

A Tale of Two Cities

I woke up in my NYU dorm room. My heart thudded and I heard the sound of sobbing. And at first I thought it was me, waking, tremulous. But it was Karsh, scrunched up fetally beside me on the narrow mattress, shivering in the throes of his own dreaming. His tears; his heart. My hand a buoy on his wildly pulsing chest. A thin layer of sweat veiled his skin, and he was calling out again in that child voice — a choked melody, in Punjabi?

—Karsh, it's okay, I whispered, struggling to squeeze him, ease him out of his dark place. He seemed skinnier, shakier, since he'd returned from his San Francisco gigs, though from all accounts, everything had gone well. I'd seen him like this before. Since his father died, he'd grappled with these night terrors at least a couple times a week. This time was worse than the others.

He was shuddering. Ever so gently, I tried to peel his eyelids awake.

When they finally fluttered open, he stared right at me with no recognition.

It was like I was the ghost.

Finally, me stroking his hair, he anchored down into a deeper, silent slumber. But I was still shaken. I decided to get some air.

My bags were packed, set to the side of the room. My roommate had split for the weekend already, a steal of a deal back to London. I'd be missing nearly three weeks at NYU but figured it would fodder my final photography project, which had me stumped at the moment. On my desk, a voluptuous bouquet of swimming-pool blue gerberas that Karsh had picked up for me on Houston. Beside it, a brilliant blood orange Titwala Ganesha, god of new beginnings —

a gift from Dadaji after a long-ago pilgrimage. In Karsh's room was the dancing form of Shiva, god of destruction: Nataraj. Out of habit, I dusted off Ganesha's face with my right hand.

Campus was beginning to hustle-bustle, the up-all-nighters staggering around zombie-like with cavernous eyes, the bright-eyed early risers riptiding the air with an alert cheery smugness.

I figured I'd check my P.O. box before flying out, something I rarely did these days since pretty much everything went encrypted or attached, wirelessly uninked. The only other person in the mail-room was Death, a freshman so named because he donned black riding boots and matching cape every day, all year round. He gave me his strangely chipper smile as he exited, arms laden with letters like a stiff-finned catch.

I opened my own box, and discovered a sliver of acutely familiar foreign sky rippling in that slim grey space.

Pale blue airmail stationery, elephant-stamped from India, like my grandfather and I used to swap tidings upon. But he'd been gone nearly three years now.

Washed up on the envelope, indigo-inked in a script nearly identical to his, my name: *Dimple Rohitbhai Lala*. Untyped, it was as if it belonged to a forgotten time. To someone else.

I took the missive to Washington Square and found a seat beside a bench where an older couple sat feeding the pigeons.

I could just about smell the swells inside the sky letter, the salt scent nearly granular, a swift reminder of the Atlantic's proximity. I opened its triple folds and found a swirling fish sketched in my cousin-sister Sangita's artistic hand — and in the Additional Message area, a request to join her and Deepak for their nuptials in Bombay.

A twininvitation: from one city by the sea to another.

We already knew the date, just over a couple weeks from now. It had been postponed from the original one due to an astronomical

astrological error by the chart reader in choosing a moment of great auspiciousness. Or, if you asked Sangita's peeved sister Kavita, more likely the groom had been delaying due to aesthetic concerns about his wife-to-be (too dark, too thin, specs).

Considering this, and the fact that it was to be an unusually tiny gathering of people already in the know, the invite was a formality, and as such was surprisingly informal.

No presents, only your presence.

It would not only be the first wedding of our generation in this family but also an arranged one, in a city and country I hadn't returned to since before my grandfather exited it in ashes. The event would last only one day instead of the traditional three (Sangita and Deepak had decided to skip the mehendi party and sangeet, limiting the festivities to the wedding and reception), and was to take place on the day commemorating Dadaji's passing. It was also the same month as my parents' silver anniversary. They were planning to celebrate while we were out there. (I was planning to secretly snap the sites of their courtship as a surprise gift.)

Karsh was going to DJ the reception. After a few gig commitments here in New York, he'd be joining me in Bombay in a few days. I was tasked with being the wedding photographer, and I was hoping that, after months of visual roadblocks, a change of scenery would help me reconnect to Chica Tikka, my third eye, who I pulled out now from my camera bag and examined. Though I'd supplemented my photo taking with my parental graduation gift of a digital, that apparatus seemed aimed firmly futureward, whereas this single-lens reflex was my direct portal to the past. The SLR had been my precious gift from my Dadaji. We'd used images to talk, to bridge the miles between us — a photographic dialogue that carried on for years, and one I still felt I was engaged in every time I lay eye to viewfinder.

Lately, all I seemed to be able to pull into frame were borders,

dichotomies, black-and-whites, academic either/ors. I longed to crack open a kaleidoscope, to discover a new truth through a new hue.

To follow a color.

Something in me had grown numb the last year or so — which I only realized as the prospect of jetting off into the semi-known unknown approached. I knew I was young and that most of my life (hopefully) lay ahead of me. But I also felt that so much lay behind me . . . *really* behind me: an anterior past. In India — a world that meant so much to me and to those I held dearest . . .

All this studying I'd been doing, about “the gaze,” Rilke, Baudrillard — sure, it was exciting, especially during the moments I'd slip into the cracks between the lines and feel that firefly of elucidation hovering close. But I didn't know how to apply any of it to my life. Sometimes I felt we were all talking in university code, our shiny (and pricey) new signifiers numbing us to — distancing us from — the neglected, moss-ridden signified itself. I'd often wonder: Was it possible, truly possible, to cut across Broadway for the infinitieth time, grab the same seat, with that invariable supergrande latte (skinny, with whipped), and have a no-catch deep thought?

I loved school. I loved sitting around and having a professor supply all the answers. But I also sometimes felt I already knew what I wanted to do . . . so why did I have to read so much about it?

When I was actually taking and developing pictures, that's when I felt pulse-quickeningly alive. Applying. Applied. My goal in India was to be as unacademically hands-on as possible. To live in the body — my own, as well as the city's.

And to live in Karsh's, too.

