheets and the lover slipping past, words circling his mind like birds as he lay in bed with his parents and brothers, too young to comprehend that desire, but haunted by it, imagining the sheets they all slept on were gray on that courtyard bed veiled with mosquito netting, under a powerful northern moon, the water moving over land behind them. Now he fell asleep as the the song subsided and

in his dream the old river floated past illuminated by those lambent words, "Lathe di chaadar, Utte salethi rangh maiya . . ." Words and water one substance, a golden Punjabi script engraved in the flux, and he was at peace knowing behind him stood the house, the courtyard the moon's brilliant disc.

V.

Arvind, teaching the girls the song, repeated each word carefully, emphatically, breaking it into syllables but their flat American intonations would not swell into the deep oval Punjabi sounds. Listen now! You're not paying attention! He snapped off the TV. Alright, Lat-he di chaa-dar, repeat it after me, Lat-he. . . They giggled irrepressibly, alarmed by the rare tension and determination in his face. He slammed his hands on the table, Listen to me, and Mona nervously circled her shoulders as if in a warm-up exercise. Minnie chipped the dark red off her fingernails. His hand struck harshly across their faces, making a bold noise, trembling in the moment of stunned silence that preceded their shrieks.

In bed he asked Sanam if she knew the song. What song? she said. He sang a few lines, imagining each syllable a physical structure — some sacred architecture — which the voice connected along the scale of heights and depths, but as if in water, wavering, "Lathe di chaadar, Utte salethi rangh maiya," he lowered the pitch, "Aaaavo saamne, Aaaavo saamne, Kollon dii russa kee naa —" went even lower, "laangh maiya" Why don't you sing it? Sanam repeated the chorus for him, What made you think of this? Too fast he complained, slow down or there's no sensation. She sang it slower, lying back on the pillows and he closed his eyes, watching the golden-lettered words drift through the slaty river. She stumbled with the tune, the slapstick verses about the mother-in-law, "Tere maa ne. . . Tere maa ne. . ." He picked up the line, rose through the comedy, circled back to the longing refrain, words swelling in his throat, slipping across his tongue and through his lips like intricately carved objects he could hold in his palms. Sanam turned off the light, humming the chorus indifferently as she got back in bed; he said You can imagine you're there if you sing it slowly

enough, thinking it was like building something with miniature ingots, a room or temple, or watching the gold ripple across the river's muted skin.

VI.

The luminous voices remembering monsoon showers of the past reflected like prisms through the concert hall, throwing light into the highest concave spaces. Arvind stared spellbound at the stage, the woman Chitra, draped in a gold and white sari, gazed down at her almond colored fingers, lightly moving her lips. Jagjit her husband, clapped his thick hands above his head, invited the audience to join in, shaking his shoulders, cupping a hand out in front of his mouth in the Mughal style. Listen, Arvind whispered to the girls, Just *listen* to the words. His eyes locked on the singers sitting cross-legged on the dias with their silk-clad musicians — tanpura, tabla, even electric guitar — and three tall brass vases of marigolds and greenery, a faint sandalwood perfume. He gripped Mona's bony wrist, do you know who Bahadur Shah was? The first verse about the exiled Mughal emperor longing to be buried in India, among his ancestors and friends, and Arvind squeezed her hand, he wants to go back to die where he came from! And softly he joined in the chorus with others in the audience, some men in white *salwaar-kameez*, teenagers from Queens glamorous as Bombay movie queens in florid silks and silver stilettos.

He waited for *Lathe di Chaadar*, they might sing it, it was popular with everyone, all the Punjabis here feeling the swell of regret, though it wasn't really a *ghazal*, just a folk song. He waited for it, whispering other songs into Mona's ears which bloomed with small gold flowers — do you understand it? The man sees his beloved's face in the moon. *Chanda*, moon. Try to follow. And her skin is like wet rose petals. . . *gulab* —

Sanam tapped his arm, You're disturbing others, let the girls be, they're too young, and after some time Mona grew restless, talked back, and Sanam took her to the bathroom. When Mona came back, he held her wrist down again, You must listen to this, this is what Lalita auntie sang for us that day, *Abista*. I didn't even want to come here, Mona cried, I

hate New York. Listen! I'll explain. A woman comes to put flowers on a grave and her beloved's voice says put the flowers down slowly, slowly — *abista, abista* — when she turns away, he says lift your veil slowly, slowly — *abista, abista*. He smiled delicately at Mona and she snatched her wrist out of his grasp.

Arvind shouted out *Lathe di Chaadar!* for an encore, but Jagjit broke into other Punjabi songs, oblivious of the insistent cry, slapping his pudgy hands over his head, while soft-eyed Chitra looked down demurely, a brown and white bird with a black shawl draped across one shoulder. The last note sung, the musicians in white silk walking off stage, and again he bellowed *Lathe di Chaadar!* which, for a moment, splintered the final silence, resounded through the vast space, a solitary plea.

VII.

A half moon, chased them across the highway, Arvind singing *Lathe di Chaadar*, a few lines of *Abista* or some other *ghazal* — desolate old Bahadur Shah longing to go home to die — and singing he thought of how they'd all slept under the moon in the courtyard — all of them in one bed or perhaps two joined together — and the filmy white mosquito netting closing off the world, but letting in the moon and the sound of water — or was it only his imagination? the sound of water? — the river where his father bathed before the light broke, just the knowledge of water was a solace for existence. He turned to the girls, drowsing in the back seat, do you see a face in the moon?

VIII.

The house again, a split-level on a street repeating split-levels, with pink and white azalea bushes, neatly squared shrubbery and the lawn trimmed by the high school boy; in the back, redwood fencing, flagstone patio and grill, an above ground pool. . . for the first time he flinched, how little solace in it, purple crocuses like plastic buds. . . how little spirit. Across the street a house with a black and white lamppost, black mailbox painted with white daisies, a black cart-

wheel with white spokes resting against a small pine. . . even the moon made no difference over this, he hummed his song to keep the emptiness at bay.

IX.

Sanam, helping the girls out of their satin clothes, said, Don't be crazy, they have school tomorrow, let them get a good night's sleep, they're big girls not afraid of the dark, are you? I didn't say they were afraid, he repeated. Don't you want to sleep with mummy and papa? He carried Minnie, already changed into her nightie, her fingernails glowing pink, into their bedroom and she was too sleepy to protest. Mona came running, half-undressed, I want to sleep with you; she climbed in next to Minnie, slithered delightfully under the blankets.

Sanam pulled Minnie out, dragging her to her own room, shouting, Why are you spoiling them? What's gotten into you? and she came back for Mona, marching her to her own bed. Later Arvind watched Sanam plait her long hair for the night, accused her of not having any motherly feelings. All you can do is drive them around town like some automatic machine, back and forth. Our bed is not too small for everyone, it won't be so bad with four of us in it; it *should* be like that. How was it when you were little? I want my family to sleep together, is that so much to ask? *Yes?* Then what am I living my life for?

X.

The buzz of *Good Morning America* and Arvind watched Sanam put on navy pants, a beige corduroy jacket. Wear the yellow silk I bought you, he muttered, gazing at her face coming to modest life with pale copper lipstick and rouge. The yellow one with the orange border, I thought you wanted it.

Sanam paused to catch the end of an interview with an economist, picked up her purse, said he'd have to drive Mona to tennis this evening because she had a meeting, take the meat out of the freezer. Arvind grabbed the remote control off her pillow, snapped off David Hartman, began humming

his song, hummed it all morning; all day in the office the words circled his mind, "Lathe di chaadar, Utte saletthi rangh maiya, Avo samne —"

Sharp at 5:30 Mona appeared downstairs in tender whites, racket and balls in hand, but he wouldn't take her to the courts. Stay here with Minnie and me, watch how I make tandoori chicken, all right? I'll play some music for you sweetie. The match, the match, Mona cried, I can clobber Michelle Jenkins! There's no reason for all this, any of this, you don't have to go your separate ways, his soft eyes were oddly resolute. It'll be a forfeit, no fair, I could have won the tournament! I practiced every day — the racket flung down in despair — I worked on my backhand all the time, *please!* No. Arvind's rare stubbornness stumped her into silence, sulking. Some time later Minnie said What about camps? and he snapped, No need to go to camps, two separate ones! We'll all drive somewhere or go to India, I'll take you to Kashmir, a houseboat on the lake. NO! The unanimous girlish cry. Minnie sat down at the piano, Can you leave the room please and close the door? but Arvind insisted there are no one-person rooms in this house, How can I teach you that? with what lesson?

The girl's blankets and bloated pillows on his bed, he ordered them to try it for a night, plugged their night light into the wall. Sanam, tired from her women in business meeting, face smudged, oily, said He purposely made life difficult, ruining their schedules — they had to be up early for school — upsetting them, Mona still crying that she'd had to miss her match, Minnie whimpering that camp was out, he'd said, and she couldn't even practice for the spring concert alone, they had to sit in the room listening, making her nervous. Hair falling out of her small workday bun, Sanam sorted out the girls' bedding, dumped flowered sheets and pillows on each single bed while Arvind, still furious, grieved, muttered There's no room in this house for any *one* person.

XI.

Four of them jammed on the same bed, Minnie's peony pink nails flashing at his side, Mona next to Sanam, who'd given in as he became more intractable each day, then quiet and wistful remembering how he'd slept with his parents in the Kanpur house on the Ganges. He shifted to the edge of the bed, giving Minnie space to move, breathe comfortably. He watched them shift their limbs, turn, throw off their blankets, Sanam sighing with each breath, dreaming perhaps, but still sensitive to the girls, reaching out to cover them, tucking discarded pink blankets under their arms. He watched silently, attuned to each door groan and furnace grunt but still startled by them, lying rigid in an uneasy wakefulness. Perhaps it was because there was no moon in the window, no fresh river wind, or because no voice issued from the depths of the house in the morning to fill him with a wonderous sense of connection with the sleeping bodies beside him, perhaps it was because none of this existed anymore, just a little lawn, redwood fencing, plastic pool. . . all of them lost in separate dreams and beings without any diaphonous curtain enclosing them in one space, cutting off the universe, their individual American pursuits, there was nothing to contain them in a unity like the unity in that weathered courtyard under the fluid Indian moon. Each body lay distinct and miraculously apart from the others, not even arms crossing randomly. He could take the girls to their rooms now, put them in their own beds; Sanam might sleep more comfortably, be less irritable in the morning. It felt like nothing; the absence of fulfillment pressed on his soul so that he almost moaned, shook his head ruefully. He left the girls in bed, lacking the energy or heart to move them, knowing it would be the same emptiness whether they slept together or apart.