A Different Ending-Shaily Menon

**MA SAID SHE MARRIED** Da against her family’s wishes. Ma’s skin was fair and her cheeks were red. She said it was because her people came from the northern mountains. She said Da’s skin was dark because his people were from the coastal south, a strange land of paddy fields and coconut trees. Ma’s family did not think such a marriage would work.

Ma came to live with him in the city far away from anyplace she had known. She said it was the second time she was uprooted from the place she called home. The first time was when her family had to flee her mountain home after the partition of India, when the killing mobs came. The second time was when she moved with Da to the city of Bombay, made from islands in the sea, where they spoke a language that was neither Ma’s nor Da’s. She said they have arrived in the middle of where each of them had originated, but to her family it is as if she has traveled to another continent. She said she has tried very hard to make this place her home.

Six years after me, my baby sister was born, and Ma was sad. She cried a lot. Earlier, she cried when the baby who would have been my brother died, and then when my sister Maya came, she cried again. She wondered what she’d done in a previous life to be cursed. She’d longed for a son but had only daughters.

Da said where he came from to have daughters was a celebration. Ma sobbed harder. She said, “Why am I not surprised? We are a hardy people. We celebrate our sons. The rice your people eat with such relish? We wouldn’t feed it to our cattle.”

She sounded angry, as if celebrating daughters and feeding rice to cattle were bad things. I didn’t know why hardy people couldn’t celebrate the birth of daughters. I reminded myself to look up *hardy* in Da’s big dictionary. Maybe then I would understand.

I wondered why it was important to Ma what kind of food the cattle ate. I thought of saying that on my way home from school I saw a cow chewing newspaper from a trash heap on the street, but somehow I knew that would anger Ma. It would remind her how much she hated the city. I turned to see what Da would say.

He unfolded the newspaper, opening it wide and rustling the pages until they fell into place. A news item caught his attention and he raised his eyebrows. “Oh!” he said. “Peace talks have failed? Now they are sure to declare war. East and West Pakistan are fighting each other, and we are trapped in the middle.”

Ma wiped her tears on the edge of her sari. She said, “The newspaper can tell you nothing of the sorrow of such wars. Go on and hide behind it. So what if I have girls? I will make them strong like sons.” She looked hard at me when she said that.

**On the wall** next to the bed, and above the table with Da’s typewriter and Da’s big dictionary, were Da’s bookshelves. The bookshelves were filled with many heavy books. I had to stand on a chair to read the titles.

One man wrote a book about war and peace. Another man wrote about crime and punishment. He also wrote a book about an idiot. I tried to sound out his name. Da helped me. *Dos-to-yev-sky,* he said slowly, so I could repeat it. He said he liked the Russian authors. There was pathos in those stories. I looked up *pathos* in Da’s big dictionary. I loved that dictionary.

Sometimes, after dinner Da and I took turns reading aloud from one of the books on his shelf. I liked listening to Da read. On Sunday mornings he read interesting stories from the newspaper. “Would you like to hear an interesting tidbit?” he asked. “The Nobel Prize for Literature has been announced. It will go to Pablo Neruda, from the country of Chile, for his poetry that brings alive a continent’s destiny and dreams.” I loved those tidbits.

But my favorite reading time of all with Da was after we returned from the peanut seller’s shop with paper cones of warm roasted peanuts. On Sunday afternoons, after the vegetable vendor with the basket of cucumbers, tomatoes, and bitter gourd on his head had come and gone, and after the dhobi had delivered freshly laundered clothes that smelled like the sun, and after everyone had woken from their afternoon naps, the vendor of savory snacks would call out from the street. “Bhel puri! Pani puri!” he would shout, and kids would come running to buy bowls of tasty, mouth-watering concoctions.

I was not allowed to eat street food, but dry-roasted peanuts were an exception to that rule. Da and I would walk to the peanut seller’s shop and we would order three small cones of peanuts–one for me, one for Da, and one for Ma–and bring them home. Then we would eat the peanuts and drink warm, spicy chai that Ma had brewed for us.

I used to think the warm peanuts were the most delicious part of the cones, until I discovered the writing on the paper. The peanut seller tore sheets out of paperback books to make the cones, and after the peanuts were all gone, I would smooth out the sheet and read both sides. Sometimes I really liked the story and wanted to know what happened next. Da took me to the British Council Library and helped me search out the book the story was from. If we found the book, we would bring it home for me to read. Sometimes the story in the book was not as good as the bit of story on the page. Other times, it was even better.

**Dusk** was one of my favorite times to spend with Ma and Da. The apartment building got less noisy as all the kids went home after playing outside. Ma would finish her cooking in the kitchen. Da would come home from the printing press, shower, and settle in to read or write before dinner.

I did my homework sitting on the cool stone doorsill in the doorway between the kitchen where Ma was cooking and the bedroom where Da was writing. One evening I was studying a poem for poetry recitation in school. I sat on the doorsill with my legs crossed and read the poem aloud over and over.

“I wandered lonely as a cloud. / That floats on high o’er vales and hills . . .”

After the third time, Da asked, “What on earth are you doing?”

I told him I was memorizing the poem because I had to say it in front of the class the next day.

“Do you know the name of the poem?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s called “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” I said.

“Do you know who wrote it?”

“William Wordsworth! He is a famous poet. I like his poem. I too like to lie in vacant or in pensive mood and think about things. I would like to see a meadow full of daffodils someday.”

Da smiled at me but said nothing.

So I said, “But I don’t understand one thing.”

“What is that?” asked Da.

“What I don’t understand is, did his parents know he would be good with words when they named him or did he become good with words because of his name?”

Da laughed and laughed. Then he told me to recite the poem again more slowly, and with feeling, not like a student chanting in a madrassa.

One evening as dusk fell, Ma and I sat with Da on the bed and shared our favorite verses with each other. Mine was the last verse of “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” of course. Da said if he had to pick only one, he would choose a verse by Omar Khayyam:

*The moving finger writes; and having writ,*

*Moves on: nor all your piety nor wit*

*Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,*

*Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.*

Ma said she didn’t know any fancy poetry. She got up to leave but was pulled back down on the bed because Da held her wrist. She tried to pull free but Da smiled and held even tighter. She asked him if this was any way to behave in front of a child.

“What am I doing wrong?” He opened his eyes wide. “I want to know which is your favorite verse. The child wants to know. Don’t you?”

Da turned to me. I wanted Ma to stay. I wanted Da to keep smiling and holding her hand. I wanted the moment to last forever. I was worried Ma would get annoyed and scold Da.

“Please, Ma?” I said.

One corner of Ma’s lips twitched in a smile, and she looked at me as if she could read my mind. She said fine, she would share her favorite verse, but she also gave us fair warning that it was opposite in meaning to Da’s. Ma said her favorite was an Urdu verse by Iqbal:

*Khudi ko kar buland itna ke har taqdeer se pehle*

*Khuda bande se khud pooche bata teri raza kya hai*

Ma sat up straight and smiled at Da as if she were challenging his verse. Da loosened his grip on Ma’s wrist. Ma stood up and adjusted her sari.

She said, “I’ll get dinner ready.”

“But wait,” I cried out. “What does it mean?”

Ma paused, one foot over the doorsill, looked at us over her shoulder, and said mysteriously, “Ask your Da, he’s the poet in the house.”

Then she disappeared into the kitchen, her thick black braid swishing across her back.

“Well?” I turned to Da.

“Let’s see,” he said. “I think it means that we should be strong and take charge of our own fate.”

What an anticlimax. Trust Ma to like a verse about being strong. After that, I was confused for a long time. Ma wanted us to be strong and take charge of our fate, but she cursed her fate when bad things happened. One day, when I was alone with Ma, I told her about my confusion.

Ma said, “What do I know about such things? I did not go to a big school in the city. We lived in a beautiful place surrounded by mountains when I was a child, and if our fate was not cursed, why would they have made us flee our home?”

She looked so sad I did not ask her who had made her flee her home. I did not ask her what it meant to be a refugee of other people’s war.

Then Ma said, “But fate is for the past and not an excuse for what you do now. You can control what happens to you now and in the future. Study hard and do well in school, and you will be in charge of your fate, you understand?”

I nodded. I did not have the heart to tell Ma I did not understand how fate could be the past and the future.

When my sister was born, Ma’s younger sister, Masi, did not come to visit.

Ma said, “Now even Masi has abandoned me. It doesn’t matter. We will be strong on our own. We will survive.”

Ma was strong for a while. I promised her I would be strong with her. Then she started crying a lot again. One day she wrote a letter and licked the flap to seal it.

She said, “It is not easy to be strong. I have written a letter to my sister.”

A few months later Masi wrote to say she would visit us again. I was so excited Masi was coming I forgot to study for my math test and failed it. Ma was very angry when I showed her the poor mark I had got. Is this what you want for yourself, she said. Do you want to fail at school and end up poor like this for the rest of your life? She said, Do you want to be a servant and do someone else’s dishes and take care of their children? She said only fair-skinned beauties could hope to be taken care of by rich princes who would sweep them off their feet. She said it is your fate to live by your wits.

I did not like it when Ma was angry with me. After that, I never forgot to do my homework or study for my exams, even when Masi came to visit. Masi said this time she had come to broker peace between Ma and her family. I had heard Da reading about peace brokers in the newspaper. I was proud to have a UN representative in my family.

Ma cheered up a lot when Masi visited. She and Masi talked and giggled while they cooked in the kitchen. Ma said she would make carrot halwa to celebrate Masi’s visit. Masi held my baby sister, Maya, in her arms while Ma stirred the grated carrots into the thickened milk. I sat on the doorsill, doing my homework. Actually, I had finished my homework a long time ago but I enjoyed watching Ma and Masi talking and working together. If Ma knew my homework was done, she would make me do more arithmetic problems from the back of the book. Ma left me alone as long as I was working on my homework, so I pretended to have lots of homework that day. Most of the time, I watched and listened and smelled the smells in the warm kitchen. I could not remember the last time we had been happy together in the kitchen.

Ma grated a whole heap of long red carrots. She was very strong. Masi offered to help, but Ma said, “My arms haven’t even started to hurt. You play with the baby. Don’t forget to stir the milk,” she said. “We want to reduce it, not to burn it.”

Masi laughed. “You don’t think I learned how to make Mother’s best gaajar halwa?”

Ma said, “I’m sure you did, but do you still remember how to cook on a kerosene stove?”

Masi stopped laughing. She said, “You really should get a gas stove installed, it is so much easier to cook with it.”

“Someday,” Ma said. “Someday.”

Ma added the grated carrots to the pot of milk on the stove. She took the pot away from the stove and heated ghee in a small pan. She put raisins into the hot ghee and then cashew nuts. Masi had brought packets of cashews and raisins and cardamom in her suitcase. I loved the smell of Masi’s suitcase.

Ma powdered cardamom with the brass mortar and pestle, and added it along with the cashews and raisins into the pot of milk and carrots and put it back on the stove. Masi saw me watching Ma. Her eyes narrowed. I realized I was staring and had forgotten to look down at my homework. I put my head down and began writing quickly in my notebook. When I looked up again Masi had forgotten about me.

Masi cooed to the baby. She nudged Ma and said, “How did this one turn out so fair and chubby? If only her Nani would agree to see her. She would melt her heart.”

Ma said, “Stone hearts do not melt easily. Stone hearts cannot take the measure of a person’s intelligence and look past their dark skin.”

She said in her stronger moments she still had faith that things would turn around for this sorry family.

I believed my mother’s words. I felt warm and safe surrounded by the smell of the carrots mixed with the warm, sweet, thick milk and the scent of the cardamom mixed with the ghee. It had been a long time since we had had carrot halwa. I loved carrot halwa.

One day I noticed that the mood in the house had changed. Masi, Ma, and Da were discussing something in the kitchen. When I went in to get a glass of water, they shooed me away to the other room.

“Go do your homework,” Ma said.

I heard Da saying in a fierce whisper, “I will not let you take her.”

I was worried that Masi wanted to take Ma away with her but then Da said, “She will not be a servant in your house. We have dreams of our own for her.”

I was worried that Masi wanted to take my baby sister away with her because she was fair and chubby. Masi handed the baby to Ma and stood up. She said to Da, “Dreams. That’s all you ever had.” She sounded cross.

Another day Ma and Masi were talking, but this time they were not laughing. They sounded angry at each other. Masi said, “Hasn’t that always been the problem? You are under his influence. His heart is as dark as his skin. What is this black magic he has over you? We never understood it. We never believed you would follow him to the ends of the world. What did he ever give you?”

Ma told Masi she should stop talking. Her face was flushed and her eyes were really bright.

Masi said, “You don’t think I see how you watch him still? It disgusts me! We are trying to help you but you deserve nothing but our pity.”

The baby screamed to be picked up but Ma and Masi did not hear her. I went to the baby and tickled her. The baby stopped crying. She put her chubby fingers in my hair and pulled it hard.

I came home from school the next day, and the apartment was empty except for Ma and the baby. I looked under the bed. Masi’s suitcase was gone. Ma and Da were not speaking. They did not say two words to each other for days. Ma stayed in the kitchen and cried. She mumbled under her breath, “They would have taken care of her, taught her things. She could have a chance at a good marriage. What kind of life do we have to offer her here?”

When Da was home he stayed in bed a lot. Once, he got up and took down the books on his shelves and blew off the dust that had gathered on the tops of them. He put them back roughly on the shelves. He dusted his typewriter. He was grumbling the whole time. “I will not have it,” he was saying. “We will not sell our soul to the devil. You know she will be treated like a servant in the big house. You know they want someone to care for the string of little boys your brothers have had.” I had never heard Da so angry.

He noticed me standing at the door watching him. He stared at me hard for a few moments. I thought he would scold me for eavesdropping on him. Instead he said, “You know, this is the only time I have wished we were rich.” I didn’t know if he was speaking to me. Then his face began to crumple and he brushed the back of his hand against his eyes. He stood up and rushed past me. I heard the front door slam.

**When Da** was not reading a newspaper, he was reading a book. When Da was not reading a book, he was writing one. At night after work and on weekends, Da wrote for hours. Sometimes, propped up on a pillow in bed, he wrote with his favorite fountain pen on foolscap. Other times he sat hunched over his typewriter in the corner of the room. Ma brought him tea and hot snacks she made on the kerosene stove in the kitchen.

The day he sent his book to the book publisher, Da was happy. He lay down on the bed and smoked a cigarette.

He said, “I gave everything to that book. I am spent.”

Ma lighted incense at the small altar in the kitchen with the picture of the goddess Durga. The smoke from Da’s cigarette mixed with the smoke from the incense. Ma made payasam—rice pudding—Da’s favorite dessert of his people.

She said, “I knew this day would come. Soon our troubles will be over.”

The book publisher sent Da’s book back. He said there was no market for the kind of book Da had written. I wanted to ask Da what kind of book he had written, but I could see that Da was sad. I don’t think he wanted to talk about the book that the publisher had sent back.

Da sent the book to another publisher. He spent hours making changes and typed the whole book all over again. Ma lit incense. The second publisher sent it back. “Too heavy,” he wrote. Da said he would not water down his book. He sent it to a third publisher, and when it came back, Da said he would burn the papers.

Ma cried and said, “I knew this day would come. I should have heeded my family’s warning. Now what will be our redemption?”

I wanted to look up *redemption* in the dictionary but I was too distracted with worry. Ma and Da argued a lot. Ma could not see that Da was sad. Da did not want to try harder. He did not want to write another book. He said his heart was no longer in it. Ma said only cowards give up on their dreams. She said she had run away with him on a hope and a dream. Da said his spirit was crushed. He stopped caring about his work in the printing press. Some nights Da came home very late. Ma said he was squandering what little money and respect they had left. I missed the dreaming days. I wanted Ma to run her fingers through Da’s hair and say, “You should rest. You’ve been at it for hours.”

Ma did not run her fingers through Da’s hair for a long time.

**After Masi left,** letters arrived every other month. Pale-blue airmail letters. I felt important, carrying the letters to Ma. Maybe I could be a UN envoy. Maybe that could be our redemption. Maybe Ma would be happy then.

Ma cried when she got the letters. Sometimes there was no letter, just a money order. “It is a weakness,” she said. “Don’t ever cry. You must always be strong.” She reminded me of this when Da got sick and had to have an operation.

Ma said, “Go and study. Now we will depend on you even more as the eldest to take care of the family.”

I studied hard and did my homework in the hospital by Da’s bedside, keeping one eye on the saline dripping in the bag. Ma stayed home to take care of my baby sister, who had whooping cough. Some of the nurses were kind to me, but they said they did not have time to linger. They rushed in and out of Da’s room because they had many other patients to look after.

I took the bus to the hospital every day after school. My stomach would begin to hurt when the bus got close to the hospital. I worried I would fall asleep and forget to call the nurse when the bag of saline was empty. I worried an air bubble would get into Da’s veins and block his heart. I worried Da’s heart would stop beating. I worried Da would die because I was not strong. I stayed awake and watched the saline dripping in the bag and tried to study. I worried I would do poorly on the exam. I worried Ma would be ashamed because I could not be strong.

After the operation, Da came home to convalesce. My teachers wrote to Ma and Da. I had done well on my final exams. If I did as well in high school, I could get a scholarship to go to college. “See,” Ma said. “What did I tell you? You will fulfill our dreams and redeem our honor.”

Propped up on his pillows, Da closed his eyes and held the letter tightly in his hands. Then he looked at me with kind eyes. I hoped the letter would make him get better soon. Maybe he would feel well enough to write another book. I longed for the days when Da was full of energy. The days when he looked up from his typewriter and his eyes were gleaming. Da got better for a while and then he got really sick. The surgeon said, “We won the battle but we have lost the war.”

Masi came to live with us when Da got very sick. Masi said, “Why do you not cry? Do you not love your Da?” I wanted to tell her that Ma cried all the time, but I couldn’t see that crying fixed anything. I wanted to tell her I promised Ma I would be strong. I wanted to tell her it is not easy to cry and be strong at the same time.

After Da lost the war, Ma stopped crying. She said she had to take care of her girls until I was grown up and could take care of her and my sister. Da had never talked a lot, but the apartment became empty without him. No one brought sweet, hot, syrupy jalebis home or read interesting newspaper stories aloud in the mornings. No one rearranged the books on the bookshelves. No one cared that there was pathos in those stories.

My sister talked a lot and filled the house with her babbling. I could see that it made Ma happy to hear my sister talk. I didn’t tell Ma that I missed Da. Whenever I missed him I went to the bookshelves and read from one of the books.

**Ma, my sister,** and I have come with Masi to Nani and Nana’s big house in the village. When we got off the train, Nana and Nani, Masi, and cousins gathered on the platform around us. They greeted us with smiles and tears and hugs. My sister hugged everyone and planted sloppy kisses on their cheeks.

They said, “This one is affectionate, takes after her Ma.”

They did not insist that I hug and kiss them. I was relieved. It is not easy to be the center of attention and to be strong at the same time.

Nani and Nana’s house in the village is big and sprawling. I wake early and explore the courtyard and the chickens and the cowshed.

Masi finds me exploring and says, “Don’t be so secretive. Go play with the other children.”

The maid is squatting on the floor next to the tap behind the house, scouring the pans with coconut husk and ash. A girl sits next to her rinsing the scoured pans. I squat beside her. I ask her if she likes school. The girl smiles bashfully and continues to rinse the pans. She says nothing.

“Don’t you go to school?” I ask her.

Her mother’s laugh rings out over the sound of the running water.

She says, “What foolish ideas you city people have. She is a girl. What use does she have for school?”

She pronounces it *eeskool.*

Masi hears the laugh. She comes over and looks at me sternly.

“Why do you hobnob with the servants?” she scolds. “You look like you could be one of them. If only your father could see you now. Go play with the other children.”

I want to look up *hobnob* in Da’s dictionary. I wish I had brought it with me, but Masi said if I planned to fill our suitcase with big books, I had another think coming.

She said, “What good did books do your Da?”

I don’t do much exploring after that.

Soon the days are scorching hot and no one is allowed outside in the afternoon. All the children take long naps. I lie awake reading many pages of the book I brought with me. Masi said I could bring one of the big books from Da’s bookshelves. I thought of bringing the one about war and peace. It is useful to know about such things in this world, I think.

In the end, I brought the one about three brothers because Da once said it was about redemption. I thought I could learn about redemption and why Ma wanted it so badly. The book is sad and difficult to read. Sometimes I am not strong enough to fight off the hot drowsy air. I wake up in the evening groggy. I hear laughing and shouting in the courtyard. Everyone has gone outside to play. It takes me a long time to remember where I am. I miss our apartment in the city. I miss Da.

At Nani and Nana’s house, story time is the most special time of the day. After lunch and before afternoon nap, all the children gather in the room next to the courtyard. It is the coolest room in the house. A fan whirs behind the khus mat hanging from the ceiling. Every afternoon the maid sprays the mat with water. The air from the fan goes through the damp khus mat and comes out cool and scented. I like the smell.

Nana is resting on his green velvet cushion, picking at his teeth with a toothpick. Some of the fennel mint he ate after lunch is stuck in his teeth. The children are gathered around him. Some of us are sitting cross-legged like him. The little ones are lolling about on cushions or on the cool floor. They wait in eager anticipation of story time. One of them giggles, remembering the funny story from the day before.

A favorite story is the one about the beggar with the sweet tooth and empty pockets, who stands in front of the sweetmeat seller’s stall. Nana describes how the beggar’s mouth waters at the sight of the round, spongy rasagolas dripping with sugary cardamom syrup, which the vendor hands out in small bowls to customers. Business is brisk. The beggar approaches the vendor, hoping for a good-natured handout of a rasagola or two, but none is forthcoming. Instead the vendor shoos him away: “Off with you, you worthless beggar! You think rasagolas are free for the asking? You’ll scare away my paying customers with your wild look and rags for clothes.” The beggar thinks to himself—the sweetmeat vendor is afraid of scaring away his customers. He has an idea. He stands beside the stall just out of view of the vendor.

When the next customer arrives and orders two rasagolas, he says, “Ah, don’t they look tasty, those nice, juicy rasagolas dripping with syrup? You will enjoy them!” The customer smiles at him indulgently, rubbing his protruding belly. “I intend to.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I won’t say anymore,” says the beggar mysteriously.

“What will you not say?” asks the customer.

“No, no. I promised I wouldn’t tell. Why should I? Why spoil your appetite?”

The customer is unmoved. With an expansive shrug, he says, “What can you say to spoil my appetite? I come here every day to have my rasagolas after lunch.”

“Yes, of course! What is lunch without a good sweet dish to top it off? You go right ahead. I won’t tell you, then.”

The beggar puts on a nonchalant look and looks up at the sky, whistling a tune.

Now the customer is intrigued and persists: “Tell me what?”

“About the mouse,” blurts out the beggar and immediately puts his hand on his lips, his eyes wide, looking around furtively, as if he has let something slip he wasn’t meant to share.

“What mouse?” asks the customer querulously.

“No, no. I won’t tell. I promised I wouldn’t. Don’t make me,” pleads the beggar.

“What mouse? Tell me,” the customer demands.

Nana stops. The moment is full of suspense even though everyone knows the story. One of the children bursts out giggling, and the giggles spread through the room like an infection. Soon the smaller children are rolling on the floor laughing and chanting to each other: “What mouse? Tell me.” “No, no, I won’t tell.” Sonu, Tutul, and all the other younger kids love this story. My sister joins Sonu and Tutul, rolling with them on the floor. Sometimes she joins them when they laugh and call me four-eyes or bookworm. I don’t mind. Five-year-olds are allowed to be silly. I am almost twelve. I have to be strong. It is not easy to roll on the floor and be strong at the same time.

Nana doesn’t join in the laughter. After a few moments, he clears his throat. The children shush each other. Nana continues the story.

The beggar pleads with the customer. “No. Please don’t make me. It was only a very small mouse. Why spoil your appetite?”

The customer grows impatient and annoyed and raises his hand threateningly. The beggar cowers before him and says, “Just a mouse, sir, at the bottom of the rasagola jar. It must have fallen in at night. The shopkeeper fished it out and threw it away first thing this morning.”

“What?” the customer shouts, horrified.

“The rasagolas are fine, sir. Just a small mouse,” the beggar says, gesturing with thumb and forefinger to emphasize the smallness of the mouse. The customer gags as he pushes away the bowl of rasagolas proffered by the shopkeeper and walks away hurriedly. The shopkeeper bows before the beggar’s cunning and offers him a bribe of free rasagolas every morning if he will stay away from the shop and not spread rumors and scare away any more customers.

But the children are not ready for the story to end. They beg him to stretch it out. Some days, Nana obliges and delays the ending by repeating the dialog about the mouse with two or three more customers. The children roll on the floor, laughing uncontrollably.

On these days, Nani comes in and scolds us for making so much noise. Nana is serious before Nani but grins mischievously behind her back. He quietly retires to his room for his nap. Nani stays with us to maintain law and order.

She tells us a story to help us fall asleep. She tells us the story of Ashok, a young boy with a bright future, who sets off to seek his fortune abroad. His family gathers at the airport for a bittersweet sendoff. Ashok studies hard, working late into the night, shivering in the cold winters, and eating soup out of cans to save money. His hard work pays off, and his parents begin a search for his bride. Meanwhile, he goes to a party, meets Ava, and falls in love with her. His parents are sad and shocked that he has chosen a bride from such a different culture. They organize a traditional Indian wedding, but everyone knows the marriage will never work. Ava embraces Indian culture. She learns the language, wears the clothes, and cooks the foods. Ashok and Ava have two children, a girl and a boy. The grandparents are overjoyed. Ashok is promoted in his job and transferred to Germany.

Happy to be back in her country, Ava enrolls in an art class and begins to remember her dreams of life as an artist. She wants to go away for a workshop with the art teacher at a hippie artist colony. Ashok is angry. They argue and fight a lot. She tells her children that she will be gone for a while and will miss them dearly, but if she doesn’t go now and find answers to some questions she will be lost forever, not only to herself but also to them.

She is away for several months—two, three, six. Ashok takes care of the children as best he can. The other Indian families around him help out. One night, after the children are in bed, he thinks he hears sobbing. He checks on the children. They are fast asleep. He realizes the sound is coming from outside the apartment door. Carefully placing the chain across the door first, he opens it to see a bedraggled human form huddled at the doorstep. It is Ava, but he can barely recognize her. He gives her some money and asks her to leave and never come back again.

Ashok tries to raise the children by himself but he can’t, and so he marries a dutiful Indian wife, whom his mother has chosen for him, like he should have from the very beginning, and she raises them like her own children, and they all live happily ever after.

Nani ends the story with a sad smile and closes her eyes. The other children have sighed and curled up to sleep next to her. Only I am left in turmoil and anguish. After every telling of the story, I retrace the steps that brought Ashok and Ava together. I trace them once and then again.

I long for a different ending. I think that maybe Ashok and Ava will never return to Europe, and the family will live happily ever after. Maybe she won’t long for the life she left behind, maybe she won’t be tempted by the young artist and will spurn the chance of adventure.

Then I wish that once, just once, Ashok brings her in and heats her a bowl of lentil soup, lets her see the children asleep in their beds, lets her stay for a few days until she makes her peace, and then lets her stay so that they can see if perhaps things can indeed go back to normal with the family and between her and him.

And then I wish that the story simply ends with forgiveness. Ashok embraces her and says: Ava, there you are. You have finally come back. Let’s get you cleaned up and fed, and then we’ll wake the kids up and have a party to celebrate your return.