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Running (excerpt)

We ran through the streets near our neighborhood. As usual, I was labored and slow. But Sanjay ran by my lumbering side with the ease of a swinging hammock. The companionship seemed to matter to him more than the running. We ran so slowly in the heat that words unmoored from him, as if shaken free by the persistence of heat and movement: the Jewish cult he knew back when he lived in India, they weren't so pale and didn't remind him of me; pink palaces and elephants with earrings; chess; the rock gods in Judas Priest, the mysteries of mail-order sea monkeys, and that girl with the uneven hair in math class; Peanut Butter Crunch, his favorite cereal hidden under the bed. How Brown University required that he hand-write his essay, even though his penmanship bore no resemblance to his personality and smarts -- shaky and hesitant, the scrawling of a first-grader. Our feet skipped over tar-bubbles and patches of grass, whiskered in the autumn heat.

Invisible threads of affection pulled me along while running by his side. But I thought he could tell; that he would even find it spidery and creepy. I hadn't had this kind of conversation in all my life. Certainly not with Preethi, his twin sister, who now spent most of her time refracted in the blinking beakers of chemistry class, or hovering near the gum-smacking social butterflies at school.

“Really, Dov, you should come over some time. My parents can cook some delicious food, and Preethi thinks you're funny.” It was as if he had read my mind.

“Really...” I almost had forgotten we were running. I loved how he called me Dov, not Hey-you, or worse yet, Rosenblum, which to me sounded like an insult cried during athletic events.

“Yeah, every time she sees you, she says it looks like you’re completely spooked. She thinks it’s funny.”

Yet for the first time in years, the name Preethi didn’t conjure thoughts of illumined brown eyes, night-black-hair, and candy hearts. I wondered instead if Sanjay thought I was funny too. Not funny in the oblique way expressed by Preethi. She really meant strange, but Sanjay didn’t notice the veiled dig at me.

Green signs marked fleeting streets: Timberlake Drive, Tangled Tree Lane, Forest Glenn, Dogwood Court; all named, I suspected, in a fit of guilt over cutting down all the trees. I noted these words of comfort marking emptiness, like green flags, the neatly drawn yellow lines along moonscape roads, and Sanjay jogging beside me in the soft dusk, his head bobbing. I squeezed my hands, which were going numb during the run.

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Sanjay invited me over for dinner with the entire Mistry family: his parents, nanni, and Preethi. In the dusky front lawn, Mrs. Mistry pulled up her yellow sari to water a garden of okra and tomatoes, faded hydrangeas and soft buttercups. Sanjay had told me that the garden used to be plagued by aphids, which would chew holes in the tomato leaves and swaddle them in downy spider silk. At first they were going to buy pesticides, but Sanjay fretted. Squirrels might be poisoned. So they imported ladybugs and preying mantises by the hundreds to populate the lawn. They would eat the aphids. I walked up the white pebble path dividing the lawn, just before the garden. I didn’t want

to disturb Mrs. Mistry, and I watched for spotted red jewels in the grass, so improbably green. But I saw Sanjay waiting for me by the yellow light of the window. He swung the door open and patted me on the shoulder.

Their home was like warm wool. Mr. Mistry owned a Laundroland forty minutes down the highway, near downtown St. Louis. Along with The Hindu newspaper folded under his arm, he took home the welcome soapscent on his clothes and skin. We sat at a fragrant dark-wood table, its surface like polished brass. Heaps of spinach and potatoes and pale cheese lay on the table, a cumin scent tingling my nose. Above the table hung a painting of the Hindu deities Krishna and his love Radha. In a red-orange temple framed by a starry heaven, blue-skinned Krishna intertwined with Radha, his fingers balancing above her breasts like a lute-player about to pluck. Her black hair cascaded down her back and to the peacock curve of her blue-green sari. She smiled slyly, an echo of her eyes and the half-moon in the night sky.

It was the most romantic thing I had ever seen, and it seemed more appropriate over a bed. Mr. Mistry must have noticed that I kept staring at it, and that my fork poked from my basmati rice like an abandoned arctic flagpole. He said he could tell me more about Krishna -- now that he had an audience. Even though he never looked at Preethi and Sanjay, they performed a mute duet, probably well practiced. She rolled her eyes, and he sat up in his chair, arms rolled back like an opened book. Sanjay had once told me he didn't care about religion. It was just a bunch of fables.

In an accent that grew sweeter with each word, Mr. Mistry explained how Krishna's skin was so dark that he was invisible even in the night. Artists painted Krishna's skin blue to convey his supernatural darkness. Here, in the starry dark, Krishna

could woo his many women with the lantern of his love. But Radha was his nightlark, his one true love. I liked to imagine Preethi as Radha, leaning below my puckered kiss. And me, skin blue and smooth as robin eggs beneath her light fingers. But every time I looked at her, quietly eating some saag paneer, my eyes wandered over to Sanjay, who was staring right at me. I felt a heat in my gut. I must have eaten some spiced peppers.