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Daisy Hernández / Christina Milletti

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PANKAJ CHALLA

Passengers

She had the baby in her lap, her thighs under the sari aching from rocking it to sleep. They were in a second-class railway compartment, and Gita was glad for her window seat, now in the summer. Her husband was beside her, and in the bench seat opposite, a woman in a green sari sat cross-legged, cracking peanuts and letting the shells collect in her lap.

"I've had such a hard life," the woman was saying. "My father passed away when I was two. From TB."

The woman's eating habits and the peanut shells reminded Gita of uneducated women from the old days, and she turned away, looking out the window. But there was no escaping the woman's voice, harsh and raspy, and her husband's polite questions and replies. She wanted to whisper to him—don't listen, don't encourage her—but he'd always been exceedingly sweet, the manners of Old India, kindness to strangers and outsiders. Gita was only twenty, and like her cousin Lila, she'd wanted to travel to America for college, had taken the SAT, had done well, but couldn't go for lack of funds. A year and a half ago, she married a man from the villages, felt she'd done so for money alone, and the thought had long troubled her. But last night, she felt for the first time that she loved her husband, as he rocked her daughter to sleep in his strong arms. Of late, he'd been a great help to her with the baby, sharing duties more than she expected, even after being at the farm all day. Well into the night, he didn't put the baby down, and he let Gita rest, singing old Hindi film songs in a sweet tenor. He sang well. Her friends in town talked of him as a country bumpkin, but he spoke good English when they went to shops in Hyderabad and was very well-read.

The train slowed on the outskirts of a town, and they passed through date palm groves. At one place, three trees rose up from a single patch of ground, the knobbed trunks curved, lovely. A distant relative of hers, a doctor who now lived in Florida, had transported whole palm trees from miles away to replant around his swimming pool in Tampa. Cousin Lila said she'd visited him once during winter break from college, describing the shade of palms, after Nebraska cold, as heaven on earth. Although, on a later visit in July, she wrote that she couldn't stand the Florida heat, couldn't wait to return to college. Gita had planned on going there too, to UNL—she'd seen pictures of Lila at a football game, in a Nebraska Cornhuskers sweatshirt. She'd thought of herself

and Lila together abroad, sisters, rice huskers, in corn country. But then marriage happened. Part of Subba's pitch at the bridal visit was that he'd pay for her college, in India or abroad, after a few years, once the business at the farm improved, as he'd recently invested in soil work in a coconut orchard, and they'd start to see dividends soon. The baby was unplanned, by mistake, despite all the usual precautions; she hadn't wanted one for several years yet, and she cried when she'd missed a period, angry at herself that she married for no other reason than to find someone able to sponsor her travel, as if moving from one guardian to another, and now she'd become a completely different person, a mother, with the resultant responsibilities, years before she had anticipated.

But that was all in the past. Last night, before drifting off to sleep, she'd become sure that any resentment she'd had these many months in the marriage had disappeared. It wasn't just a momentary feeling, she felt the same in the morning, a new beginning, and they didn't fight on the way to the station, as they used to in the past. Subba had a way of connecting with outsiders. The taxi driver talked freely with him, telling him excitedly about his plans to get an AC taxi. Subba had a deep voice and spoke with a slightly inquisitive yet detached manner that impressed workers. He was only twenty-six, but he spoke and behaved as if he were much older—strict notions about right and wrong, conservative views. He only liked old songs and movies, the new ones were too vulgar, according to him. Her friends joked that she had married a husband from the Classics, black and white movies. But then, while office workers his age were already pudgy, the outdoor life had kept him fit.

It started to drizzle outside.

"Oh, God!" her husband said. "The mango pieces—you left them out to dry on the terrace, Gita—did you remember to bring them back inside?"

"Yes. I told you earlier, you weren't listening—"

"Okay, good," he said, short, almost dismissive. Previously, his blunt manner hurt her—now she understood it as a habit left over from managing farm work, and in Bhim's village culture, as master, he didn't need to explain himself, and laborers spoke of him in awe, how authoritative he was, how forceful, decisive, a contrast to her father's timidity and tendency to empathize with workers too much. Still, Subba asked the same question several times that morning, and she smiled and shook her head, reminded of an aunt of hers, who also was obsessive-compulsive. Subba had a farmer's frugality, and although they could afford to travel first-class, they always went second-class as he said there's no point in throwing away money just for temporary comfort on the way to see family in Hyderabad. They were going to attend a nephew's thread ceremony

there, to ready him for school. She had worried about the baby's comfort in the heat and wished that they'd chosen an AC compartment instead. But thankfully, the touch of rain outside had cooled the air somewhat, and it wasn't so unbearable here in second-class after all.

Gita was born and brought up in Tanuku, the place that surrounding villages relied on for everything—business, entertainment, fashion. Growing up, theirs had been a once-wealthy family fallen on hard times, her father always worried, answering court summons in land dispute cases with tenant farmers, litigations he usually lost. It was said her ancestors had acquired wealth by coercion, land grabbing from small farmers who failed to keep up payments on their high-interest loans. The British had sided with their family, the landowners, but after independence, the Indian government, conscious of votes, courted the peasants. She believed the stories of cruelty from the past, but her father was the opposite—he had no business sense, too much compassion, so farm stewards and peasants often cheated him. Even when he suspected they might be lying to him, their tears worked: he couldn't bear to hear sad stories, and he'd write off loans to laborers or overlook missing goods. When every month they kept losing land and furniture, several girls in the house still to be married off, she got a proposal from a nearby village—no dowry needed, the groom's family would bear all costs of the wedding, out of respect for the girl's storied family. She accepted. Although she'd already had the baby, she hadn't been married for long before her father passed away. That was three months ago—a heart attack while riding on a rickshaw, on his way to collect a debt from a poor farm worker, as his own bank account was all empty. She tried to get her husband to send money back home to Tanuku, but her father would never accept—one time, rare for him, even getting angry at her on the phone.

Subba said, "It's just that pickled mango chutney is so expensive—buying it in shops is just not a good financial choice."

"I agree," she replied, although she didn't care about pickled mango chutney or how much it cost. She read somewhere, in a Buddhist verse in a magazine, that agreement produced happiness inside and felt it was not untrue.

The woman in the green sari had finished one packet of peanuts and took out another wrapped in a newspaper cone. "My son's somewhere on the train. He doesn't sit with me. Likes to wander from coach to coach. Wonder where he is." The compartment was open to the aisle on one side, no doors, two bench seats facing each other. She called out into the passageway, "Son!" But there was no response. "Anyway,

as I was saying, I was the only child. All the property was willed to my uncle—my father's brother. So my mother and I went to live with my uncle and aunt. Promptly, my mother and uncle had an affair, and my aunt found out. Aunt said she'd drown herself in the well."

"Did she?" Subba asked.

"Of course not. Anyway, seeing that Mother and I had nowhere else to go, they came up with a satisfactory solution. I was to be married off."

"Marriage? Weren't you too young for that?"

"Well, I was nine years old by then."

"Oh," Subba said.

She couldn't, but of course, he'd understand that—in Bhim, it was not unheard of for girls to be married off at birth. What was the connection then between the woman's stories and her own life? She'd rather think of Lila and America, but she didn't have any real images of that place to hold on to, other than those from movies or TV. Lila would write and ask her to send "lovely" pictures of village life, the green, lush fields, all the "good ole stuff." Lila might be nostalgic about the village from far away, but Gita wanted to live in a nice city apartment, a condo with an elevator, no cows on the road. Still, the woman's stories intersected with her sense of the past, how things used to be, things that might have happened to women in her family or that of her relatives, and she didn't want to hear, but the words were there, around her in the compartment.

"The plan was that Mother would stay with me in my husband's house," the woman said. "It was a way to throw us both out in a respectable manner. Within a week, they married me off to a widower."

"A widower!" Subba said.

"Yes, and an old one. My family fixed me up with him because he agreed to marry me without a dowry, that's why. Cheap bastards!"

The woman spat out the window—but with such vehemence that it startled Gita, and the baby stirred, wailed. She picked her up in her arms.

The woman said, "Always a hand under the neck—that's the way to hold a baby."

Gita frowned at the woman, and after her daughter calmed down, she once again laid the baby across her lap, rocking her back to sleep.

Had her family been cheap also? Knowing her dreams of going abroad, had they agreed to a financially convenient match? But that wasn't true, it was her decision really, nobody pressured her to marry, in fact, her unemployed brother argued she should not accept a country match, that she'd get better offers from city officers, if she waited a little. But she couldn't bear to see her father's worried face every time she went to him for money for books or application fees.

The train stopped at the station. Gita nudged her husband with her elbow. “Fill this up please.” She handed him a water bottle.

“Pardon me,” he said to the passenger opposite. “I’ll be right back.” He went out of the compartment.

The woman sighed, a long-drawn-out sound that succeeded in blowing the peanut shells in her lap to the floor. “Oh, girls these days,” she said. “In my day, a woman used to be scared even to look her husband in the eye. I’m impressed, how you seem to have your husband under your thumb.” Gita didn’t look at her. The train had been stopped at the station a long time—maybe one of those places where engines were changed or freight loaded. “It’s different for you educated girls,” she went on. “You’re educated, aren’t you?”

“I passed twelfth with distinction,” Gita replied softly, looking away.

“No education for me,” the woman said. “I sat at home and had no need to use my brain. My husband was a moneylender. But he was terrible at it. He knew how to lend but never knew how to collect. I used to call him the money giver.”

Gita glanced at the woman, laughed, then remembered her father, and bent her head down. They’d kept his body on ice for two days, as her sisters were traveling from different parts—Renusagar, Delhi—married to men posted to government office jobs all over the country. She was the youngest, her father’s favorite. Looking at his iced body, she felt that at least all the girls succeeded in getting married to families with no financial worries, something to calm him a bit, in the end.

A platform bookseller wheeled his cart by the train window. “Excellent books, self-help books, every magazine in India is here! Madam, you’re young and educated—you’re educated, aren’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” said Gita, rocking the infant in her lap. “And I’ve got enough books and magazines at home.”

“You’ve got a beautiful child too,” said the bookseller. “Boy or girl?”

“Girl.”

“She looks like a little princess. I myself am a father of three girls.” She couldn’t tell if his look was one of pride or of commiseration in what he deemed a kind of shared misfortune. “Now, tell me madam, do you want to earn money at home? I’ve got just the one for you!”

He took out a book wrapped in brown paper. “All the information you need to sell insurance plans from home—you look like a smart woman. All you need is a telephone. It’ll take you only a week to master the contents of this book. You can make fifteen thousand rupees a month—”

“Fifteen thousand,” said the woman in the green sari. “Buy it, girl!”

“Sell to relatives, neighbors, friends,” he said, tapping the book. “Twenty women have bought this book already today!”

"Buy it, girl, earn fifteen thousand a month—now, that's independence! I can't do it, but you can, you can. You don't have to ask your husband for every little thing, you'll have money of your own."

"This is the last one in my stock." The bookseller spoke softly. "If not to you, I'm sure to sell this at the next window. But I don't want you to lose this opportunity."

A platform seller, with the usual claims and exaggerations. She wasn't sold on the seller's argument, which she thought patronizing, nor did the scheme interest her particularly, but the train was not moving, and she felt bored. She asked, "How much is it?"

"Eighty rupees."

Subba wouldn't approve, but maybe for that very reason, or that she really could make a bit of money on the side, she took out her purse, and paid the bookseller. He said, "I'll write you a receipt for this transaction. From now on, you'll be a professional woman, and I want to deal with you in like manner."

She said in English, in an Americanized accent like Lila, "Whatever, man."

The seller looked at her blankly, and then pinned the receipt to the front of the book. "There, madam," he said, handing over the book, and wheeled off his cart.

The baby had gone to sleep, and Gita laid her out on the bench seat. One of her hands was always on her daughter, gently caressing, holding.

"How many months?" the woman asked Gita, squinting at the infant.

"Four months."

"She looks like a little angel."

A wiry boy of sixteen entered the compartment, wearing tight cargo pants. He had a sad, troubled face.

"My son," the woman said. "He comes and goes, like our rains." She whispered to Gita loudly, cupping a hand over her mouth, "He doesn't listen to me." The son heard and looked angrily at her.

Subba returned with the water bottle. Gita drank from it. A trickle of water ran down her arm, which she wiped with the free end of her sari.

"Very nice couple," said the woman to her son. "He's a gentleman farmer. Madam is also educated. Pay your respects to them."

"*Namaste*," muttered the son, joining his hands, without looking at them.

"Son, did you eat—it's lunch time, you know."

He grunted and said, "No."

"Do have something."

"Not now," replied the son.

"You're so much like your dear father. So difficult. Anyway, I'm hungry. The lunch is in the bag on the top rack. Could you get it for me, son?"

"You get it yourself."

"See how he treats me," the woman said to them both. "Never mind that he does nothing for me, but he never calls me *Mother*. My only son. Not once does he call me *Mother*." She began to cry. Gita was determined to ignore her. The son left the compartment.

Subba coughed then and got up. "I'll get it for you. In which bag is the lunch?"

"The blue bag with the tick mark," said the woman.

"The Nike bag? Nice bag."

Subba hauled it off the rack and set it down next to the woman. She opened it and took out a packed lunch box. She began eating, digging in with her fingers. "It's a good thing to have a son," she said, chewing noisily. "But a boy is no boy without a father. That's the problem with my son. He has no father."

"*Ayyo*," her husband said. Gita was touched on Subba's behalf, as he'd lost his father too when he was in college in Rajam—he'd dropped out, moved back to Bhim to take care of family lands.

The woman said, "My son was five years old when my husband died. TB again. Must be an old curse." With her fingers, she tore pieces of puri and scooped up the potato curry. "And guess who gets all the property?"

"You weren't willed anything this time too?" Subba asked.

"Hardly anything!" She threw a hand up in the air. "After everything was divided among his children from his first marriage, his mistresses, and so on, there was hardly anything for me and my son. That's why my son has joined the army. A bit on the young side, I feared they wouldn't take him, but what's in a year or two, give or take—they took him after all. We're moving to the training camp in Itarsi. A young life given over to bullets." She said it drily, as if by rote, the emotion long fizzled out, hardened. "That's why I'm on a train now. I've never set foot outside the state before. Nobody in my family ever had to cross state borders, except on pilgrimages." But this time she sniffled, as if the feeling were fresher. Gita asked herself, was travel such a bad thing? The woman shook her head and mixed a red, spicy chutney of pickled mangoes with the rice—she'd spoken as if there were nothing redeeming about a journey, as if there were no choice, only a compulsion, of people having to go away from their place of origin. For Gita, travel was a goal, a purpose—she'd wanted to go on a field trip in her final year, in the twelfth, to Ellora caves, but she chose not to, even though her father urged her, that he'd manage. She'd lied that she wasn't interested. "Anyway, as they say, it's

all fate. What to do—according to God, I deserve such a life. This mango chutney is delicious." The woman smacked her lips loudly. "I've excelled myself this time. Want a bite?"

Gita shook her head, as did Subba. The train hadn't moved yet, and there was no breeze. The sun was out again, and the drizzle outside was now a distant memory. It was hot. She worried again about the baby and fanned over her little body with a hanky. When the baby twitched and whimpered, she spoke soothing words and fanned more gently until she went back to sleep. Gita took a sip of water and passed the bottle to Subba, who drained half of it with a gulp.

"As I was saying, if one deserves a bad life, one deserves a bad life. Who are we to argue with Fate?" The woman laughed, rolled the rice and chutney into a ball, and dropped it into her mouth. "This is very, very nice. The one good thing I got from my marriage is the mango tree in my husband's house. The best chutney mangoes in the entire district."

She took out a water bottle from her bag. "It's empty." Then she called out, "Son!"

The son came up. "What is it?"

"I need some water," his mother said. "I ate the chutney. My only vice is spice." She laughed at her little joke. The son didn't. "Now my tongue is craving water. Be a darling, and fill up this bottle for me with drinking water from the platform?"

"It's time for the train to move. Why didn't you tell me earlier? The train has been on the platform for ages."

"I didn't know that the bottle was empty."

"It was you who emptied it during breakfast. Of course you knew it was empty."

"What to do now? My tongue is burning!"

"Rinse it at the sink," said the son and left.

The woman sighed. Her husband was about to offer their water bottle, but Gita whispered, "I need it. There's no big station for the next four hours."

But still, he said to the woman, "Have some of our water."

Gita clutched the bottle. "No, I'm sorry—ours is almost empty too, and on such a hot day, I don't want to risk passing out, with the baby."

"She'll only have a sip—"

"I said, we hardly have a quarter-bottle left."

"Please, no trouble on my account," said the woman.

Subba was looking at the book wrapped in brown paper.

"What's this?" he asked her then.

“I just bought it,” she replied. “It has information on how to sell insurance from home. I might try it in my spare time.”

He quickly shook his head, “No.”

“Fine, I won’t do it then.”

“How much was it?” he asked.

“It wasn’t much—I’ll add it to my account, as my expense. Just a book, no big deal.”

“You know how I feel about you working.”

“I got it, I won’t.” She smiled. “Really doesn’t matter to me, Subba—I’m not hung up on insurance work. Let it go, please.”

“How much was it?” he repeated, as if she hadn’t spoken at all, and he hadn’t heard.

“Eighty rupees.”

He cursed under his breath, picked up the book, and got up.

“No need to return it, goodness, I won’t work!”

To the woman he said, “Please madam, give me your bottle—I’ll fill it up.”

Gita said, “The train’s about to leave—”

He was already out of the compartment. The guard blew the whistle. The train started moving. She hurriedly looked out to the platform—Subba hadn’t been left behind, had he?

The woman was looking, too. “Oh, there’s a water tap over there—”

“What a scoundrel.” Both women turned. He’d come back into the compartment. “He gave back only seventy rupees for the book,” he said, sat down, and wiped his brow. “Although, I must say I’m fortunate he took it back at least. Usually these people don’t.” And he said to the woman, returning her empty water bottle, “Sorry, no luck—there were already people in line at the tap.”

The train accelerated. Gita looked out of the window. The book didn’t matter to her, and she wasn’t bent on working, but the fact that it bothered him so much if she did, bothered her. He didn’t understand her, moreover made no effort to see things from her vantage. He didn’t beat her, but nevertheless said and did little things that cut her within. That’s it? The insensitive husband. It seemed to her such a common, unremarkable complaint. Yet, she felt then that she didn’t love him after all and never could, and if her father hadn’t been going bankrupt, she would never have married him. It didn’t even seem like a realization, but a reminder of a fact she’d always known and had temporarily forgotten after the baby. She pursed her lips, and again the thought came that she alone had chosen to marry him. There was no fix to the problem—she’d need to grow around it, as a plant would curve away from the shadow of a wall or that of another plant, reaching toward the sun. Maybe not

UNL anymore, but she'd move to Hyderabad once the baby was six—even if Subba might remain behind at the farm—her daughter going to a good school, she to college.

The woman in the green sari shook the water bottle and peered inside it. "No water for me. As I said, it's my fate. My father passed away when I was two."