

DION D'SOUZA

FISHIE

"OH LADY, COME HERE!"

"Oh auntieeeee!"

"Oh sister, how much you're giving?"

The above calls are heard at the marketplace this morning, as they are every other day without exception. The women at whom they are aimed, often randomly, walk among the rows of white sunmica—topped wooden boards, fishes paling on them in the sweltering heat, smelly grey water trickling down the ends and along the narrow open gutters at the edge of the path.

A young girl, who has managed to clear her table, stuffs her earnings into her blouse, thrusts a hand into the wicker basket by her feet, and flicks a fresh batch of fish, hitherto cooling in crushed ice, onto the table.

"Pomfret how much?" Mrs. D'Cruz asks her.

"Two hundred," the girl says.

"Too much, men. Lottery I got or what?"

Offended, the girl shoots back: "*Arré*, auntie, why telling that way?" An East Indian who was schooled until the ninth standard, she knows just enough English to set the stage for her daily wrangles with regulars like Mrs. D'Cruz. "Every day you're not buying or what?"

"That's why you're asking more and more?"

"Auntie, I'm honest business. You don't know or what, so long you're buying from me?"

"You say auntie, auntie, and commit daylight robbery," Mrs. D'Cruz snaps at her.

"*Ayya*, how you're telling like this for me, auntie! Not nice." The girl's face contorts in self-righteous anger, yet she continues grappling with English, like a fisherman reeling in a prize catch. "Mummy hears then she will hurt!"

"Then tell me proper price."

"Proper only this."

"I'm going."

Giving up at last, the fishergirl lapses into her native language. The words now rapidly bounce off her tongue, like scrabbling crabs off the corners of the fisherwomen's baskets: "*Arré*, auntie, wait! If you don't want to give, don't give. Don't go on complaining. I don't like to hear all this morning-morning, when business has just started. Come, one-eighty give, okay? Four fresh nice pomfret I'm giving. Want?"

Mrs. D'Cruz opens her small purse, waggles a finger at the thin sari-clad girl.

"You're becoming very expensive."

"Times are like that, *mavshi*. We also have to survive."

Mr. Picardo, a social sciences teacher at St. Mary's High School, tips his brown beret and says, "Good morning, Mrs. D'Cruz."

Mrs. D'Cruz blushes. The two of them are around the same age, Mr. Picardo a tall reedy bachelor and she a plump greying widow with a grandson who is being taught by him. They have known each other for many years, having lived in the same neighbourhood.

"Good morning, good morning."

"Good morning, Picardo Uncle," the fishergirl shouts.

"*Haan*, which fish do you have today?"

"Pomfret is there. Fresh. These four cutting for auntie."

"She's charging one-eighty. I was just telling her she's become too much."

"What I'll do then, auntie? I also have to eat."

"Just see how she talks," says Mrs. D'Cruz, waving a hand at the girl, who has now picked up her sickle and is deftly severing a fish head. Mr. Picardo bends and pokes a finger into another fish's gills.

"Hm, it's fresh," he says. Mrs. D'Cruz smiles at him.

"Then what, I'm selling *sadela* or what, Uncle?"

"I'm going to tell your mother how cheeky her daughter's become," Mrs. D'Cruz warns in Marathi.

"I have my business to do," the fishergirl mumbles to herself.

Mr. Picardo and Mrs. D'Cruz pay no attention to the girl, who is now neatly slicing the fish into pieces. Blood spurts and dissolves into the grey water on the table, turning it a muddy red.

"So, how's everyone at home?"

"All fine. Yours?"

There is no one else at Mr. Picardo's house. Since his mother passed away, he has lived by himself in an old but neat cottage.

"Ho, ho. Me. I'm doing just fine."

The fishergirl shoves Mrs. D'Cruz's fish into a plastic bag and receives the notes with the tips of her wet bloody fingers.

"Yes, you're always keeping fit, morning walks and all. Still doing that, no?"

"Ho, ho. Yes, every morning at five-thirty. I walk for around half an hour. That's the best time. No traffic, no pollution. Then I go home and get ready for school."

Mrs. D'Cruz appears very impressed.

"Two more years left for me, then I retire."

"Yes," says Mrs. D'Cruz, smiling.

"Uncle, you want?"

They do not notice her as they begin to walk away slowly, oblivious to the commotion around them.

"You'll go to Canada then, to join your sister?"

"Oh, I don't know. She's always asking me to, but I haven't decided."

"You have time," Mrs. D'Cruz says with an exaggerated laugh. "Two years, no?"

"Oh? Ho, ho. Yes, that."

"How's Elroy at school?"

"Who?" The abrupt change in topic takes Mr. Picardo by surprise.

"Elroy, my grandson," Mrs. D'Cruz laughs again. Such an absent-minded professor, she thinks to herself.

"Oh, him. Yes, he's doing fine." At scraping through geography and just about every other subject, thinks Mr. Picardo. But never mind that.

"His unit test marks, Greta was grumbling about."

"Yes, he didn't do as well as she expected, I suppose."

"He's a real rascal, that boy! But he's nice, *haan*." Mrs. D'Cruz turns to Mr. Picardo with a twinkle in her eyes.

She's such an innocent! Mr. Picardo thinks. He loves the confidence with which she speaks this unique mishmash of languages.

"He works hard two-three days like that before exam. Otherwise, I know he's always shouting and playing in the lane. But he's small, no? What else young age is for? Greta's always telling he's not studying, wasting all their

money. She's also working hard, I know, poor thing. But my Elroy's good. I know."

Mr. Picardo nods.

When she gets no response, Mrs. D'Cruz quickly continues: "Now he has me all the time to take his side. And Greta has me to cook for her and look after him and house. I'm still fit so far, thank God. I can do work. But if something is happening . . ." Mrs. D'Cruz slides her black bazaar bag into her left hand and sniffs into her handkerchief.

"Oh, Mrs. D'Cruz, don't talk like that."

"You will help then, Mr. Picardo?"

"What?"

"I mean, you will just give little special attention to my Elroy, see that he's doing all his work properly in class? Anything . . . if he's having trouble or something in class, you will see? After all, you was our family friend." She looks at him with big troubled watery eyes; his newly acquired *family friend* status, he assumes, derives from his vague acquaintance with her late husband.

"Why, certainly. That's only my duty as a teacher!"

"Any time if he's having problem, then he can come to you? It's okay?"

"I only teach him geography . . ."

"Just general. I'm not asking too much."

"Oh, I know, Mrs. D'Cruz. I understand."

"Not regular tuition or something . . ."

"Yes, yes."

"Only if he has problem. He's smart boy, my Elroy. Only someone must take little interest. I never study much, and Greta also . . . she's working as secretary in small office, and her husband started working abroad again on ship . . . What to tell you story?"

Mr. Picardo nods.

They have reached the entrance to the market.

"All the time there is shouting at home. Please . . ."

"Don't worry, Mrs. D'Cruz. I'll do the best I can."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Picardo. You're good man," says Mrs. D'Cruz, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. "Oh, but you did not get fish?"

"What?"

"Fish, no, you came to buy?"

"Oh, yes. I'm having guests tonight. I forgot. How silly of me!"

"Yes," Mrs. D'Cruz grins. "Which guest?"

How inquisitive and yet how charming, thinks Mr. Picardo.

"Some old friends of mine."

"If you need any help with recipe . . ."

"Ho, ho. I'm quite an okay cook. I manage. Thank you."

"I know, I know."

"But I'm sure," Mr. Picardo quickly adds, "I can't cook half as well as you do!"

Mrs. D'Cruz takes a moment to smile. Then she says, "You must come one day. For food."

"Yes, surely."

"When Elroy has holiday on Thursday. See what I'm telling! Today is Thursday . . . holiday for him! That's why you are also in the market . . . That's why I bought special for him pomfret. Greta told me to fry. Curry fish where he's eating? Only want fried, and otherwise only meat! You know these children, no, what fusses they make . . . that's why."

"I see."

"Okay then, Mr. Picardo."

"Fishie, fishie!"

"Idiot!"

"What?"

"As though fishes can hear . . ."

"They can't?"

Elroy considers this for a while, peers into the well he and his friend are standing around and then finally says, "I don't know."

"But just now only you said . . ."

"Hey, look, I can see a turtle!"

"Where, where? Show!"

Elroy points the turtle out. The well is deep, its waters black and restless, churning continually like juices inside an upset stomach, glinting under the afternoon sun.

The hard domed green shell of a turtle is visible just below the surface of the water. The head and tail jut out from either end, like delicate tongues.

"Ya," says Elroy's friend, a thin boy with thick spectacles. Elroy's hair is bushy; he is short for his age and a little plump. Both boys are wearing

shorts and t-shirts and carrying rather heavy bags on their backs.

They stand on their toes and lean over the wall to get a better look. Now there is a school of flat grey fish.

“Eh!” one of the men who work at the chicken shop calls out to them. “You’ll fall inside,” he warns them in Hindi. Then he drops an oil canister (with the top sawed off) into the well and draws out some of its black water. He pours some on his feet and then proceeds to wash his arms and face.

Elroy and his friend exchange disgusted looks and walk away slowly in no obvious hurry. They pass the chicken shop with the chickens cooped up in their cages, poking their tiny white beaks through the holes in the wire mesh. The bottom of the cage is covered in feathers and shit, the air reeking of the latter. Then they stroll through the less messy side of the market with the fruit and vegetable vendors. The fisherwomen are still chattering at the other end, now in a hurry to get rid of whatever fish they have left.

They step out of the market and down the lane, smiling happily to themselves.

“Let’s buy some chewing gum,” Elroy’s friend suggests.

“Okay,” says Elroy.

They enter a shop, buy gum, and walk away feeling even bolder.

“Chyou did chyour chomework?” Elroy’s friend asks him.

“What?”

“I said, Chyou did chyour chomework?”

“Idiot, don’t chew gum and talk!”

“You did your homework?”

Elroy giggles. “Nah.”

“Even I didn’t do.”

“Otherwise also I would have bunked today. Damn bored, men.”

“I know,” his friend solemnly agrees, nodding his head. “First to hear all that rubbish in class and then at tuitions again. And double homework also!”

“Too much, men.”

They wait for a rickshaw to pass and then cross the road.

“Where we’ll go?”

“Let’s go to D’Mello Lane and see the fish tanks. Then we’ll go to the park.”

“Okay,” his friend grins.

In a little corner off the lane, a signboard announces “Sunny’s Aquariums” in faded blue paint with a few fading fish looped around the letters. Long fish tanks line two sides of the shop with fishes of various shapes, colours, and sizes swimming in murky greenish water, shiny sharp-edged stones piled on the beds, and pumps bubbling away busily—ugly purple or slimy green toads that seem to be yawning or burping and blank-faced bikini-clad mermaids idly swishing their tails.

“Hello, boys,” says Sunny as he takes out a cigarette and lights it. He rubs his goatee and watches them as he smokes. “Come to have a look at the fishes?”

Elroy and his friend prefer to visit the shop when Sunny’s father is around. He’s a quiet old man, who doesn’t pay much attention to them. But today they wish to kill time, so they are forced to put up with Sunny.

“Tongues are tied up or something?” says Sunny, who laughs and slaps his thighs as though he’s cracked a very amusing joke. There’s something positively evil about his thin-lipped, yellow-toothed smile.

Elroy and his friend hang around near the entrance, retracing their steps. Sunny squints and grins at their skinny legs tottering about in their small sports shoes.

“You boys want to see a special new fish I have? I’ve kept it in a big new tank all by itself. We just got it from abroad a few days ago.”

The boys stare at the ground and do not look up.

Sunny continues, “It’s a really rare and expensive fish. Silver and shiny. This long.” He gestures up to his shoulder. “You sure you don’t want to have a peek at it? It’s guaranteed to go fast, so you may not get another chance.”

“Where’s it?” Elroy’s friend demands.

Elroy glares at him.

Sunny grins. “You think I’m lying? Come here, and I’ll show you. It’s inside the storeroom, where we keep the worms, old tanks, and all that. We don’t want to get everyone around here excited. One customer has already seen it. He’s going to come and pick it up soon. Come in, it’s just here. We’ve kept it inside just to be safe. Anyway, there’s too much smoke outside, and it’s hot. And if it rains, that’s even more trouble. Too much dust flies up. It’s not good for the fish. That man’s got an AC at his place.”

“But just now you said it was not sold and would go fa . . .”

Elroy drags his friend away by his bag.

Sunny leans against the column of tanks by the entrance, grinning,

blowing out smoke.

"What you did that for? *Bleddy* idiot!"

"Shut up and walk fast," says Elroy, panting as they rush up the lane.

"Nut, we would have got into trouble with that madman Sunny."

"How?" his friend asks.

"I don't know. He's not nice, that's all I know."

"What *dhaaps* he was giving us. Foreign fish and all he has inside."

"And you fell for it . . ."

"No, you idiot, you didn't hear me or what? I found out his lies."

"Ya, ya. Shit!"

"What happened?" his friend asks, turning around to look, half expecting to see Sunny marching up to them, his imported fish in his hands.

"It's Atul's mom, men. If she sees us, we're dead!"

"Where?"

"There she is, coming from that side."

"Shit!"

"Run!"

"Again? Wait for me!"

They turn into another bylane. Roadside vendors with dresses and eatables, a cobbler, and a paper dealer clutter up the mouth of the lane, like the teeth of a barracuda. The boys take refuge behind a cottage, and Elroy peeps around the wall, watching Atul's short portly mother slowly saunter by.

"Shit, we would have been dead if that mad lady had seen us. She would have pretended not to notice anything, but in the evening she would have called up your mother and said, 'Elroy goes for Hindi-Marathi tuition with Atul, no? *Haan*, but today in the afternoon when I was walking to my house, I saw him and his one other friend roaming on the road . . .'"

Elroy laughs.

"Shit, some afternoon we had, no?" he says.

His friend nods beside him.

"Let's go buy ice candies from the bakery and sit in the shade in the park. I'm tired, men."

Tampa, Florida
26th August 2004

My Dear Greta,

How are you? I hope you are fine and things are good. I miss you a lot, as always, and I'm sure you and Elroy must be missing me too. How is Elroy? He got his unit test marks? How has he done? And how's your mother? I know she has a tough time managing Elroy and the house without us around, but she's always been a strong hard-working woman, and we owe a lot to her.

How's work? Getting along fine? Travelling to town every day must be a real pain as always. Work here is okay. Martin was leaving in a few days, so I thought of sending this letter with him along with a little parcel for Elroy.

How's the weather over there? Still raining? I guess it must be raining quite heavily. Here in Florida the days are warm and sunny as usual, though there's a bit of rain too. At the end of each shift, I'm completely out. I just get to our quarters, have a quick shower, and hit the bed! The food and all is good, of course, but obviously nothing like home food.

Right now we're just docked here, but we'll be leaving on a cruise soon, the same old route—Cozumel, Belize, Mahogany Bay, Grand Cayman, etc. The weather's going to be the same, pretty much. The places are beautiful to see—real postcard-type beauty—but you know how it is. You get tired of it all after a while . . .

You mentioned something about a perfume and a handbag. I'll see what I can get, okay? I'm ending this letter here. Will call soon.

Love,
Stephen

Dearest Elroy,

How are you? How's school? I hope you're not being too naughty and harassing Mama and Nana. You're supposed to take care of them for me, remember?

You got your test results? I hope you've done well and are working hard for the first term.

You asked for some Pokemine something on the phone. I could not find it—what is it exactly?

*Love,
Dada*

Such sweet, touching letters, thinks Greta. Anyone who read them would think he was the perfect husband and father, but they would be mistaken. It's only after living with him all these years and having his child that she's discovered his true nature.

She succumbed to his charms less than a year after meeting him at a party, and they were married soon after. For the table pieces they had tall decorative candles, lush red and with spiral ridges running their length; a little lace bow tied near their base that rested in a dainty glass bowl; and a small white card that displayed their names in gold lettering inside intersecting arrow-pierced hearts and thanked their guests for joining them on the most special night of their lives. What she remembers most fondly of the wedding night is the frantic *masala* routine shortly after the buffet was thrown open and to which the dancers certainly did not make a beeline, for this was what they looked forward to the most, hooting and waving their glasses and hankies, and the game in which the couple was hoisted in chairs and their lips were brought tantalizingly close and then quickly drawn away while their guests cheered and protested.

The first few months of marriage were a breeze—the kind that makes you feel all giggly and silly, laughing at the stupidest of anecdotes. She loved their walks by the beach, the coffees they never wanted to end, the dreamy gazing into each other's eyes that insulated them from humdrum realities, and the dinners and late-night movies where they existed only and specially for each other. Indeed, they had been drunk on love.

Whatever was left of the high started to wear off when Stephen failed to show any inclination to get a job after several months of doing nothing. He had worked on a cruise liner, waiting on tables in a restaurant, but he had very little appetite for saving, so when his company closed down it fell upon Greta to support the household. Her mother moved in to help after they had Elroy, and Stephen went around town, scouting in vain for jobs. Then

came the rumour of an affair with an old friend from college. Another friend claimed that she saw him with her once or twice outside some shabby hotel. Stephen and Greta exchanged many harsh words after her mother and Elroy went to bed. She threatened him with divorce; he denied her accusations, claiming the accuser was simply mad and jealous.

“Jealous of what?” she demanded, her voice bitter and tremulous. “Of your success? Of the fun you’re having, cheating on your wife and little child?”

Days and weeks passed. They lived in the same house like strangers, hardly saying a word or even looking at one another. Then Stephen came home one evening with a lovely bouquet of roses and swept her off her feet all over again. He’d gotten a good-paying job with another shipping line, and he promised to work hard and make it all up to her. Of course he hadn’t cheated on her. How could she have believed her friend’s lies?

She’d been planning to leave him, but her mother eroded her resistance with intervals of nagging and quiet, cold indifference.

“What will other people think?” she said. Greta was newly married with a small baby she was still breastfeeding. And Stephen was a good boy on the whole. He’d work hard and give no trouble now that he had a job. On what grounds, in any case, did she intend to demand that her marriage be voided? Some cheap gossip? Was she in her proper senses? What a scandal it would be! A broken marriage at her age! Surely her friend must have just seen Stephen with that girl once somewhere and made up all sorts of malicious lies. People nowadays had no work . . .

She listened to her mother, and she didn’t exactly regret her decision. Things were certainly a lot easier once he was working again. But he lost his job three years ago, when the company policy changed post 9/11. Months of unemployment followed, Stephen began his rounds of the city again, and she went back to supporting the household. Thankfully there were no rumours this time, and she was not shouldering the entire burden, as he had saved some money.

Now he is employed by another cruise line, and here she is sitting on the sofa and reading his letters, her wet hair wrapped in a towel.

She places the letters on the table and looks around the living room of their one-bedroom flat. It was Stephen’s uncle’s flat, and he made Stephen the nominee. Stephen probably conned him with his charming personality

as well, Greta often thinks.

There is a showcase to one corner filled mostly with curios and mementos that Stephen picked up from around the world, a simple sofa set, a TV on a stand along with a CD player, and a row of CDs stacked above the player. There is some Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, Bob Marley, some more rock, country, and reggae. The player is almost never touched while he is away, as Greta is too afraid to fiddle with it. In any case, she is not very fond of music. Perhaps when Elroy is older he will develop his own tastes . . .

Some show her mother avidly follows is on TV, the volume too loud. She turns it down, and her mother, who has been warming food in the kitchen, immediately comes rushing into the room clutching a spoon.

“You? I thought it was Elroy putting his cartoons again.”

“No . . .”

“Alright, no, Greta?” her mother asks, catching sight of the envelope on the table.

“Hm. Where’s Elroy?”

“In the bedroom. Doing his homework. Make it loud, no? Why you made it soft?”

“But you’re in the kitchen . . . you’re not watching.”

“Ya, but I’m listening dialogues, no? Let me warm the food fast and sit to watch . . .”

Her mother and she are in the habit of speaking in English now. After Elroy started talking, they gave up speaking in Konkani.

“Okay, okay . . . Elroy!”

“What?” Elroy shouts from the bedroom.

“I told you not to shout like that. Come here.”

He comes running into the room. “What happened?”

“You read Dada’s letter?” She doesn’t ask about the chocolates and t-shirts because it would be a silly question; she knew only too well and before her mother could tell her that the parcel would have been raided immediately. He shakes his head.

“Here,” she says, handing him the letter.

Elroy reads it quickly and then grins. “Pokemine something,” he says.

Greta and her mother laugh. Elroy runs back to the bedroom before his mother can comment on the comment about his studies, and his grandmother returns to the kitchen and stirs the spicy curry she’s put on the gas.

Mrs. D’Cruz finds herself thinking of Mr. Picardo. He mentioned he was

going to have guests tonight. She smiles and wonders how his fish curry's turned out.

"Ready!" she shouts. "Greta, Elroy, come soon. I want to watch my program!"

Mr. Picardo is writing something on the blackboard, and there is a rapid exchange of whispers among the pupils. For a moment the classroom resembles an awards function with the guests all charged up, their favourite celebrities having finally arrived—a tad late, as expected.

"Oh, just look at what she's wearing!"

"Car broke down or what? Traffic?"

"Just look at how he walks!"

"So pretty, no, she is?"

Then Mr. Picardo spins around and raps the duster on his table, rattling the vase with its single forlorn-looking plastic rose, which the class teacher thought would add a "cheerful touch" to the otherwise serious surroundings (education being no monkey business—the very future of the country, after all, rested in the teachers' able or unable hands). He grabs and steadies it just as it threatens to topple down and crash to pieces, and the students laugh.

Mr. Picardo slams his duster down again. "Silence, I say!"

"*Ghanya* wants silence," the boy seated next to Elroy whispers.

Elroy grins.

"You there—on the fourth bench of the third row!"

Elroy and his partner exchange guilty looks, and the other students turn to them as if they were the recipients of the first award.

"Yes, you two. Stand up!"

The boys hesitate.

Mr. Picardo coughs into his hands and then yells, "Stand up, I said. What were you giggling about just now?"

There is a tense silence, as the boys do not respond.

"Elroy, isn't it? And what's your name?"

"M . . . Mahesh, sir."

Mr. Picardo clears his throat. "Yes, Elroy, you will kindly tell us what it is that amused you so much just now. And then, I hope you and your friend will not hesitate to recapitulate my lesson for the day . . ."

"You were talking about the important seaports in India, sir."

"I believe I was. But before you get into that, we are more interested in what Mahesh had to say . . ."

"Nothing, sir."

"Other people were also talking, sir," says Mahesh defiantly.

"I am very grateful to you for bringing that to my notice, Mahesh. Now, Elroy, would you please not delay the class any further? I'm sure you're not in the habit of laughing at nothing."

Mr. Picardo adjusts his spectacles and eyes the class, anticipating agreeable snickers but drawing none. He clears his throat.

"N . . . nothing, sir," says Elroy.

"The truth please, Elroy."

Elroy gulps, glances at Mahesh, and then turns to Mr. Picardo, at whose expense the students regularly have many a laugh, for he is in the habit of assigning homework that he definitely wants completed by such-and-such a date, failing which he will be forced to call their parents and the principal, but that, on the decided date, he has absolutely no memory of assigning. And he is always seen bumbling around the school corridors or loping after some "Miss" and exchanging the odd confused word, which often leaves the latter red in the face or grinning absently, as one would at a child stating garbled facts with much confidence.

Elroy looks up. "*Ghanya* wants silence.' That's what Mahesh said, sir."

Some students clamp their hands over their mouths; others sport lopsided grins. There's a faint chuckle or two.

Mr. Picardo had suspected for some time that the nickname and variations of it were doing the rounds of the school, including the teachers' staff rooms, but he is still startled by this revelation. He looks away, fidgets with his spectacles, removes a white handkerchief from his pocket, mops his brow, and fiddles with the sleeves of his shirt, which are already neatly folded at his bony elbows.

"Well . . ." he mutters with a strange expression on his face: sad, angry, confused.

The class doesn't giggle. For once he has their rapt attention. It's the most prestigious and eagerly awaited award of the evening . . .

The school bell suddenly peals, jolting everyone. Mr. Picardo jumps, and for several seconds he doesn't move. Then he grabs his books from the table and walks away. Pausing abruptly by the door, he swings around.

"It's no use giving you remarks for mischievous behaviour or anything

of that sort—you'll merely get them signed by your parents and forget all about it. I'll see what needs to be done . . . and that applies to the whole class, not just the two of you."

He falters, still startled and confused, like an invalid springing to his feet without the aid of his walking stick or someone witnessing a sudden shudder from a mackerel long assumed to be dead—say, one he was planning to fry.

"Yes, I'll see what needs to be done," he mutters to himself in the doorway.

As soon as he disappears from view, the class erupts in frenzied laughter. Many children are gripping their sides, smacking one another's backs, nearly falling off their benches, clutching the very edges of their desks. Slowly they begin to recover, some cough.

It's recess. Nobody minds.

"Why did you tell him?" Mahesh demands. "Anyway, *ghanya* will most probably forget all about it!"

Students from the next class troop in to find out what happened and why Mr. Picardo looked so upset. Mahesh, grinning from ear to ear, rushes to tell them.

"You should have seen his face!" Elroy hears him shout.

"What happened?" his friend, who has come in from one of the neighbouring classes, inquires of him, placing an arm on his shoulder.

"Nothing," Elroy replies, shrugging his friend's arm off.

Greta is seated at her desk in a corner of the office with a row of cubicles stretching out in front of her, giving her desk the appearance of a ticket booth at a railway station. Opposite her own is the desk of a younger and more style-savvy girl, who is the secretary to the younger partner. As of now, this girl is immersed in a conversation on the telephone, as she often is whenever the boss is not around. She giggles, steals a glance at Greta, and whispers something to the person at the other end. Greta pretends to be engrossed with something on her notepad. Then her phone rings, and she picks it up.

"Yes, he's in. Just one moment, I'll transfer your call."

She punches the extension and sits back in her chair.

The AC is murmuring softly to itself.

She looks up at the clock. It's half-past twelve, and lunch is at one.

She's been watching her weight for the last few months, so she doesn't carry much. Usually it's just two *chapattis* and some vegetables, although sometimes (very rarely) she treats herself to a sweet lime juice. She eats quickly, as though it's a chore to be gotten through, like typing or attaching bait. She doesn't eat alone—two or three ladies from the office always join her—but they eat and chat at leisure, and Greta is inevitably the first to get up. The girl opposite goes out for lunch and mostly keeps to herself. The other women smile at her but, in private, pass certain nasty remarks.

Greta turns and gazes through the tinted windowpanes at the blank grey sky, grey pigeons hopping along window grills and air conditioning boxes. Then she turns to the cabin behind her, whose glass door is similarly tinted. A hotshot real estate developer is on the line. Mr. Tahiliani rubs his forehead, consults a file—thankfully lying before him on his desk—and says something into the receiver.

He's getting too old for this, Greta thinks. These people have so much money, yet they want to go on and on, earning more and more. But then, where would we be without them?

A buzz.

She sighs, gets up, picks up her notepad, and enters the cabin to transcribe another letter.

Elroy is lying in the deep-sea darkness of his room with Nana asleep on her mattress on the floor beside his single bed. It's a tiny room, fashioned out of the additional space at the end of the flat, which is barely large enough to accommodate the bed and mattress. Elroy didn't always have this bed; it was made a few years ago, and he has repeatedly offered it to his grandmother, but she obstinately refuses.

She snores softly and grinds her teeth in her sleep, and the harsh, bony sound makes him think of the rattling of chains at the cycle repair shop. If he's very disturbed, he reaches down from his bed and shakes her gently. She shifts sides and falls into a quieter sleep. One night, when he shook her, she woke up gasping, "What what?" She looked strange and a bit frightening without her glasses and with her grey, uneven hair left loose.

Some nights, if she knows he is unable to sleep, she calls out in the dark, "Sleeping, no, baba?" She asks him if he would like a glass of water or warm milk. But tonight she is fast asleep, and he can hear her snoring peacefully.

Elroy feels a weight pressing down on him. He feels like when he knows

he's not prepared for an exam the next morning, and he's going to do badly. But his exams are over, and he's got his results—nothing to boast about, as usual, but they must now be communicated to his father.

He turns on his side, away from his grandmother. He can faintly make out the yellow lettering on the poster he's facing. The ecstatic ratlike mascot is perched atop the word, its charged tail pointing upwards. Standing almost menacingly tall above the creature is its trainer, his legs wide apart, as if in a posture of combat, straddling the first and last letters of the billion-dollar franchise name. With one hand, the boy, who appears to be around Elroy's age, gives a thumbs-up and shows off a metallic ball (half red, half white); the other is balled into a fist.

Elroy has a vague notion of what is bothering him: it's the episode with Mr. Picardo at school. He still doesn't know why he answered truthfully; he could have just made up something. But it was the heat of the moment. He felt cornered, and it got to him. What was that dim-witted old man thinking anyway? What had he expected to find out?

Elroy knew Nana was friends with his geography teacher and that she intended to speak to him about Elroy . . . and then this happened. That idiot Mahesh! What would Mr. Picardo say to her now? He knew that his grandmother, for some mysterious reason, looked up to his teacher a lot, while in school everyone thought he was a clown.

Elroy always thought that once one was older, past a certain age, one automatically understood how things worked, how one had to deal with the world and find one's way in it. It was like a door opened, and once you walked through everything that came before—the phase of childish innocence, uncertainty, and ignorance—was shut out and forgotten. But now, thinking about Mr. Picardo, whom he hadn't given much serious thought to before, he isn't so sure. Mr. Picardo seems as locked out of the secret world of adults as him. But maybe that is just Mr. Picardo?

Sometimes at night Elroy is filled with such anger and frustration he doesn't know what to do. He shoves his face into his pillow and clenches his sweaty fists. He wants to grow up fast, become taller, earn money, be independent, make his own decisions, break more rules, and live more dangerously, though exactly what dangers he wishes to expose himself to he does not quite know.

He remembers wandering into his parents' bedroom early on some mornings when he was little, while his grandmother was still asleep, to find

his parents cuddled up together, fast asleep, their legs entangled under the sheets, his father's arms wrapped tightly around his mother's waist, or his mother's head and arm on his father's chest. He'd climb up the side of the bed, crawl over his father, and try and nestle into the space he wedged between them.

He thinks about passionate and silencing kisses, about breasts, about fondling their full nourishing shape, about bodies rhythmically brushing against each other, and works himself into a mild tension. Then he thinks about Atul's mother and father engaging in such acts of intimacy, and he immediately he feels disgusted.

From his parents' wedding album pictures, which seem to be from a different age and which can be browsed to the accompaniment of a juddering romantic classical music piece by cranking a small key (thus heightening the effect of otherworldliness), Elroy knows what a beautiful young couple they were. His mother, smiling delightedly in every picture, glowed in her very elaborate and trailing gown. His father, who was still very handsome, seemed distracted in a few pictures. And there was so much love in the kiss they shared when they were lifted up on chairs, so much need, so much . . . desire.

When he was younger, his father taught him to ride a bicycle and took him to school and football practice. Sprawled on the sofa, watching football matches, he got excited, cursed, and then bit his tongue, realizing that his son was in the same room, playing with his toy train. When his mother returned home from work, tired and stressed, there would often be heated arguments. That, for him, represented a vital dimension of the adult world—people hurting themselves and others for reasons and in ways that were beyond his understanding. It almost seemed as if they wanted to hurt and, in turn, to be hurt, relishing the pain they inflicted upon others and eager to nurse the wounds they invited. It was a perplexing mystery that his grandmother strove to shield him from, kissing his forehead and patting him to sleep, telling him that he should be good and not upset his parents because they quarrelled whenever they were unhappy about something, but it was nothing to worry about. Yes, Elroy thinks to himself, they are adults, they know the rules, and they can sort out their differences. They built a life that suits both of them and allows them to fulfill the promises they made to each other, to God, to their families, and to their child. They do what they have to, just like the man from the chicken shop, who washes himself with filthy well

water; like Sunny, who is holding on to his prized exotic fish for a special customer in a secret chamber that they refused to set foot into; and like Mr. Picardo, who says he is going to take matters firmly in hand but is unlikely to remember his threats and might not say anything at all to Nana when he runs into her in the bazaar.

And, for some reason, even though he wasn't the main culprit behind the scene with Mr. Picardo and had nothing really to feel ashamed or guilty about, Elroy finds himself nagged by a sense of helplessness.