THE WATER BETWEEN US
Uncle was late.

Crouched behind the leaves of the coffee plants, Krishna tried in vain to hide from the relentless eyes of the sun. He licked his dry lips, tilting his head back and letting his tongue roll out like a dog.

Once, when he had tried to run away from Uncle, he’d crawled underneath fallen boulders at the far side of his village. He’d sandwiched himself between blistering rocks and the muddy earth, barely squeezing into a space no larger than a market stand crate.

Now, he felt like he had then, smothered in a sticky blanket of heat and thirst. His back was aching, sweat clinging to his brown skin like wet rice paper. Only a swarm of flies kept him company in his row, and the other boys’ conversation easily pierced the buzzing.

“...Where do you think he is this time?”

“Probably drunk again,” said a boy not much older than Krishna. “I heard Auntie screaming at him last night.”

Someone else snorted. “Yeah, screaming at him not to stop.”

Krishna didn’t understand their snickers. But he did understand that without Uncle walking between the rows with a switch dangling from his fingers, he didn’t have to wait for the lunch bells to ring.

Taking care to duck behind the coffee plants, he crept through the rows to the stream that flowed from a small lake to the north, bordering the farm.
Krishna had discovered that the easiest way to eat was to eat alone. Then, he wouldn’t have to worry about his chapathi getting stolen. But just as he got to the stream, he heard a voice through the bushes. He paused, peering through the leaves. Standing on the other side of the stream was a girl of about seven, probably close to his own age. She was singing to herself, her voice high and strong.

He stepped forward—and froze as she startled at his footsteps. For a long moment, they stared at each other, brown eyes locked on brown eyes. Yet where Krishna was as dark as the pits of the coffee cherries he plucked all day, the girl was fairer than fresh cream. Had it not been for her langa, and hair and eyes the same color as his own, he would’ve called her a foreigner.

He frowned. This was his spot. He didn’t want a girl here. He was about to tell her exactly that when he noticed the red spots of color along her cheeks. She was clearly embarrassed.

Hastily, she brushed her skirt as he shifted uncomfortably in the awkward silence. When she finally faced him, only a determined look remained on her face.

“Hi.” Her voice was as tender and sweet as her song. “I’m Radha.”

Hesitantly, she stuck her hand out, and it took him a moment before he recognized the British gesture. Curiosity got the better of him, and he crossed the stream halfway, perching on a rock before tentatively grasping her fingers.

For a moment, he marveled at the softness of her skin. The hands that he’d known were always rough, their touch never gentle.

“Krishna.” He tilted his head to the side. “What were you singing?”

She immediately drew her hand away, blushing. “Nothing. Just a…love song my father hums sometimes.”

He scrunched his nose. “A love song?” He didn’t know any boys that sung love songs—unless the bawdy folksongs he’d heard in the fields counted.
She narrowed her eyes defensively, her initial timidity washing away like water. “Yes, a love song. It’s actually very sweet. It’s about a husband who comes to bring his wife back from a visit to her parents’ house, but she’s not allowed to see him yet.”

Before Krishna could ask why, she continued. “I sing it when I’m mad, actually.”

He had settled comfortably onto the rock while she talked, starting to pick at his chapati. He couldn’t quite remember if he’d ever talked to a girl alone before, and he found himself wanting to hear more of her voice. “Why were you mad?”

She huffed, “My mother wouldn’t let me wear what the village boys are wearing.” She gestured to Krishna, who was in just a loincloth. “This skirt is too long. I’m so scared of getting it dirty that I can barely go anywhere.”

She wasn’t wrong. The skirt puddled along her feet, too heavy for the thin string holding it up at her waist. For a second, Krishna imagined what it would be like to wear such a long garment to the outhouse, much less while working on the farm. He shuddered. He would trip and fall in the muck for sure.

Conversation flowed easily after that. He didn’t know any children except the other boys he worked with. He was curious about this girl, who seemed to have so much more than he did but so little freedom.

When she mentioned she lived right next to the stream, he asked why he hadn’t seen her before.

“Oh—we just moved here. My father is a coffee merchant. And what about you? Did you just move here too?”

He shook his head. “No, I live on the farm with Uncle.”

“Uncle? Is he your real uncle? What happened to your parents?”
He shrugged. He honestly didn’t know the answer to either question. One of the eldest boys had told him that they had all picked out his new name when Auntie had taken him in as a toddler. He told her what his days were like. She was aghast at how long he worked.

“Do they not let you play?”

“Not when Uncle is watching us. But when he’s gone, sometimes we sing.”

That piqued her interest. “You can sing?”

He blushed. He couldn’t repeat the lyrics of the songs he knew to any girl. “Not as pretty as you do.”

A cowbell sounded in the distance—his break was over. To his surprise, something like sadness curled in his stomach. As he turned to go, she grabbed his wrist. “Hey,” she teased, a twinkle in her eye. “You can’t leave me without a song.”

He swallowed hard, asking the question lurking in his thoughts. “How about tomorrow?”

A smile transformed her face. “Tomorrow it is. Promise you’ll be back?”

For the first time, Krishna believed in the promise of tomorrow.

“Yes. I promise.”

1934

The strange man kept watching Radha.

She fidgeted in the sweltering heat permeating their house. Her new langa and blouse were scratchy and stiff, and her fingers itched to take them off.

But not with that man watching her like a hungry coyote. Her father’s nickname for her had caught his attention, and he used it as if he himself had coined the term. Sweet bulbul. The word was vile on his tongue. Little nightingale.
Silently, she watched her parents continue to exchange formalities with him. Fear slicked her thoughts, blurring their sentences. How much do you make a year?…What kind of house do you live in?…Will Radha have fine saris?…What are you expecting for a dowry?

Hours slipped by, sliding past Radha like beads on a string. As her parents talked, she felt his gaze drift back to her, marking her features with a calculating gleam. But she knew what he was looking at. Afterall, her own mother told her every day how the afternoon sun made her skin gleam like fresh buttermilk.

Finally, the man rose to leave, promises of return spilling from his lips. The light caught in the man’s hair, casting the silver strands a glowing white. She wondered if he was the same age as Father.

Suddenly, he turned to her and grasped her chin. His black eyes pierced her own, and though her soul screamed at the touch, Radha found that she couldn’t move a muscle.

“Such fair skin,” he crooned. Radha suppressed a shiver and tried not to think of how nightingales get eaten by coyotes. His fingers tightened imperceptibly before abruptly releasing her.

Without a look at her parents, Radha tore out the back door. Her mother shouted after her but she didn’t care. She had to get away. Had to get away from her parents, away from that man whose eyes were so hungry.

Radha ran. She ran like her fears were nipping at her heels, clawing her skirt. And like always when she was upset, her feet carried her to the stream just beyond their property. Just as they had these past four years—to him.

As she drew close to the stream, she heard a voice singing the seven svaras.

“Sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni, sa.” His voice wasn’t too shabby, and despite the despair clutching her thoughts, she marveled at his improvement. She almost smiled—almost, except the sound of Krishna singing the classical scale reminded her of when her own father had taught them to her. The
man who sang with her each evening was the same man who hadn’t met her eyes since he’d told her the previous night, *Your suitor is a rich man, and we cannot afford to refuse him.*

Krishna had already stood up from his lunch as she came into view. “What happened?”

Panting, her words tumbled from her mouth. “A man came to look at me today and my parents want me to marry him and I hate them and I hate him and I hate this village.”

Krishna drew the rest of the story from her slowly. She couldn’t bring herself to describe how her mother had gently dressed her before the meeting, handling her as gently as a European porcelain doll. How her father had shaken her suitor’s hand and smiled.

Instead, she told him what the older man had said to her, what he had clearly liked about her.

Krishna was clearly stunned. *But really, what was there to be shocked about?* Radha reflected dully. He may have been isolated from most women, but two girls in their village had already been married this summer alone, and they weren’t much older than her. The age of their husbands was a different matter altogether.

Suddenly, he scrambled back towards the farm, calling over his shoulder, “I’ll be back in two minutes!” He returned clutching something soft and brown and stinking.

“Here.” He shaped the dirt into a brown patty and handed it to her. She took it hesitatingly. “Put this over your face.”

Her stomach roiled from the smell. “What is this?”

“Plant fertilizer.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It smells like cow dung.”

He shrugged. “It probably is cow dung.”

“*Krishna,*” she shrieked, immediately dropping it onto the rocks. “Why would you hand me that?”
He laughed at her expression. “It’s for your face. If you rub it into your skin, you’ll get small red and white bumps. I saw it happen once to one of the boys on the farm. Just be careful not to eat it.”

At her hesitation, he sighed, and scooped a small piece of the dirt mixture onto his finger. “Like this,” he said, before rubbing it across his own cheeks and chin, eyebrows waggling in an attempt to amuse her.

She couldn’t help but giggle at the ridiculous sight. She eyed the foul-smelling dung and mud, swallowing the bile rising in her throat. Was it worth it?

Her mind flashed with the memory of that man’s gaze, cold and predatory.

She reached over and smeared her palm across Krishna’s cheek. He paused, staring, as she then wiped the same muck along her face in giant circles.

And his smile, pearl white against the dirt, kindled a flame inside Radha. It did not waver when she returned to the house, her new langa covered in mud and manure. It did not waver when her parents screamed at her for her disobedience, or when her knuckles turned as red as her mother’s sari from the slaps of a wooden stick.

And when she faced the man again one week later, her face splotchy and red and dotted with pustules, his face splotchy with disgust, the flame only burned brighter.

1936

Krishna heard the sound of crying long before he reached the stream.

He pushed back the fronds to see a willowy silhouette standing just inside the water’s edge.
“Radha?” he called tentatively, and she spun, hiccupping as she clutched a bundle of cloths tightly to her chest. He made to enter the water, but she stepped back, panic blazing bright in her brown eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Radha had never been scared of him before. He looked down at himself, but could see nothing out of the ordinary. Besides, it’s not like she could see his back from this angle.

She averted her eyes, and her whole body sank a little, as if her spirit had collapsed inward. “Mother says I can’t touch or talk to anyone. She says I’m impure until I bathe.”

Krishna wanted to ask what that meant, until he saw what she was clutching. Bloodied rags about a hand’s length long.

He froze. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head tightly. “My stomach hurts terribly and I can’t bathe or wash these in the house where my father might see me and this stream is freezing in the mornings. I’m not allowed to go into the kitchen either and all of my food is cold by the time I get it.” Krishna himself would’ve taken any food, hot or cold, but he didn’t say that. Instead, he asked, “By the time it reaches you? Where are you sleeping?”

“There’s a shack behind the house. My mother said to sleep there until I stop bleeding.”

He glanced at her in horror. “Bleeding? Are you going to die?”

“I asked my mother that too and she said no. Maybe I will though and then she will be sorry that she didn’t let me sleep in the house.” She scowled petulantly but he could see the slight tremble in her lips.

Krishna wanted to ask where she was bleeding—he couldn’t see any cuts on her—but she had fallen silent, washing the cloths with renewed vigor.
Despite his wanderings during the day, he hated being alone at night. The boys on the farm would huddle together, bravado giving way to fear of thieves or cobras or older men. The thought of Radha sleeping outside her house, in pain and alone, made him shiver, and he suddenly hugged her.

She stiffened, before hugging him back, hard and tight, face pressed firmly against his shoulder. “No one has touched me for days,” she whispered with a sniffle. “They said I’m too dirty.”

After wading through the mud to pluck coffee cherries all day, Radha was one of the cleanest people he’d ever seen. He was about to say so when her hand inadvertently pressed against the cuts on his back, and he pulled back, wincing.

She frowned, but then gasped when he turned around in explanation. “What happened?”

He didn’t look at her as he lowered himself into the stream. The cool water felt heavenly against the bloody cuts. “It looks worse than it feels,” he lied, giving her his best carefree smile over his shoulder. He floated for a moment before adding a little more shamefully: “I got caught stealing some food, that’s all.”

She looked sheepish. “I could’ve brought you food if you’d asked—well maybe not right now, but you know what I mean.”

He shushed her with a wave of his hands. “No, no, it’s fine.” His stomach rumbled at the thought—clearly, he hadn’t been successful in his thieving endeavor—but the last thing he wanted was to be responsible for Radha seeing the end of the wooden stick her mother occasionally beat her with.

Silently, she urged him upright, but before he could ask what she meant by it, she began to gently clean his wounds.
Minutes ticked by as Radha trickled water along the long, thin cuts left by Uncle’s switch, cleaning them thoroughly as her small hands lightly rubbed away the blood and grime and sweat coating his back. He felt himself begin to relax under her touch. He’d never known a woman’s care, and he found himself wondering if this is how his mother would’ve cared for him if she’d survived.

As the minutes ticked by, Radha began to hum under her breath. It was the same song she’d always sung when she was upset.

“The husband entered his wife’s old house, and greeted her parents with love
Happily, they welcomed him into their home and pampered him like a dove”

Soon enough, Krishna picked up the tune, his voice bolstering hers.

“Bowls of milk and kheer were placed before him, and a mattress was prepared
But still he had not caught sight of his wife, much to his despair
He gently caught his wife’s sister’s arm, who was young and fair of skin
“Where has my wife gone tonight? He asked his wife’s kin”

And when Radha told him that the blood had soaked the upper edge of his loincloth, he squatted so that his lower body was hidden in the water, stripped off the cloth, and began to scrub it against the stones. Radha picked up her own rags, and together, they both washed the blood from their clothes under the watchful eyes of the midsummer sun.

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1938

Radha silently followed her mother along the muddy path leading to the western side of their village. It was a path they traced every harvest time, when her father’s accounts were a little less empty. With a wide basket balanced on her head, her mother stepped through the muck as if she were a traveling acrobat walking a tightrope, her posture stiff, her steps careful and measured.
Thank the gods she can’t see me, thought Radha. Priti had instructed her to step in her footsteps so that the dirt didn’t splatter, but Radha had gleefully ignored her instructions as soon as her mother had turned around. She loved the soft squelch of her sandals, the cool mud oozing between her overheated toes. If she were to perpetually be accused of being dirty, she might as well look the part.

The heady scent of chapatis and spices wafted from the basket perched on her mother’s head, and she felt her stomach grumble in response. Around them, the wooden houses were shrinking, the people loitering on each doorstep growing. They were dressed as if they were scarecrows, worn clothing hanging off bony frames. Men squatted in the corners under lean-tos, chewing betel leaves. Washing women glared at them, their conversations stolen by the wind as they passed. Children dashed by, some clothed, some not. A young girl not more than five bumped into Radha, dropping the rag doll she clutched in her hand. Before she could help the girl to her feet, a boy was already there, scooping her onto his hip and disappearing in a spray of mud.

All around her were pairs of eyes nestled in gaunt sockets, seeing nothing and everything all at once. The further they walked, Radha felt like she carried an invisible basket on her own head, collecting lazy gazes and spiteful glares and everything in between. Suddenly, her own simple cotton langa seemed to shine as bright as the sun, and she wanted to do nothing more than strip off her skirt and run with the naked children around her.

She shivered and pressed closer to her mother.

Finally, they arrived at their destination, a hut at the very end of the road. A ripped tarp acted as a roof, dusty curtains as a door. Inside, the ground was dry. A circle of women sat on straw mats in the dirt surrounded by piles of discolored clothing with needles glinting in their hands. One of them looked up as they entered, a smile breaking across her fair face.

“Priti!” she cried, dropping her mending to embrace Radha’s mother. “It’s good to see you.”
The women had already set down their mending, and soon food and laughter filled the hut, bubbling through the gaps in the wall and holes in the tarp.

Radha sat silently beside Priti. The woman who’d embraced her mother, Jana, was speaking softly, her face strained—as if her expression had been embroidered by a ruthless hand, the threads pulled too tight. She could tell that Jana had once been beautiful—her skin was almost as fair as Radha’s own, her features as fine as a porcelain doll. But she couldn’t unsee the weariness that clung to her skin like a gossamer veil.

Radha shifted closer. She could only hear snatches of their conversation.

_The fever stayed for days…I knew he would die if I didn’t do anything. I had to get the medicine somehow._”

…”What did your husband do? When he learned?”

“Nothing. He did nothing.”

Time seemed to stretch like an elastic band, and as each wide banana leaf was wiped clean of food, the mood snapped back to a somber silence. Every reprieve must come to an end.

After saying their goodbyes, Radha and Priti slowly walked back, the same heavy silence hanging like a mantle from their shoulders.

“Before I met your father, I used to live in a large house. A house nice enough to host the wives of British soldiers. We had our own cows and servants, our choice of dresses and fine jewelry. Beautiful slippers and delicate dolls.”

Radha tried not to show her surprise. Priti rarely spoke of her past. Radha knew that she’d been the daughter of a successful merchant, that she had other sisters who lived north. _Too far for us to visit,_ her mother claimed, but she could now see that there was more bitterness in the words than she’d realized. But now, it was as if those first few words had broken a dam and the rest of her mother’s story flowed out in a torrent of anger and regret.
“My sisters still have gold bangles and silver necklaces. They have maids to scrub their floors and silk sari and furniture imported from Germany. And what do we have? Our lives are tied to the coffee bean, to the market that doesn’t care about our comfort.” Priti’s laugh was a sharp thing, dry and humorless. “We used to live here, on this street with our feet soaked in mud each day. Those women had been my neighbors before the coffee bean stock went up. Now, we might be a little better off than those women, but not by much. And your father? He doesn’t even look at me anymore, always wrapped up in his account and negotiations. And I sit in an empty house and do the same empty chores with the same empty feeling each day.”

She shrank away from the intensity in her mother’s words, the manic gleam in her eye, but her mother clutched her wrist as tight as an iron vise, pulling them both to a halt in the middle of the road. There was no warmth, no protection in her mother’s hold. “This is what love will give you, Radha. The world cursed us to be women, and love cannot break that curse—wealth will.” Her mother jerked her head towards the direction of the hut they left. “You think her husband is strong enough to stop her from being ogled by the village men? From being harassed at night by the soldiers?” Radha knew the she her mother referred to was Jana. “When her child fell sick with fever, how do you think she got the money? Those other men only want one thing, and it’s a price we must pay to survive.”

“Stop,” Radha pleaded. Tears clogged her throat. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She was lying, of course. She couldn’t be a girl and not know what those words meant.

But her plea had cracked something in her mother, and the anger bled away, leaving only an empty husk in its wake. Priti looked tired, so so tired.

Radha trained her gaze on the mud at her feet. In between them lay the rag doll dropped by the young girl earlier. It was now coated in filth. “Promise me, Radha. Don’t choose this fate.” She
didn’t have to continue, to say the unspoken words that coiled tight inside Radha’s chest. *Don’t choose love.*

Radha said nothing as they walked back. As soon as they’d returned, she told her mother she would leave to wash her feet by the stream.

But when she got there, she heard shouts in the distance. She quickly crossed the water, and made to slip into the plantation rows—but bumped straight into the back of a tall boy.

He whipped around, surprise evident on his face. “A girl? Who are you? What are you doing here?”

She stood her ground. “What’s happening? Why is everyone shouting?”

He yanked her into the bushes, away from the commotion. She strained to see through the leaves and could see a group of five or size boys huddled at the feet of two men. One of them paced as he spat on the ground, a switch dangling from his fingers. Her heart sank as she caught sight of one of the figures, the lines of his body more familiar to her than her own. *Krishna.*

The boy whispered, “It’s too hot today. Some of us wanted a break. Uncle said no. They took the break anyway.”

“But he’s whipping them!”

She felt him shrug.

For a moment, Radha imagined herself running from the bushes, begging this man her best friend called Uncle to stop. Telling him who her father was, devising elaborate threats against his coffee bean business if he flicked that switch one more time.

But before she could do any of those things, she remembered that doll lying in the mud, staring back at her with unseeing eyes.

*This is what love gives you.*

The man raised his switch. Krishna flinched, arms raised to shield his face.
And with tears sliding down her cheeks, Radha looked away.

1940

Heat blazed against Krishna’s face. His eyes stung, his skin prickled, but he only relished the burning sensation.

Any sensation other than the tightness in his chest.

They were all gathered in the hut they used for sleeping. Someone had scraped a shallow pit in the dirt and they had managed to build a small fire. Hot coals smoldered and sparked as one of the boys fanned the smoke, occasionally turning the cobs of corn for their dinner.

He tried his best to join their conversations, laugh at their occasional crude remarks, but he could feel the mask rapidly slipping. Finally, he slunk to a corner, sliding against a wall until he sat on the ground, feet stretched in front of him and head resting against a wooden post.

Every so often, he would remember what happened and the breath would disappear from his lungs.

I’m getting married. My parents have already agreed to the match.

And you? Have you agreed to the match?

He jolted as someone tossed down a mat and sat beside him. He would always recognize the man beside him, a figure that haunted both waking life and living nightmare.

He dipped his head in respect. “Uncle.”

Uncle grunted in acknowledgement. Krishna fought to keep from recoiling at the alcohol on his breath. Another bottled drink was already clutched in his hand.

For a brief moment, they stared at each other, and he could’ve sworn he saw the fire reflected in Uncle’s eyes.
Krishna had always hated fire. Hated the heat, the smoke, the eerie crackle of an almost otherworldly power. His skin was already slick with sweat from the humidity, and Krishna would trade all the light and laughter for a chill midnight breeze.

Now, he watched as the firelight danced across Uncle’s face, casting hooked features orange then black then orange again. He suppressed a shiver. Fire may illuminate their world, but that didn’t mean he liked what he saw.

“Krishna, is it?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

He grunted again. “Padma always wanted a son named Krishna. It was her father’s name.”

Words vanished from his head, and he could feel his pulse suddenly ricochet into his chest, his throat, as wildly as if he were walking a knife’s edge with a precipice on each side. Uncle had all but disappeared from the boys’ lives after Auntie had suddenly died last spring from a miscarriage. The cook claimed that he drifted through the house like a ghost, shut inside his room for hours at a time. Krishna would occasionally catch him staring at them from a upper-level window, a sliver of his hard, haggard face—there and then gone.

He wondered how deep a broken bottle would cut flesh. Before Krishna could articulate a response that wouldn’t earn him a beating, Uncle continued speaking, his words slipping and sliding into each other.

“She wanted kids so badly. She would’ve been a good mother, would’ve given them her very soul so they could be happy. I’d give anything to see her with the kids she wanted so damn bad.”

Krishna bit his tongue to keep from lashing out, swallowing the sudden vicious anger and spiteful glee that clutched his vocal cords. She had us, and she treated us worse than the dirt on her feet. The gods don’t forget such things.
But his only response was, “She was a mother to us all.”

Uncle continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “I always thought I would have a son to pass this place to. Who knows, maybe I’ll sell it. Don’t even want to live here anyway, without her.” He took a hard swig from the bottle in his hand. “She made the house nicer, you know? She made it a place you wanted to live in, not just a job. And she loved flowers. Can’t even look at the damn magnolias without wanting to chop the damn tree down.”

Suddenly, he eyed Krishna. “Have you ever cleaned a floor? Folded clothes? Housework?”

Krishna hadn’t and he said as much. He couldn’t quite remember the last time he’d walked on a floor that wasn’t made of dirt. If he had ever walked on such a floor.

The man beside him waved away his response. “Then you can learn. Padma used to do everything, and I don’t want a maid or any other woman in the house. Besides,” he gripped Krishna’s bicep and gave it a sharp jerk, “you’re too skinny to be much use in the fields, anyway.”

He continued to chatter, but Krishna was staring at him in shock. Where there would be mosquito nets and shade and his toes would scrape surfaces that weren’t layers of caked mud? It was unimaginable.

He tuned back into Uncle’s words when he realized he was holding his bottle towards him. His eyes were dilated, his torso swaying back and forth as if caught in an invisible river current. Distantly, Krishna wondered if he would even remember making this offer to him. If he would get slapped for trusting his words when the sun rose.

He didn’t know the rules, what would stoke Uncle’s anger. So, with slightly shaking hands, Krishna cautiously took the drink that was offered.

“And what about you, boy? Have you lost anyone you loved more than life itself?”

He remembered how she had looked. The acne scars had faded from her face over the years, decorating her upturned nose and sharp cheekbones like starry freckles. Gone were the days of her
cotton langas and blouses; when they’d met by the stream, she had filled out her sari like any woman of the village—any woman who was already a wife.

_Marry me._

_What?_  

_Marry me instead. I promise I can make you happy. I would never hurt you._

He took a tentative sip, the smallest drop of liquid sliding between his lips and down his throat. The alcohol was sour and strong, and Krishna couldn’t keep his face from cinching like a lemon. He was suddenly thirsty, parched far beyond comfort. But he knew the alcohol wouldn’t help—nothing would. He passed the bottle back to Uncle, and leaned his head back on the post.

Krishna had felt gangly and boyish next to her, still a tangle of limbs and ill-fitting clothes. His facial hair hadn’t even grown in yet.

And neither it seemed, had his wisdom.

_It doesn’t matter what I want._

_I love you._

_I’m sorry. I can’t choose love._

This time, he wasn’t afraid to answer Uncle’s question. “Yes, I have.”

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1943

Radha didn’t want to look at the clock on the wall. _Couldn’t look_—sweat had blinded her vision hours ago.

She tried to follow the movements of the shadowed figures around her with half-moon eyes, but all she could distinguish was that the light had faded. Had the sun already set?
A cool cloth pressed against her forehead. Water-soaked fingertips traced her lips. Gentle hands brushed her hair.

One part of her wondered how so much time could have passed, but another part wondered how so little time could have passed. Radha felt like she was trapped in a place that existed out of time—a place similar to what the British referred to as Hell—while this unbearable pain consumed her lower body.

Voices murmured above her. She tried to speak twice before the words finally made it past her lips.

"Is-is he here yet?"

The conversation paused. A gentle voice—her sister-in-law. “It’s hard to get a message to the military officers. If Balveer received it, I promise you he will be on his way, Radha.”

She didn’t have the energy to beg her sister for more details, to scream at her when she really wanted to scream at him. She closed her eyes. The pain was too great; the price too high. Only the gods knew what hour of labor she was entering, how little she had left inside to pay this toll.

Women were urging her, their voices insistent. *Push, Radha, push.*

The world turned again, tumbling her thoughts in a maelstrom of pain. For a moment, she forgot everything and anything. Push what?

*The child,* a small inside voice whispered in a moment of clarity. *Push the child out.*

Radha tried to breathe and failed. She couldn’t *feel* her lower body to push. There was only the mind-bending, endless pain. And the child, it seemed, didn’t want to come out. If the child was a girl, she didn’t blame her. She laughed hysterically. Why would she want to enter this world, when Radha so desperately wanted to leave?

And then she was falling again, falling through time. Memories rose around and above her, cradling her as she plummeted.
Her father’s endearments echoed in her head. *Sing me a song, little bulbul.*

The sound of a trickling stream, the thrum of cicadas.

Krishna’s low baritone voice singing alongside hers, crafting a duet from her favorite melody: *He gently caught his wife’s sister’s arm, who was young and fair of skin*

‘*Where has my wife gone tonight? He asked his wife’s kin*’

She remembered her wedding.

No man she cared for had been there—her father had passed the year before, and Krishna hadn’t shown up. She hadn’t expected him to, but that didn’t make his absence hurt any less.

“I needed you then. Why weren’t you there?” she whispered. No one answered her.

*Push, Radha, push.*

Balveer’s face had been solemn—an expression she’d learned was perpetual. A man only fifteen years her senior, he’d treated her with gentle courtesy that night, and every night after. Over the past three years, she’d learned how to tease a smile from his serious mouth—but only on rare occasions. She had thought his reservation, his distance could be bridged with trust. That one day, he would see her not as a bulbul to be protected in a gilded cage, but as a woman to be cherished.

And yet after all this time, she hadn’t been able to climb the wall he’d built around himself. She’d seen the cracks, but that was all they were—chinks in an iron-clad armor, too small for Radha to pierce. When was it worth it to simply give up?

“Please come now,” she begged. “I don’t care if you weren’t here before.”

Another wave of pain rolled through her. She screamed, arching her spine so hard she thought it would snap. The darkness behind her lids began to lighten. Dawn was almost here. She barely heard the door creak open.

A calloused hand grasped hers, another curved against her cheek. She blearily leaned into the touch. “Is it you?” she croaked.
“I’m here,” came a voice that she knew well. But it wasn’t the voice she had begged for.

Balveer kneeled beside her, worry etched deep into his brow. Disappointment struck her like an arrow.

Of course, he wasn’t here. How could he be? But at least her husband was, and she knew he was all she had a right to hope for.

Another bout of contractions clutched her. She shook uncontrollably, feeling her legs grow slick with blood.

Suddenly, exclamations sparked around her. “I can see the head!” “Radha, you’re almost done. Hold on just a little longer.”

Darkness rose around her like a tidal wave, dragging her down with the force of ocean current. She fought to stay awake, to stay here, in this room that smelled like death but still held a promise of life.

*Push, Radha, push.*

And then between one moment and the next, the child was free. Radha’s head dropped back on the pillow. She was free.

Hovering on the brink of consciousness, she heard her daughter’s cries as if she were underwater, fatigue muffling her senses. But when they tucked her child in her arms, Radha managed to open her eyes.

Her skin was smooth and damp; her hair was thicker than she had expected, placenta matting the soft strands. She cradled the screaming infant close, smiling as her cries quieted momentarily into soft hiccups.

She wondered if this was how her mother had felt when she’d held her after she was born, with a heart completely whole and shattered apart at the same time. Slowly, her daughter’s eyes
eased open. Not by much, but just enough for Radha to glimpse the deep brown irises that lurked behind the gossamer lashes, shiny with unshed tears.

As if the calm in the storm had passed, her daughter began to cry once more, face squeezed tighter than a lemon. After so many hours of pained silence, the sound of her cries was a divine melody to Radha’s ears.

She brought her lips close to her small ear. “Myna,” she whispered. The name of her favorite songbird. “You’ll be my little Myna.” And then the darkness dragged her under completely.

1945

Light danced on the clean, wooden floorboards. Krishna slowly rose to his feet. Try as he might, he couldn’t find a speck of dust.

He nodded in approval to Ishan, the newest servant in training. Looking at the young boy was like tilting an hourglass backwards and watching the sand fall back into a too-familiar pattern. Krishna turned his back on the tall and gangly and overeager boy and made his way to Uncle’s study. He rapt his knuckles against the door twice.

“Enter.”

Krishna entered the small chamber, packed floor to ceiling with books. The room was warm, the air smelt of paper coated in sandalwood incense. Uncle sat at his desk, head bent over a spread of ledgers.

The first time he’d been in here, he’d felt like he’d stepped foot into a strange land, one where they spoke a language he would never know. Krishna had become light-headed with claustrophobia. For all her parents’ shortcomings, Radha had at least been instructed on how to read and write. Each time she’d tried to teach him, he’d refused her. He hadn’t wanted to know how high the wall between them towered. What if he hadn’t been able to scale it?
Uncle didn’t look up. “How are the fields coming today?”

“They’re working hard. The boys are ahead of schedule this week and the crop is growing strong. Veer has recovered from his foot injury and Manav’s cough has subsided.” He paused. “Thank you for their medicine. They have promised to work hard for the days they could not.”

Uncle grunted. “They should thank you for convincing me.” He scribbled something else in his ledger before finally looking at Krishna. The lines in his face were deeper, each year scoring it trace across his skin. Krishna was surprised to find himself disliking the bend in Uncle’s back, the subtle shake in his fingers.

“A letter came for you today. The stationary is quite nice as well. Is there a British girl you’re courting that you haven’t told me about?” he teased.

A simultaneous mix of dread and excitement coated his insides at the sight of Radha’s handwriting. He hadn’t been able to resist writing to her once he’d learned how, but now he’d come to regret the correspondence.

Did he truly want to know how she was enjoying her life? Her words were like bait on a hook, and Krishna was forever cursed to be a hapless minnow, darting towards any flash of silver in the water.

“You know I have no time to court a woman,” he replied back lightheartedly, receiving the envelope. The smooth, creamy paper made his fingers twitch.

“Come now, Krishna. You’re of marriageable age now. Perhaps you should start your singing again. I remember you used to sing on the fields as a little boy—Manav told me you were the only one who could sing the scales.”

Krishna’s smile went wooden. “That was a long time ago. I do not sing anymore.”

Uncle shrugged. “I suppose. But Padma’s brother wrote to me last week. He’s searching for a husband for his daughter.” He raised his brows at Krishna.
He barely registered the shock at Uncle’s implication. “And you think I would make a good husband for her?”

“You’re hardworking, and I would like this farm to stay in the family. You understand, yes?”

At Krishna’s silence, Uncle turned back to his work. “I’ll give you time to think on the matter. You may return to oversee the boys.”

“Yes, Uncle.” As Krishna turned to go, his eyes flicked to the letter. Once he was past the threshold, he broke the seal and pulled out the paper. The letter was shorter than normal, limited to a single page. He skimmed her words before crumpling the entire message, envelope and all. He turned back to the study.

“Uncle, I’ve changed my mind. I don’t need more time to think.”

He raised his head once again, surprise flitting across his worn features. “Oh?”

The words on the page burned in his mind. *I have a daughter.* He could no longer be the doomed minnow.

“I want to meet your brother’s daughter.”

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1947

Radha had missed the smell of coffee beans.

She sat cross-legged next to Krishna as he silently ground the beans in a mortar, the cracking and crunching noises puncturing tiny holes into the quiet atmosphere of the early morning. Buttery sunlight danced on his fingers as he held the pestle, his grip as careful and deliberate as that of a veena player’s.

Radha watched as the bowl of beans became a bowl of powder, each fragment slipping through an hourglass of their own making.
“Have you visited the bank yet?” In the morning, his voice had always been sandpaper rough, as gritty as the stone he now used to grind the beans. Radha was surprised at the comfort she took in its familiarity.

“I’ll go there first. If they deny me my pension, I won’t give away the saris. Someone in the market will buy them.”

He didn’t reply. He hadn’t said much when she’d appeared on his doorstep the night before, drenched to the bone from monsoon rains and a shaking child clutched in her arms.

Even though they’d only seen each other a few times over the years, Krishna hadn’t hesitated before opening his door farther, silently offering to share all he owned, regardless of circumstance or reason. He had always shared everything he’d had with her, and the memories made her nauseous with regret.

Radha rose and began to boil hot water over the clay stove in the corner. She caught a glimpse of her own white sari in the water’s reflection, and felt a sort of numbness clutch her chest.

She’d had few names in her life so far. Radha, daughter, mother, wife. And now, that list was a title shorter.

When the water had finished boiling, she brought the old iron pan to Krishna, who carefully poured the steaming liquid through the coffee grounds. Soon, the scent of coffee had infused the single room hut. Despite its small size, the space was clean, the ground neatly swept and patches of mosquito nets draped across the glassless windows.

She looked to the corner, where his wife slept soundly on a straw pallet. Radha’s daughter lay beside her, rosy lips softly fluttering in her sleep. The strong scent of coffee would rouse them soon.

Krishna noticed the direction of her gaze and mistook her expression. “You’re still young,” he said softly. “You will find someone else.”
She swallowed, nodding tightly. She didn’t want to talk about what had happened, couldn’t even bring herself to despise the communal violence that had taken his life. As usual, the British had outmaneuvered them all—and avoided the massacre they had so artfully arranged. Her husband had been a pawn in their game, and now he had left her life as quickly as he’d appeared.

But how could she explain that Balveer’s absence was just that—an absence, not an abyss? An emptiness of space filled but not an emptiness of heart? She mourned the loss of his familiarity, his solemn presence, the quiet home they’d shared. She stole another glance at Myna. After all, he’d given her the greatest gift.

But the wall he’d placed between them had lasted till the end, and she couldn’t climb it even in death.

Radha stayed silent and watched Krishna as he ran a small comb through his wavy black hair. Some of the teeth were broken, but he meticulously brushed down any wayward tufts. “Aadit will be expecting me soon.” Aadit—no longer Uncle.

“And my parents will be expecting me.” She hadn’t been able to stomach the thought of facing them yesterday. Once again, she was a woman without a man, cut from her anchor and left to drift in uncontrollable currents. What would her mother say?

Her gaze drifted to a corner of the hut. She could see the unnatural bending in the wall planks, the slight mismatch of lengths as if they were puzzle pieces forced to click. She had seen the jar of money hidden there this morning, when Krishna had reached in to add a few more rupees.

And some deep part of her knew his dream of owning his own coffee farm would come true, that the piece of soul that his childhood had stolen would be planted in his own land like a seedling to regrow.

She cursed herself. Why hadn’t she just trusted him?
In that moment, she wanted to beg him for forgiveness, beg him to forget her stupidity all those years ago. She wanted to cry at his feet and explain that she hadn’t been the one to fall out of love yet she was still falling. That she’d made the same mistake as her mother—not in choosing love, but in losing it.

Desperation grabbed her in a tight grip. They might not have another hour together, or even a few more minutes. But they had now.

And Radha had to know.

“Krishna,” she said, and when he met her gaze, she knew he knew what she would say. What she would ask. The what if that had hung between them since the day they met.

But before she could say anything else, he looked away—at his wife. He said in a low voice, “You know I cannot.”

All words evaporated from her mind, the icy shock of reality temporarily paralyzing her. She did know, although for one moment, she’d wanted to forget.

Instead, she walked away to wake her daughter. Today, she would see her parents again. She would once again be daughter, not wife. And at least with Krishna’s response, she knew she could finally lay their dreams to rest in the chasm that had opened inside her heart.

1951

The rich, aromatic scent of cardamom filled the air as Krishna sprinkled a pinch of the spice into the coffee. A customer grabbed it from the table barely a second after he slid it over, another coming to fill their place in an instant.

A year ago, the flood of customers would’ve overwhelmed Krishna like a tidal wave, dragging him out to sea while he struggled to keep his head above the water. After Aadit’s death, the responsibility of the farm had nearly pulled him under.
Now, the deluge of people in his shop was not an unfamiliar sight. Krishna could pass hours, days, weeks in this routine. Each cup of coffee he prepared was almost part of a meditation, the addition of milk and spices each a step in a calming ritual. In the background, he was vaguely aware of his assistant tackling the sloppier tasks in the shop, grinding the beans, wiping the tables and floors, keeping the spices and milk stocked.

He had just finished another cup when he heard his name.

“Krishna?”

He looked up to see Radha standing before him. He blinked, and for a moment, he expected her to vanish like a desert apparition.

When she didn’t, the other details rushed to register. The last time he’d seen her, she had been as pale as an apparition, with a white sari to match. Now, with sindoor in her hair and a rich, red sari wrapped around her frame, she was as lovely and eye-catching as a hibiscus flower.

He found himself holding his breath as she took in the well-lit clean space, the hand-carved tables and small block chairs. He knew she had mentioned they would be moving back to Bangalore in her letters, had even asked where his coffee shop was. But the shock that she was standing here, in his shop, still managed to momentarily paralyze him.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed after a long moment. “This—this is all yours?”

He nodded, not trusting his voice as a wave of emotion briefly overcame him. In many ways, he couldn’t quite believe it himself.

Krishna waived down his assistant to handle the customers while he quickly poured two cups of coffee for him and Radha and ushered her to a free table in a corner. They sat down, her smile never leaving her face.

For a moment, he was unable to speak. “You...seem happy”
She laughed, and the musicality of the sound hit him like a mallet. “Yes, well…you last saw me at quite a bad time. It’s been, what? Four years now?”

“Yes.” Krishna cleared his throat, struggling to overcome his muteness. Standing before Radha as a man with money, stability…what else had he dreamed of as a young boy? In some ways, had his dream not come true?

Today, they were together again. But just like a real dream, their time together would be as transient as a passing night.

“Tell me, Krishna. Tell me everything. Is Aadit finally gone?”

As if her command had unlocked his voice, the story poured forth. He had been lucky that Aadit had not been as reckless with his finances as he’d been with the farmhands. After the plantation had passed into his hands according to Aadit’s will, Krishna had taken one look at the profits the plantation had been bringing in annually—the profits that Uncle had painstakingly hid from him—and cried.

Cried for all of the nights he’d spent hungry, mosquito-bitten and miserable. Cried for each of his brothers who’d never felt a full stomach or had received the medicine they’d needed. The only thing that had calmed him was the knowledge that no boy would ever be treated like that in those fields again.

“He…wasn’t as bad towards the end. You know, I used to think he felt nothing at all for us.” Krishna looked down at his coffee. “Now, I think he had never been taught how to feel properly. How to love properly.”

The smile had faded from Radha’s face. “I do not believe any of us know what it is to love properly.”

A moment of silence fell between them. He steeled himself. “And what of your new husband? Does he treat you well?”
Something in Krishna’s stomach pinched when he saw the smile return to Radha’s face. “He is the most I could’ve prayed for.” She paused, and Krishna stared at his empty coffee cup. “In fact, he may have given me what I’ve prayed for. After all, a mother is not complete without a son.”

He looked up sharply. “You’re having another child?” She flinched imperceptibly, and he cursed himself for his sharp tone.

“I’m not fully certain yet…but all of the signs are there.” She drew a finger along the rim of her cup. “Why do you speak as if it’s a bad thing? I thought maybe you would even be happy for me.”

He tried to gentle his voice—and failed. “Happy? Your last child nearly killed you, Radha!”

A roll of her eyes. “Myna’s birth was poor luck. Come now, Krishna. Don’t tell me you’ve become a pessimist. That used to be my role,” she teased.

But he couldn’t get past the image of her in his head, the first time he’d seen her after the birth. The haggard set to her face, the change to her gait. The gaps in her succinct description of her labor had told him all he’d needed to know.

But Krishna was still shaking his head, voice rising. “And what will happen to your daughter if you die? Did you stop to think your husband might sell her like you were sold? She’s not his, after all.”

His words finally cracked her composure. “Don’t speak of my husband like that,” she snapped. “You imply I have a choice in any of these matters. You of all people should know better.”

While he could weather her glare, it was the crestfallen look behind her brown eyes that made him look away. He tightened his jaw, fighting the guilt and unexpected resentment coiling in his stomach. “What does that mean?”

She opened her mouth—and then closed it, seeming to think better of her words. “Do you still sing?” she asked instead.
Krishna reeled at the sudden change in topic, sudden change in tone. After a moment, “No,” he admitted. “I don’t have time for such things anymore.”

Her smile was strained. “Yes, I see. There are much more important things in your life now.”

Krishna hated the soft, impersonal expression she’d adopted. As if she wasn’t talking to him, but a distant family member with whom there was nothing left to converse. He tried to continue the strained thread of conversation, but they both found themselves repeating the same lines they’d written in their letters. Finally, silence fell between them.

The steel cups on the table were empty—had been empty for quite a while. Krishna stared at his reflection in their surfaces. His mind kept replaying the earlier parts of their conversation. Why couldn’t he let her words go? Had he himself not told her no four years ago?

Finally, Radha made to rise. “My husband will be expecting me soon,” she said.

“Wait.” He caught her hand. She froze, but didn’t look at him. He knew it wasn’t his place but he couldn’t stop the words from tumbling out. “Please, Radha.” His voice broke, all bitterness giving way to fear. “You do have a choice. This pregnancy. You don’t have to do it, there are ways to—”

“Stop it,” she said fiercely. “Don’t tell me such things, Krishna. You have always done what it takes to survive, so why do you expect me to do any less?”

He began to protest, and she leveled a look of cold fury at him. “If you’re jealous, just say so. Do not blame me for your own lack of child.”

Krishna let go of her arm as if he’d been burned. He didn’t see Radha push through the customers in his shop, didn’t hear the door slam as she left.
He let his head fall into his palms. He hadn’t been lying when he’d expressed his concern for her health. Radha would never know how deeply his gut churned, how waves of fear had crashed into him at her news.

But he hated that she’d guessed his words weren’t the whole truth.

1952

Krishna banged on the door. Again and again and again, until his hands no longer felt the thudding impact.

_Thump. Thump. Thump._

He tried not to think about the note that still sat in his pocket, burning through his clothes and straight to his soul. He resisted the urge to take it out again, knowing the sweat on his fingers would smear the ink.

“Hello?” he shouted again. _Thump. Is anyone there?”_

It was the first note he’d received from her in months, their only communication since that day in his shop. He hadn’t known her new address and she hadn’t reached out—until now. He couldn’t stop turning over the last words they had spoken to each other.

_You have always done what it takes to survive, so why do you expect me to do any less?_

“Please!” he shouted again. “I’m here to see Radha.”

_Please gods—don’t let those words be our last._

An eerie sort of silence surrounded the middle-class house, sending shivers down his spine. He had to find a way in, had to find her before it was too late.

Krishna had just taken a step towards the back, hoping to find another entrance, when suddenly, the door swung open. A weary maid stared at him from the threshold. His stomach turned as he noted the crimson stains on the apron tied over her _sari._
“She thought you wouldn't come.” The maid wiped her red hands on the apron. “Follow me.”

The maid led him through the house. Krishna didn’t see any of it. He felt like he was walking through a tunnel, but rather than light in the distance, he saw only shadows.

He stopped just before the open doorway and gripped the doorjamb. Beyond him, the room was swamped in stillness, the smell of blood thick in the air. Inside, he could hear rattling breaths, hushed voices. Krishna inhaled slowly, staring at his paralyzed feet. Who would he be when he walked out of this room?

He turned to look at the maid waiting behind him. Her eyes were tired, her thick shoulders slumped forward. Krishna recognized the look of defeat in her eyes, but still made himself ask the questions burning in his throat at the silence. “Where is the child? Her husband?”

“The husband is on a merchant trip. The baby came too early…but he was born alive. He was too small, so one of us took him to the hospital to see a doctor.”

He set his jaw. Her husband may have been the businessman, but Radha’s whole life had consisted of transactions. She’d been crafted into an unwilling merchant, forced to trade a life for a life. It was no trade at all, but a theft.

The maid’s words bolstered his nerves, and he stepped through the doorway.

The room seemed to blur before him, leaving only the bed to slide into focus. The sheets were crumpled and twisted, a mosaic of pink and white and blood red. Radha lay wrapped up inside, looking forlorn and small.

The woman at her bedside stepped away as he came closer, going to his knees beside the bed. Her hand rested limply on top of the sheets, and he grabbed it instinctively. Her fingers felt almost like a stranger’s, chilled and clammy.

Her eyes fluttered open. “Is it you?” she asked, her voice as soft as a midnight breeze.
His mouth had gone dry, and he had to force the words out. “Y-Yes. It’s me. Krishna.”

She laughed, the sound so weak it pierced his gut. “I would know your voice anywhere.” She closed her eyes again, and Krishna carefully brushed back each sweat-soaked strand of hair glued to her skin. “You came. I—I was afraid you wouldn’t.”

He could feel a sunset approaching, a cold night nipping its heels. A part of him knew once the light faded, it would never return. They stood on two sides of an abyss, and he had only now, these precious few moments, to cross the ocean between them before she slipped under the waves. How could he begin to bridge the distance sown by mistakes and regret and lives led apart?

He gripped her fingers tighter, and climbed onto the bed beside her. The blood on the sheets seeped through his clothes, the wetness an icy kiss on his skin.

He curled towards her and she towards him. Their interlocked hands lay between them, bridging the inches that separated their bodies.

It had been years since he’d let himself drift towards music. He’d extinguished any melody he’d start to hum, had avoided concerts and musicians on the streets.

But in that moment, Krishna opened his mouth and began to sing. It was an old tune, one of the first he’d heard from Radha’s lips. But he remembered how the folksong would settle upon her shoulders like a comforting blanket, the peace she drew from its aching notes.

“*She’s locked herself away, waiting for her courses to end*

*He frowned, ‘Tell her she needn’t hide from me, she will not be condemned*  

Her voice joined his, and for a moment, their two voices rose and fell in tandem, sharing a melody that had linked their souls throughout all these years.

*Yet crescent moon turned to dawn, and still she didn’t show*

*The husband made to leave, his spirits hanging low.”*
As their song went on, Krishna drew her into his arms. An embrace he’d lived without for years, and one he never thought he’d feel again. One he knew he would never feel again.

His lips brushed the shell of her ear. Warmth blossomed as her skin met his, and he felt the rhythm of her heart dancing beneath his mouth.

“He mounted his horse, heart heavy and resigned

‘Wait!, a voice suddenly called. Don’t leave me behind.’”

Twilight floated around them, the darkness of the night finally creeping in at the edges. Radha’s eyes drifted close. Krishna shut his own and saw Radha standing on the other side of an abyss, water rushing between them in a hoarse roar.

Beside him, her voice dwindled to a whisper and then a breath and then an inhale.

“He turned to see his wife, radiant as the sun

‘I couldn’t see you’, she said shyly, ‘until the purifying bath had been done’”

In his head, the rushing water trickled down to a serene stream. Radha’s smile shone as bright as the constellations above her.

“He crossed to her in a moment, and held her to his heart

‘You’ve always been the purest soul, my beloved sweetheart’”

And with the last notes of their song floating between them, Radha stepped into the night and disappeared among the stars.