

AMITA BASU

NIGHT

VIKESH WONDERS HOW SIMRAN FELT, signing the attendance sheet and sneaking out of her hostel before curfew. To avert suspicion she wore her homeliest clothes—calf-long *salwar* two sizes too big, *dupatta* drawn up to her chin—and avoided the guards' eyes. But they never stopped her, for Simran's got an angel face. What an innocent she was when she came to him that first night in the hotel room he'd booked. He coaxed her open, showed her what he liked, and got her—as a man does—to show him what she liked. Their nocturnal education notwithstanding, her face still is like this full moon in the murky autumn sky. His blood churns in his heart and throbs in his groin.

The boys' hostel has no curfew, so he decides to embark tonight instead of waiting until morning. Who knows what'll happen to him tomorrow, but he's doing the right thing, and he must keep looking the world in the eye.

As he approaches the hostel gate, the guards bid him good evening as usual. He returns their greeting, nodding graciously. His trepidation retreats, making room for other feelings. God, if his own hair ever got as thin as this old man's, he'd know better than to oil it flat. These poor men don't seem to care what face they turn to the world. No proper pride.

"That's the cousin of the student body president," he hears the long-time security guard murmuring to a new colleague. "His cousin controls contracts worth crores of rupees, yet Vikesh sir"—that's how the 45-year-old secondary school graduate speaks of the 21-year-old months away from getting his bachelor's degree—"is as modest and affable as my five-year-old."

Vikesh pretends not to hear as he mounts his Royal Enfield and pulls himself up straight. In their eyes, he's still the man; if something goes wrong, they might be useful. God willing, nothing will go wrong on his last date as a free man with the love of his life.

He rides down Bank Road lined with hostels. Show your money and take your pick: private hostels and public, old buildings and new, red-brick

and cement-and-glass, five-to-a-room and one-to-a-room, air-conditioned and hot-tin-roofed. At 9pm the November smog is settling, smudging the yellow streetlights into halos. The smog's at streetlight height and hasn't yet descended to the asphalt. How wide the streets look, traffic-free, night homogenizing the potholes and dung stains that give a street its features but steal its spaciousness.

The fragrance of *shiuli* turns his head this way and that, seeking the inconspicuous bush that perfumes late monsoon and early winter lemon-vanilla. Can't see the bush—must be behind a wall. He remembers the *shiuli* bush in Simran's hostel garden. He'd stand waiting at her gate, his nostrils flaring and narrowing to draw in the fragrance from the small cream-petalled orange-stemmed flowers that the girls gather for evening *puja* in the tiny lighted shrines in their rooms.

Simran doesn't go in for that old-fashioned nonsense. Sometimes she cradles a few flowers in her handkerchief—shielded from body heat, keeping their freshness—and sniffs them when they ride down a particularly rubbishy or coddungy street on their Allahabad tours. She sits pillion on his Royal Enfield, face *dupatta*-veiled against the dust, arm lightly circling his waist, cream-coloured legs in thigh shorts resting against his hips. She wears party outfits under her oversized *salwar kameez*, disrobing at her friend Ishita's, but she only bares her skin when Vikesh is there to protect her from other men's hands and eyes.

He never had to ask her to watch what she wears, and it would've been awkward having to ask her. It's alright when you can tell people to do things, but Simran's never been the kind of girlfriend you tell. At best, with trepidation, you ask her and watch for the lip pursing that indicates she's displeased. Alone among his friends Vikesh has a girlfriend who has her own mind. He'd never admit this to his friends, but he's proud of her mind, for a pole cannot lean on a creeper. His chin rises into the descending smog, and his heart surges as he thinks of the treasure he's won.

The road runs between campus scrubland and Company Garden's flowering trees. The amla trees flaunt their silver-green foliage and pale-green clusters of super-sour fruit, bleached under the white streetlights. Feasting squirrels have left fallen half-eaten fruit to scent the air. Their earthy freshness dispels the smog's sulphur nausea. Vikesh slows and sniffs. For weeks he's looked forward to tomorrow. Now his heart aches with all that he's giving up. Never has the amla smelled so delectable or the smog-blanketed city

looked so cozy.

The headlight of an approaching motorbike looms disembodied, rocking as wheels sink into potholes and roll over the speedbumps that fight a losing battle against Allahabad's traffic. Vikesh remembers the lantern-bearing ghost—out on a foggy night, approaching the man whose hour had come—with which his grandmother frightened him on demand as a child. The motorbike hurtles out of the fog into view and out again. Vikesh smiles, remembering what silly things used to scare him, then purses his lips as he realizes nobody warned him about life's real dangers.

He draws up outside Simran's hostel, facing the campus of the university's science faculty. The light's on in her first-floor room. Has she already returned from the mess, or is she cooking her own dinner? She's a good cook, producing traditional recipes with remarkable consistency and gentle twists: *aloo jeera* with *saunf* as well as *jeera*, *baigan bharta* with bell pepper instead of eggplant. She's made lunch for him all year. They eat her cooking out of his tiffin carrier on the lawn under the peepul tree that murmurs its wisdom patiently to the flighty winds. They watch their peers straggle down the history department's wide stone corridors, which are cool even in June. The university's buildings date from the British Raj, and so do its syllabi.

Staring up, Vikesh wonders if Simran's convection heater is on. It's not cold enough for her to need the heat, but perhaps she's cooking on it. Cheap to buy, costly to run, electric coils naked, blazing orange-red, these little monsters electrocute a few people every winter. But they're cheap, and in this city of students they sell like hotcakes. One of them disfigured Simran's cousin as a child, but she still refused to let Vikesh buy her an induction cooker and a sensible space heater.

"This is what I've grown up with," she said. "I just have to be careful—keep my eyes open—and I'll never have an accident."

"Then think about the electricity bill," said Vikesh. "These things suck up electricity like, uh, like a black hole." Picturing Simran cooking over a death trap upset him too much to conjure a proper simile.

Simran tossed her head. "The hostel pays the electricity bill. Besides, everyone else has one."

"By that logic, you should get an air conditioner too," said Vikesh. "You're always complaining how hot your room gets in summer."

"Oh, coolers are good enough for me. That's what I've . . ."

". . . grown up with," Vikesh supplied, and the argument ended with a

laugh.

He knows now that “good enough for me” is her way of refusing to argue, but how can such an intelligent woman be so convention-bound? In any case, she’ll have to think for herself after tomorrow, as he’s giving up his own freedom to set her free.

As he rolls down the carefully folded-up sleeves of his blue-and-white-checked Superdry button-up, he remembers how she’d fast all day before coming to him, as she was self-conscious about bloating and food babies. God bless women for inventing things to worry about! She hadn’t been as innocent as she looked, not even the first time she yielded to him after eleven months of coaxing. When applying for an overnight pass, she’d tell her hostel warden that it was to visit her local guardian. And she’d meet him only once a fortnight; any more often and they’d suspect, she said. Vikesh didn’t argue; he understood that she was projecting her own guilt, and it saddened him that she felt guilty. His own conscience was clear, as they were violating not ethics but only hostel rules set by sex-starved wardens.

A jamun tree insinuates a sturdy primary branch towards Simran’s second-floor balcony. On the nights she wouldn’t go to him, he could’ve come to her if she’d let him. The hostel’s boundary wall is fifteen feet tall, but the plaster’s coming off, providing footholds, and there’s no barbed wire on top. He could’ve dropped into the garden, clapped to scare off snakes, scaled the tree, and crawled along the branch to her balcony. When he suggested this scheme in February, her brows knit in that childlike wonder he loves to earn. “How do you know so much about my hostel? Does being related to the president also mean that the guards let you into the women’s hostel compound?”

He grinned. “I despise people who use their status to get privileges . . . No, I just keep my eyes open. You can see all this from the gate . . . So? May I come? We’ll be quiet, and your cooler’s fan will cover up any noise. I can come to you, and you can stop complaining about running the gauntlet of the security guards’ eyes.”

“No,” she said. One of her neighbours would overhear them and expose her. She’d lose her room, her reputation, and probably her life, for the hostel warden would write home, and her parents would kill her.

“Hm.” Busy considering logistics, he hadn’t considered consequences. So he made do with her rare visits all year. After tonight there’ll be no more worrying about logistics.

He turns off his engine and looks around. He used to haunt this road during his first year of undergraduate studies, before she yielded to him, and he still haunted it afterwards, still alone most nights. He came to watch the moon rise and set, listening to the night's yawning silence and sudden sharp noises, like the choking snores of sleep apnea. Sometimes she stayed in her room, and they spoke on the phone, but usually she was busy studying with her phone switched off. He'd stay here until her window went dark, and then he'd return to his room and leaf through textbooks before drifting off to sleep.

Leaning on his handlebars, he closes his eyes and smells her lying beside him, jasmine perfume mingling with musky nether odour. She learned fast. Her nervous giggles ceded to the same grave interest with which she regards textbooks, civil service exam prep books, and everything else she believes is important. As a teenager, he taught his younger brothers cricket and football, and they still play fervently, while he dabbles. But she was the one who really taught him how to teach the most intimate things to another person. Gratefully he spent hours showing her the city and the state, discussing his plans for their future. They'd move far away from this cultural backwater and surround themselves with progressives. She looked and listened, but when he asked her what her plans were after graduation she only tilted her head and pouted her lips.

Sometimes her passivity annoyed him, but he reminded himself that she'd grown up beautiful. It'd been enough for her to arch her brow or make her breasts shift under her t-shirt. She had had no need to plan or become brave. That's why they're doing it this way.

After two years of sneaking out to meet him, she told him last month that her parents had arranged her marriage to a 25-year-old Brahmin software engineer. After recovering from his shock, Vikesh rode to Chandigarh to scout his rival, and he brought her back an accurate picture: flabby, only ever goes to work, boring car. She listened attentively, for she wouldn't meet the man herself until the engagement. Then she shrugged. "A man doesn't need to be interesting, only kind."

He begged her to tell her parents about him—to tell them she wanted to marry him. "They'd behead me if they knew I wasn't a virgin," she said. "And they'd hunt you down, strangle you, and toss your corpse into the Ganga. When people fished you up, your own mother wouldn't recognize you."

"They wouldn't hurt us," he protested. "We're in love. It's right for us to

be together. We just have to do the right thing, God will look after the rest.” Exigency had made him religious.

“If you were a Brahmin, then I might’ve dared tell them,” she said. “You know I don’t believe in that caste nonsense myself, but . . . d’you want to get us both killed?” Her coal-black fire-bright eyes beseeched him to see sense. He could only see the blank of a future without her.

That’s why they’re doing it this way. Filling his eyes one last time with her window’s square of light, stark behind the jamun branch, he rides off.

It’s 11:21pm on his Titan Black Dial, the readout dim behind the streetlamp’s yellow glare. He speeds across the city, taking turns without slowing down, picturing himself as he’d look to someone peering through the curtains of a third-floor window: his wheels at an acute angle, the asphalt grazing his calves. Of course he isn’t really going that fast—impossible on these streets—but playacting never hurt.

They call Naini Bridge the rocking bridge, but really it just trembles under the weight of the eighteen-wheeler trucks that are allowed into the city after 11pm. He watches the yellow moon fracture into big clean shards on the Ganga’s slothful surface, and he thinks about the night he brought her here. She leaned over the railing, and the pendant he’d given her broke its slender silver chain and dropped 300 metres waterwards. He watched the panic in her eyes, her hand snatching at air. He imagined jumping after the trinket, plunging into the river that, below its slothful surface, hurtles seawards at a million gallons a second. It would’ve been worth it to calm her fears.

“Forget it,” he said, taking her wrist and steering her away from the edge. “I’ll buy you another—or a different design, if you prefer.”

“That was my favourite piece of jewellery ever,” she insisted. Moved, he pecked her lips. Pecking was the only display of affection she allowed—even on a deserted bridge at dawn.

The lost pendant was a leopard—her favourite animal. A month before her birthday, this discovery had cost him a mazelike conversation with Ishita, his question buried in the maze’s heart lest Ishita guess his intention, blab to Simran, and spoil his surprise.

On the other side of the bridge, he sees Roshan pacing beside his hot pink TVS Scooty Pep Plus. A female cousin who graduated last year gave it to him, and he doesn’t seem embarrassed to use it. But Roshan was raised by women; he can’t be held to normal standards.

Stamping out his cigarette, he crosses the street to Vikesh, who's leaning on his motorbike.

"Enjoying yourself?" asks Vikesh.

Roshan replies with a studiously casual shrug. The bad boy look is a motorcycle jacket Roshan's still growing into.

Vikesh remembers Roshan from their first year on campus. He was a sociology student, thin and stooping, his face pimple-strewn, in thick eye-glasses and ill-fitting plaid button-downs picked out by his mother, but he was no wimp. A student thug sauntering near the teashop knocked down his books for fun and felt a fist flying into his throat. Only Vikesh's presence saved fifty-kilo Roshan from annihilation in broad daylight. All that first year Roshan pored over his books and resisted his hostelmates hustling him out for a night of fun, telling them straightfaced that his widowed mother depended on him to study well and enter the civil services. While his hostelmates failed to bring him out of his shell, he eventually made new friends, and they were very friendly indeed, for night after night he lost money to them playing poker. He paid them back unfailingly but grudgingly, and since May he'd been paying them with Vikesh's pocket money. "Pay me back later, or never," Vikesh told him, long before he had any idea he'd need him, for he pitied the small-town boy gone astray.

Now, glancing left and right like a trainee thug himself, Roshan hands Vikesh a brown paper package that will alter the course of many lives.

"Nobody will know," he assures Vikesh. "I'll tell them a friend's friend had the key, and I got it myself."

Vikesh claps Roshan's back, lightly, but Roshan stumbles, and his eyes fly open, as if Vikesh were an outlaw and his touch were contamination by proxy. Vikesh briefly considers punching his lights out, and he teeters on the edge of a cliff, ready to fall down either side. He finally falls into laughter—first gentle, then rising into hysteria. Roshan watches him wide-eyed, waiting for the laughter to explode into violence.

Vikesh wipes his eyes and sighs breathlessly. "You wanted to grow up fast and make your mother proud. Now you have."

"You haven't told me what it's for," says Roshan, gesturing at the package distantly, eyes averted.

"I told you what it's for," Vikesh replies. "Science experiments."

"You're a history student."

"Not a good one!" His smile fades. His hysteria has taken the edge off

his feelings. "There's nothing for me here—nothing I can do with my own efforts, I mean. I could get someone to give me a plush job and grow flabby and smug, but that's not my style. If you've got nothing to lose, then it's easier to take a risk, eh?"

"Good luck," says Roshan, sincere now that he himself is clear of trouble. He knows about Simran. Vikesh has told everyone about the woman he loves—the woman he's going to start a new life with.

The Royal Enfield glides back across the river. The water chills the wind into a hammer of cold, and Vikesh's unhelmeted face grows numb. To awaken his muscles he grimaces at the moon's reflection in the river, shrugs mightily, and jogs his shoulders, all without slowing down.

A good friend deserves loyalty unto death. This thought pushes into his consciousness the fact that he's been terribly lonely all this while. Tears blind him. Midway over the bridge he slows down and wonders: should he jump in? That, too, would solve all his problems. Simran still has enormous qualms about running away.

He can't jump in. His father told him when he was a kid, "If you get beaten up at school, don't come home until you've beaten the other boy up." What would his father think if they found his corpse and showed him that his grown son had been beaten by a girl?

When Simran leaves her hostel gate tomorrow at 8:50am, soft fingers adjusting satchel straps, feet stepping lightly as if nothing were wrong, Vikesh will be waiting. The brown paper package will be ready, the bottle inside open, his arm raised.

She said they couldn't be together. At first he wept, pleaded, and argued, but the prospect of their parting didn't seem to trouble her. Too late, he realized that she'd always considered this a fling and that he'd fallen for a whore.

Now he accepts her decision. But if he can't have her, then she must lose something too. She must lose her parents' approval, for they think she's a do-it-all, acquiring a western education while clinging to her Indian *sans-kaar*, preserving her virginity for the man they've chosen for her. She must lose the life that's been planned for her with that flabby virgin who's bought her with his upper-caste birth certificate and the plush job that is the reward of a lifetime's mindless grind. And she must lose her beauty, which draws strangers' eyes from across the street but seldom draws their whistles, for her beauty's babylike, her face like that of an angel, protecting her even from

street harassment as long as she's not in her ordinary *salwar kameez* and *dupatta* good-girl lying clothes. A woman who flings away her virginity and then flings away the man to whom she flung it deserves a face to match her heart—a face to tell the world how she should be treated.

What will they do to him? It doesn't matter, for he can see no life without her. He's told everyone about the woman he loves—the woman he's going to marry—and she's made him lose face, so she must lose hers. Tomorrow at 8:50am he will be waiting outside Simran's hostel gate, bottle uncapped, to fling sulphuric acid in her face.