

Mr. Agarwal can't find an empty seat on the bus after work, so he sits perched in one of the open windows with his legs dangling out for the duration of the ride home across Delhi. A man seated in the window next to him reads a newspaper, but Mr. Agarwal is not a reader and prefers to daydream in order to pass the time. He holds onto the window frame of the swaying bus, closes his eyes, and recalls a memory of a time, years ago, when he and his lover, a pretty girl named Lakshmi, were both students at the University of Allahabad. He was twenty and she was eighteen, and they had been hiking on a trail in Durga Pooja Park when they decided to rest on the grass in a grove of scented pania trees, where they were enveloped by the delightful fragrance of the white blossoms shimmering in the sunbeams. He turned to her. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him toward her. He rolled on top of her and they began to kiss.

The bus Mr. Agarwal is riding suddenly hits a pothole in the road and jostles him out of his daydream. He may now live in the crowded city of Delhi but his heart, or at least a piece of it, is still with Lakshmi, wherever she is. Ever since his precious wife Chetna died of cancer last November, fond memories of his youth, memories that have refused to fade, often erupt at peculiar times. The bus bounces down the familiar route on Vinay Marg between the Civil Services Officers' Institute and the Bhairav Temple. The man seated in the window next to him is still engrossed in his newspaper. Mr. Agarwal glances over the man's shoulder at the headline about yesterday's football game, and lets go of the window frame for an instant. A white cow crosses the road and the bus suddenly lurches to avoid the animal, sending Mr. Agarwal careening out of the window, head-over-heels, onto the dusty road below. He lies sprawled like a fool, in pain, and sits up dazed amidst the stinking garbage heaps and dung piles buzzing with swarms of flies. The cow ambles over with a baleful look on its face and licks him. He soon

picks himself up and staggers off. He wants to walk off the pain, so he foregoes calling an Uber ride and limps the rest of the way home.

He steps inside his flat on Janpath Road and greets his daughter Preeti an hour later than usual.

“I fell on the road and hit my head,” he tells her.

“Oh no.” She gives him two aspirin and brings him a cup of tea spiced with ginger and cardamom. She draws a bath for him and, after he’s cleaned up and dressed himself, helps him to sit down at the table. Dinner awaits, cold. He picks up a smoky kebob. It’s a favorite of his.

Later that night, after he tells Preeti the story of how he nearly got killed on the bus ride, he lets her feel the bump on his head and shows her his leg, bruised from the fall. She wraps up some ice inside a towel for him.

“You must be more careful, Father,” she says.

“Perhaps. But what am I to do? I’m too poor to buy a motorcycle to get to work.” He presses the cold towel against the side of his head. “My low salary forces me to take the bus.”

“Then you must at least get a bicycle. But to sit in the window of a moving bus? Idiocy!”

“Yes.” He sighs in sadness. “I know. This is the last straw. I’m going to quit my job.”

“What? No.”

“Working at a call center holds no future for me. I’ve been unhappy for a long time. Even before your mother died. You have no idea. People from places like Omaha, or...or Albany, or Sacramento. Are you sure your computer’s plugged in? I must ask that question dozens of times

a day. Have you checked your cable? Reset your modem? The customers curse at me. Threaten me. Call me stupid. I've had it."

"But what will you do?"

"Take a trip to Allahabad and find a girl I once loved."

"Aiyeel!"

"Oh, don't be dramatic. Baldev will be home in a few more days." Preeti's husband Baldev, who works as an engineer, is temporarily stationed at a remote job site a hundred kilometers away with Morning Gas Company, a drilling operation.

"You're not serious."

"As serious as a heart attack, as they say in Abilene, Texas."

"You are way too sentimental. Mother always said so."

Later, Mr. Agarwal searches online for the girl, Lakshmi Kapoor, and soon narrows down a likely candidate. It could be her. He takes out a credit card and pays for a report. When he studies it he recognizes some of the names of her relatives. In an auspicious moment, he realizes that she's the one. Still lives in a flat in Allahabad, seven hundred kilometers away. Two weeks on foot.

He finds Preeti to say goodnight. "Things will seem better in the morning," she says. "After you've had some rest. You'll see." She gives him two more aspirin tablets. He hugs her before retiring for the night. He lays on his back on top of the covers, his heart thrumming in the darkness as he thinks of Lakshmi, the girl he left behind, the teenager he slept with some thirty years ago in the park, until he falls asleep.

Dilip Mehta's rooster next door crows at six and wakes him. He presses the pillow over his head, trying to force a few more minutes of rest, but he soon gives up and gets out of bed.

Preeti is up too, and has made coffee. She pours him a cup.

"Feeling better?" she asks.

"Ugh. No." He sits down at the table.

She serves him paranthas that she has stuffed with radish, cauliflower, and eggs, but he just stares at the breakfast. Ordinarily, he would clean his plate. Chetna had taught Preeti from a young age how to cook, and she learned well. "Please eat. You'll be late for work," she says.

"I'm going in to see Mr. Gupta and quit my job, Preeti." She yelps.

"At least you'll be going in to see him on a full stomach. Maybe you'll reconsider once you feel a little better, so please eat." He reaches for his coffee cup and groans in pain. "I should take you to the doctor," she says in a voice full of concern.

"No. No doctor." He holds his head in his hands and winces.

"You could have a concussion." He grunted. "Scientists think it could shorten your life."

"On the contrary," he says. "The bump did me some good." He picks up one of the paranthas. "Knocked some sense into me. It's time for a change, and it's now or never." Soon he is eating like his old self.

"So Father, you've found a woman?"

"Correction; looking. I haven't seen Lakshmi since we were both students at AU. If I do manage to find her, I only hope she remembers me."

“I’ve never heard you make mention of another woman.”

“Before I met your mother, my heart was broken when Lakshmi’s parents interfered with our puppy love and arranged her marriage to another man. The passing years have softened that blow, but I never forgot her. Don’t get me wrong, I was in love with your mother Chetna. And she loved me. I always stayed true to her but I’m emotionally drained now after nursing her during her illness.” He sighed. “I’m only fifty; a relatively young man, and need to find companionship again. And maybe love. Who knows?”

“Have you considered that this Lakshmi may very well be married, Father?”

“Of course she could be.”

“You should find out before you stumble into something, don’t you think? Play detective and find out more about her on Google?”

“I think it’s best to not reach out to her online. It’s the way of a man my age. I will surprise her with a visit instead.”

“Well, this is certainly a surprise. I cannot imagine you with any other woman. Selfish of me, I know.” Preeti fell silent for a few moments. “But I’m happy that you won’t settle for being lonely, though.”

“You’re jumping the gun. If Lakshmi’s taken, then all I’ll have from such a strenuous journey on foot is very strong legs.” He points down at his feet. “And more disappointment.”

“What? You intend to walk to Allahabad? You’re not thinking straight. It would take you weeks.” He nodded. “So my fifty-year-old father is going to become a tramp?”

“A long journey on foot will do me good in more ways than one.”

“Nonsense. Absolute nonsense.” She covers her mouth with her hands in shock.

After breakfast, in his bedroom he locates an old AU yearbook on a shelf. He had never allowed Chetna to throw away anything. He opens the book and turns the pages until he finds a black-and-white photograph of Lakshmi from freshman year. He tears it out and sticks it in his pocket. He fills his backpack with a change of clothes and some toiletries, before he finds Preeti and kisses her on the cheek. “Goodbye, my daughter,” he whispers. His eyes fill.

“You can’t do this, Father. You have no idea about this woman. I think you have lost your mind.”

“I don’t expect you understand it. But the long journey will give me the time to sort things out in my mind before I knock on her door.”

“No, Father. Wait.” She blocks him. “You can’t leave like this. Love has ruined many a man.”

“It’s not going to ruin this man. And I won’t be gone forever. I’ll call and let you know how I’m doing.” She sighs heavily and steps aside. He takes his wallet and cellphone with its charger, and opens the door. “Goodbye.” He kisses her. “I love you.”

“Wait.” She grabs his arm. “The fall from the bus. That’s it, isn’t it? The bump on your head. You have a concussion. Father, you must not go. It’s making you think like a crazy man.”

“Please don’t make this any more difficult for me.”

“I know one of the doctors at BLK Super Speciality Hospital on Pusa Road right here in Delhi. He can fix this.” Her voice rises in desperation but he shakes his head and throws his hands up in the air, annoyed. He tells her again that he loves her and leaves the house without

looking back. “Father! Come back. They have a CAT scan machine, you know. Give the doctor a chance. Do you hear me? Father?” He hopes she will not follow him, and she does not.

At the call center, Mr. Agarwal strides through the vast, open office, full of men and women chatting on headsets at computer desks, inspiring countless customers to check their cords and reset their modems. He barges in on his boss, Mr. Gupta who is seated behind his desk and speaking on the phone. “I quit, sir,” Mr. Agarwal says.

“What?” Mr. Gupta says something quickly into the phone and hangs up. “Who are you?”

“Uttam Agarwal.”

“You are giving your two weeks’ notice?” Mr. Gupta looks perplexed.

“No. I’m leaving today. Right now.”

“You cannot just quit, Agarwal. We require notice from every employee, or else we dock your pay.”

“Fine.”

“What? How is that OK? You are rich? You don’t need the money? Everyone needs the money. That’s why everyone gives us notice when they quit.”

“Well Mr, Gupta, I don’t.” Mr. Agarwal hurries out of the building. His head throbs. Burning a bridge, he knows, but he would build more.

Mr. Agarwal begins his journey through Delhi. The road is full of smoky motorbikes and cars. The drivers, always on their horns, fight each other for advantage and seem to storm him. He walks with throngs of pedestrians headed to and fro. A man in front of him carries a mesh

bag full of live chickens over his shoulder. Their heads bob but they are mostly quiet and accepting of their fate. A woman in an orange sari approaches with a stack of clothing towered on top of her head. Stalls line the street with vendors selling vegetables and fruit. Spices, too; ginger, fenugreek, anise, tamarind, and garam masala. One shop sells watches, the next sandals. Livestock; goats mostly, roam freely among the traffic, now only chaos. Rag pickers, old women accompanied by young children wearing masks and plastic gloves sort loads of waste; empty potato chip bags, plastic water bottles, and soiled fabric for the kabadiwallas. Mr. Agarwal moves on. His head is still throbbing but he tries to shove the pain down deep.

He seeks shelter for the night. Beggars on the sidewalk plead for scraps of food. He wonders about his daughter Preeti back home and hopes she's well. He calls her to chat and inform her of his progress. She still pleads for him to return home but her husband Baldev is back now, and they are fine. Mr. Agarwal hangs up and bunks on a pallet in a room he has rented for the night. Lying on the mattress, he pulls out the yearbook photo of Lakshmi from his pocket and studies it. It's the only image of her that he has. Black hair parted in the middle. Dark eyes expressionless before the lens. He traces the outline of her face with his finger. Lakshmi. Oh, what have I lost all these years? I loved Chetna, yes. But I loved you too, Lakshmi. A tear drops onto the photo and he wipes it away with his thumb. He suddenly realizes he has left home without a picture of Chetna. Dear Chetna. Such a wonderful life together. Couldn't hope for a better partner or a better mother to his daughter. His grief over his wife's death is only now beginning to lift. He wonders about Preeti's warning. Could he be going crazy from the bump on his head? Was she right? He weeps. What is wrong with him? Can't stop sobbing until sleep mercifully overtakes him.

In the morning, he sits cross-legged on the pallet and rubs his sore, road-wearied feet. His soles and heels begin to toughen. How soft they were weeks ago when he began his journey to Allahabad, soft from utter laziness. His leg muscles, only just recently tight with years of complacency, loosen up. The bright sky outside improves his spirits and it looks promising for travel, but first he has a breakfast of idlis with dip and chutney from a street vendor. It's the memory of love, of course, however dim and distant, that compels him onward. He sees Lakshmi more clearly and more often in his dreams, now. In fact, she populates every dream he can remember, now. Love propels him. He grows more and more lovesick for her. In the back of his mind he wonders, how will she have changed? How much of her beauty has been erased by the passage of time? Will he recognize her? Will she remember him? Thirty years has been a long time. Unrequited love is an illness as powerful as any other. The headaches continue and now he begins to think that Preeti was right. Maybe he should have had a CAT scan. But it wouldn't really matter. There is only one antidote for love known to man.

He's been on the road for six weeks and is weary when he finally arrives at Allahabad, a city familiar but strange. It lies on the Ganges and is home to over a million people, but he thinks of only one. He follows the Grand Trunk Road and stops to search an app in his phone for her address. It's nearby but the hour is late and he takes a room for the night, pleased to be able to wash and freshen himself up before he meets her, he hopes, in the morning.

At around nine the next day, he walks up to a two-story pink brick apartment building on Chaddah Road near Durga Pooja Park. Several motorcycles and pickup trucks are parked outside. He locates the door to C-12, takes a deep breath, and knocks. A man answers.

"Yes?" The man asks. He is young, with a several day-old beard, and is dressed in slacks and a buttoned white shirt.

“Sorry to trouble you, sir. Are you the man of the house?”

“Who are you?”

“An old classmate of Lakshmi Kapoor’s from university.” His hands shake as he pulls out her crumpled photo he tore out of the yearbook. “My name is Uttam Agarwal.”

“Zia.”

Mr. Agarwal hands him the picture. “Do you recognize her, Zia?”

Zia puts on his glasses and stares at the photo. “What’s this all about? Are you a detective?”

“Oh no. Nothing like that. I’m from the reunion committee at AU.” He makes up a pretense that he is a representative from the University of Allahabad trying to locate old students.

“Please step inside.” Mr. Agarwal is surprised when Zia holds the door open to his flat. They together stand in the kitchen. “Lakshmi Kapoor was my mother,” Zia says. Mr. Agarwal feels faint at the news. “I’m sorry to say that she won’t be able to attend any reunion. She recently passed away.”

Mr. Agarwal staggers. “Oh no,” he gasps. His knees buckle. “It can’t be. How long ago?”

“This past November. You seem to be taking this pretty hard, Mr. Agarwal. Mother was a student at AU many years ago. I’m sure you can barely remember her.”

“I do remember her.” Mr. Agarwal wipes away a tear. “Very well, in fact. I’m sorry that you lost your mother, Zia, but I must admit that I’m here on false pretenses. I not only remember her, but I’d once planned to ask her to marry me, many years ago of course, until her parents

intervened and found someone else they believed was better suited to be her husband. I moved away to Delhi and made my own life. We lost touch and I never heard from your mother again.”

“Why the sudden desire to locate her after all this time?”

“Loneliness. I suppose I’m nothing but a sentimental fool. My wife Chetna died, also last November. Grief does strange things to the mind.”

“Would you like to join me for lunch in the park?” asks Zia. Mr. Agarwal quickly agrees. Not far from the flat, Zia finds a street hawker. “This guy has the best food around,” says Zia. He buys them each a lunch of kachori sabzi, dough balls with a spicy filling, and they sit together on a painted park bench. Mr. Agarwal thinks back, slightly embarrassed, to the last time he was in this same park with Lakshmi, making love to her in the pania grove not far from where they now sit.

“I must tell you something,” Zia says. “This is very painful and sad for me to say, but my mother died by her own hand. She had lived her life in enormous pain. Mental anguish. No one knew why. Nothing the family did would help. The torment finally became too much for her to bear. I found her in the bathroom. She used a razor. The worst thing imaginable.” Neither man finishes eating the rest of their lunch. Mr. Agarwal closes his eyes as if to blind himself from the pain of this news.

Zia stands. “Let’s take a short walk.”

“I’ve traveled all the way from Delhi on foot to get here, so another kilometer won’t hurt.” Mr. Agarwal cannot ever remember being as sad as he is now. They head out in a light breeze. The trail they follow borders a brook and winds past a temple with a handsome lawn.

“My mother never married,” Zia says. Mr. Agarwal walks close beside him. “She refused the marriage that you spoke of, the one that my grandparents had tried to arrange. I learned later on in life that I was born to her out of wedlock. My mother felt great and everlasting shame. She shared everything about her life with me, Mr. Agarwal. There was nothing she held back. My mother was very loving to me, her only child.”

“I’m so sorry for you.” The breeze shifts and suddenly the unmistakable scent of pania blossoms fills the air.

Zia stops. “I tell you all this for one reason,” he says. “Moments after I met you, I knew. Mother always held out hope. She told me that you might one day return to Allahabad to find us, Uttam Agarwal.”

“Find you?” Mr. Agarwal is stunned.

“It’s the truth.” Zia surprises him with a hug, and Mr. Agarwal cries out in shock.

“Please, one second,” Mr. Agarwal begs. “Don’t move.” Zia smiles. Mr. Agarwal steps backward and fumbles with his phone as he tries to make a call, dialing and hanging up three times before he gets it right and the call goes through. “Preeti,” he cries when his daughter answers. “Say hello to your brother.”