

ANJALI JOSEPH

THE RUSHCUTTERS (FROM THE NOVEL *KEEPING IN TOUCH*)

“SO HOW HAVE YOU BEEN? HOW ARE THINGS?” Keteki smiled at her friend. She had a can of apple juice and a bag of crisps; there was music, the weather was good, and she’d stopped feeling dread. All she wanted was to stay like this.

“Things are . . . good,” Tom said. He smiled and stared ahead.

“Work?”

“Yeah, really picking up. You know what it’s like when you’re freelance, but I’ve had some great jobs come in. Redoing a pub in West London; they’re making it into a gastropub.”

“Oh, that’s great.”

“Yeah. Laura and I split up.” His eyes, hazel and alive, met hers.

“Oh shit. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” he shrugged, lifted his hands from the wheel, and let them drop again. “Fuck it, Kato.”

Keteki laughed. “I’d forgotten you called me that.”

“You don’t remember that time at Woody’s?”

Keteki was thrown. “In our second year? Come on.” Jeff Woodward, a year above them in college, lived in North Oxford. At Easter, when his parents were away, he had a house party that went on for a long weekend. Late one night, Tom and Keteki chased each other around the house, pretending to be Clouseau and Cato from *The Pink Panther*. At some point, they realized no one else was in the game and, in Woody’s neurologist dad’s study, had sex behind the leather sofa. Twice.

“I’ve often wondered why we didn’t just fuck *on* the sofa,” Tom said now.

Keteki smiled and looked at a sign marking the turn for Saffron Walden. “Did they ever actually grow saffron in Saffron Walden?” she murmured.

Tom laughed. His crow's feet came out, and his brown face flushed. "You're changing the subject," he noted.

"I'm sorry about you and Laura," Keteki said.

"Ah well. It was great. She's a great person."

"She is." Keteki had liked Laura, though they never became friends. Perhaps because of that time at Woody's. Or maybe, she diverted herself with this, because they were both tall. How absurd. But if nothing was real, why should it not also be ridiculous? She smiled at the old car's dashboard. The dashboard hummed back at her, as if enjoying the joke.

"What are you musing on, Kato?"

"Good music, nice car, lovely to see you," Keteki said. "Everything is alive. I do need to pee though."

"I'll stop at the next services," Tom promised. "You can have a wee, we'll get a coffee, and I'll have a cigarette."

An hour and a half later, they drew into the drive of Tom's parents' house. Another car was parked near the door.

"Oh, Pete and Elsa said they might arrive a bit earlier," Tom said.

"How did they get in?" Keteki asked.

"There's a key under the fourth plant pot to the left in the greenhouse. Now you're back in the country, it might be good to keep that in mind."

"Where are your parents again?"

"Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. I don't think they'll be back for Christmas."

Keteki helped him unpack the car, and they went into the large house. In the porch was a congregation of wellingtons and shoes, and then from the hall onwards a variety of rugs and pictures on every wall. The dog appeared, a Collie-Labrador cross, Dexter, barking with joy. He thrust his thin face at Keteki, putting his arms on hers, and she hugged him.

"Hey!" Pete and Elsa came out of the kitchen. Pete was holding a bottle.

"You're drinking," Keteki said.

"Just a beer. The sun's over the yard arm."

Elsa laughed. "At one o'clock?" she said.

Keteki followed them into the kitchen, a large room with a pine table, a huge dresser, and on the wall next to the table a green tapestry that she remembered from her last visit. "I love that," she said.

"It's beautiful, isn't it," Elsa said. "I think Tom's mother bought it."

"It's contemporary, but they're cutting rushes," Keteki said. The figure in the foreground of the tapestry was bending and scything green stems; behind him, another man was tying bundles of reeds. In the background, a third person, a woman, was loading the bundles into a low boat heaped with reeds that hung over the sides, resembling hair. Near the first figure, a dragonfly hazed past; there were butterflies too, and a sickle resting on the bank. The figures weren't archaic: the woman near the boat wore dungarees and had short hair. But there was a faded quality to the tapestry that seemed to have appeared over a long time. A languor in the figures made it seem as though the scene had taken place long ago or, more mysteriously, been observed much earlier, even though it had happened only recently.

Keteki yawned.

"Sit down," Pete said. "Have a beer."

"I'd pass out," she said.

"Do you want to take a nap?" Elsa asked. "We're putting lunch together."

Keteki squeezed Elsa's arm and went to look for a place to curl up. She peeked into the dining room and then found the den, with a battered velvet sofa, bookshelves, and doors into the garden. It reminded her of the book room in Jorhat. She stretched out on the sofa under a blanket, a copy of *The Observer Magazine* next to her. Her body began to shimmer and evaporate; she was watching a man in waterproof trousers standing in a clear river, scything and lifting bunches of heavy reeds. She was aware, too, of an iridescent blue dragonfly moving around the man. Every element of the scene was alive, electively present: water, earth, rushes, air, the dragonfly.

A moment later, she felt the lightest of stroking on her scalp, until her head floated away from her body, drifting upwards. Her awareness was yearningly on the stroking, fearing it might end, before it turned into a simple hum of bliss.

Eventually the fingers lifted, and she was aware of a heavy leg leaning on hers.

"Lunch," Tom said. He was on the sofa, knees bent, and he rested his hand on her shoulder. Keteki sat up a little awkwardly, detached herself, and smiled. He put an arm around her as they walked into the kitchen.

"Oh, wow," Keteki said. The table was laid, and Elsa was putting a circular baking tray down. "What's that? It smells amazing."

Elsa smiled. "I just used what we could find. Onion and jalapeño quiche

with parmesan.” She took off her apron and sat down.

“Delicious,” said Tom a few mouthfuls later.

“So good,” Keteki said.

Pete smiled. “I live with her.”

“That’s all kinds of happiness,” Keteki said, nodding to him. “Are you guys in Cambridge now?”

They lived outside the city in a village near the veterinary practice where Elsa worked.

“You just came back, right?” she said.

“Not long ago. I’m just here for a month or two,” Keteki said.

“Hm,” Elsa said. “England. I guess sometimes I miss knowing how to deal with people. In Finland, people are direct. Pete’s family are so nice to me. But I don’t always understand what they are saying: ‘Oh, that would be lovely,’ ‘No, don’t worry about it,’ all that.” She laughed. “Finnish people are strange, I know. We are probably not that friendly, especially to outsiders. It’s just . . .”

“You’re used to the shape of strangeness in your own place,” Keteki suggested.

“Yes, something like that. But I love my work. I get to work with horses as well as small animals. And it’s been great with Pete.” She waved towards her boyfriend. “You know, when we met, he wasn’t really looking for a relationship. And I wasn’t sure if I would stay in England. For a while, when we were first together—how long was it?” She turned to Pete.

“Not that long,” he said. “Just at the beginning.”

“For a few *months*,” said Elsa, “I didn’t know what was happening. I thought maybe it would just turn out to be a short thing.”

“Well, it was early,” Pete said mildly.

“I know,” Elsa said, “but it was frustrating. And then,” she turned to Keteki and Tom, “when it seemed like Pete was getting attached to me, I felt so confused. Maybe I liked the idea of winning him over. I didn’t know what to do when there was no resistance. I was like a car with the engine revving but the back wheels off the ground.”

“I love this place,” Keteki said. It was early evening in the Rushcutters. The walls of the snug back room were panelled in a way she’d never seen before, four kinds of wood inlaid in interwoven spirals.

“Snakes,” said Elsa, tracing one with a finger.

"What's everyone drinking?" Pete came back from the bar, where Tom was waiting.

"Cold lager, please," Elsa said cheerfully.

"Same for me, please," Keteki said.

She and Elsa were sitting in the snug when Tom's voice seemed to come out of the corner behind them. They heard his laugh, a growly cackle Keteki had always liked.

He said, "Stay over another night."

Then Pete's softer voice, "No mate, we have to go back tomorrow. Work."

"The sound in this room is really strange," Elsa said.

Keteki had a sense of the pub, which was a simple, old-fashioned house, as a vortex, warm, soaking in its own time period. Even the walls seemed to vibrate with it. "I'm going to take a look around," she told Elsa and went outside.

At the water's edge, she sat down and leaned back on her hands. The intense feeling was diffused here; she heard some tourists laughing and talking about the boat they'd arrived in. The sun was warm on her face, and she got up and kept walking to stop herself from falling asleep.

The pub had been built in the sixteenth century as a mill keeper's cottage, and the mill pond was at the back. A man stood there, smoking and staring into the water. Keteki turned to leave, then turned back. The thin, dark-haired stranger smiled, secretive, as though expressing her mood. He opened his mouth but checked himself.

Keteki looked around.

"There you are," Tom said. He raised an eyebrow. "Running away already?"

Keteki smiled. He held a beer and a glass of Pimm's. "Yes, my policy is always to get the girliest drink possible," he said. He handed her the beer and eyed the dark-haired stranger. "Come inside?" he said to Keteki. "The music's going to start soon."

"In that case," said the other man, who appeared to be Irish, "I'd better come in too, since I'm the music." He smiled at Keteki. "Neil O'Halloran."

She shook the outstretched hand. "Keteki Sharma," she said.

"Tom Hurst," said Tom, putting out his hand. Keteki looked at the two of them, Tom stocky and scruff in jeans and a faded t-shirt, and the musician pale as a ghost, his hair dark. He wore an old black t-shirt, a checked

shirt, black drainpipe jeans, and boots.

"Well," he said. "I should probably go in."

Tom and Keteki looked at each other. The rushing of the water into the pond was loud, and the light was changing.

"Well," Tom said, "let's go and hear our new friend play his songs?"

She followed him in.

"... please give a warm welcome to Neil O'Halloran!" The huge landlord was just stepping away from the microphone.

The thin Irishman smiled. He was sitting on a stool in the corner. "Thank you very much, Thaddeus," he said. "Thank you for having me and me guitar. This is a beautiful place, and it's a beautiful summer's eve . . . and I just met a beautiful Indian girl out by the mill pond." He looked at Keteki. She was sitting on a stool next to the table. The unusual acoustics of the square room brought his voice past her so that it appeared to be whispering in her ear from behind, as though they were already in bed.

"St. Patrick is said to have banished all the snakes from Ireland," Neil said. "Though I've also heard we've no fossils showing there ever *were* any snakes, so maybe it was the easiest miracle ever," and the now full room laughed. Keteki looked around: there were men with generous bellies perched on high stools and women with faces that had weathered storms, sunshine, and years of disappointingly grey days.

"But this is a song about snakes, about beginnings that are endings, about biting your own tail, something I know I've . . . ah, I'll just sing, I think." The last few words died into a murmur, and to more chuckles he began to play. His voice was delicate and wavering. "The first time I saw you, the last time we met . . ."

Keteki sat in a hum of pleasantness, following the voice, both impressed and horrified by the extrovert's need to be vulnerable in front of an audience. But perhaps he felt not vulnerable but at home, like slipping into a river on a hot day. When she and her cousins had been children, there was a tiny beach near the snake temple where local kids would swim. Some days, the water was blue like a picture of a tropical sea. Until you got in, water, land and sky all seemed distinct. But as you entered the river, feeling the cold, delightful slippage against your skin, the water was revealed as living and many: there were tiny fish, suspended particles. Sunlight entered the top layers, insects flew above the river, and clumps of fleshy-leaved meteka drifted by. She remembered feeling her own self, too, as many, each limb

diverse, each thought individual, even its life was a brief flash.

Clapping, and the song had ended. Neil was gazing at Keteki. She smiled; he mouthed, "Beautiful." Keteki saw Tom twitch, but by the time she turned, he was again in profile. The music went on, and she listened, aware of her friends behind her, all of them floating in the stream of things. The singer, whose name she'd already forgotten . . . Will? No, Neil, that was it. Her eyes landed on him, focused uncertainly, and he looked back. There was a moment of contact—or was it emptiness?

Another song, louder and more strummy, with an insistent refrain: "And I'll see you again before you go." Cheers from the audience. Elsa came back from the bar with beer for everyone. Keteki tried to catch Tom's eye, but he was too far away. She gave up and sipped her beer, then went in search of the bathroom. While she was waiting for a cubicle, she heard two women discussing Neil. "He's hot," said one.

"His legs are skinny," said the other one. "I wouldn't kick him out of bed though."

When they emerged, Keteki was only slightly surprised that they were younger than her and attractive. She examined herself in the unforgiving light and saw a scruffy t-shirt, pores, lines near her mouth, and white hairs madly spidering from the sides of her head. What could the Irishman have been thinking? Maybe he had a thing for foreigners. She smirked and in a flash saw the sides of her eyes in the mirror image become an upward slanting line: she was Joy mama but also her eldest uncle, Sandeep mama. Quickly, she turned away.

While she was at the bar, someone touched her elbow. "Hi," said a soft voice.

Keteki turned. "Oh, hi," she said. "You were great, well done."

The Irishman nodded. "Were you bored?"

"Oh no no no." She waved her hand and clutched his surprisingly substantial upper arm. "Not at all."

He smiled wryly. "Folk music isn't for everyone. My ex-girlfriend called it 'Those Dirges.'"

Keteki laughed. "Maybe it's for the best she's an ex." She leaned her elbow on the bar. It was easy to talk this way, uninvolved. In her pocket, her phone buzzed. She ignored it.

"Tired?" Neil asked.

"*Super* tired," she said and pushed back her hair. "I'm working with

a friend, we're doing a pop-up exhibition for a lighting company; they're putting out a new product, so it's looking at their history. It's nice because it's an Indian company, and they have a lovely archive. It's like a history of advertising in the early twentieth century."

"Sounds amazing," Neil said. "Is that what you do—stuff for companies?"

Keteki shrugged. "Mostly it's more like fine art or an exhibition with a theme. I used to do some textile design. I want to get back to that but . . ."

The bar was noisy; a tall red-faced man came up to shake Neil's hand. "Lovely music," he said. "Which part of Ireland are you from? My mother's from County Clare."

"I'm from Kerry," Neil said.

"That's lovely country," said the other man.

Keteki began to melt away, but a hand grabbed her t-shirt from behind. "I just want to check on my friends," she said.

"Can I come meet them?"

"You already met Tom." She smiled apologetically at the tall man, who looked admiring.

"I don't think he likes me," complained Neil.

Keteki raised an eyebrow. "He likes everyone. I really . . ."

"I'll be over in a second," he said.

"Then can you bring this pint? It's for Tom."

She made her way back to their table. Pete was in conversation with a man in overalls, who reminded Keteki of someone.

"Hi," she said and gave Pete his beer.

"Ian Swanton," said the other man. He had a deep voice.

"Ian works as a rushcutter," Pete said.

"That's so interesting," Keteki said. She looked across her shoulder to the corner where Tom and Elsa were talking intently. Tom raised a glass to Keteki, and Elsa looked irritated. Keteki found she could hear murmurs of their talk because of the peculiar quality of the wooden panelling.

Tom's voice, lower, but also tight, ". . . no, that's a terrible idea . . ."

Elsa, her voice sweet but forceful with frustration, "I just think the right thing to do is tell him."

Keteki stopped listening and focused on the man in overalls. "We make various things," he was saying, "but rush matting is the main one. It's been in use since medieval times, you know. Now people like it because it's eco-

friendly and local.”

“Like the tapestry,” Keteki said.

Neil appeared, delivered Tom’s pint, and sat next to Keteki. “You were telling me about your work,” he said. He put a hand on her arm.

“It’s erratic,” she said. “Projects here and there.”

“Sounds like my life,” he said. As he talked, Keteki gazed at him. What pretty eyes he had, a dark line underneath like eyeliner. She got lost in mapping the points of stubble on his face, blue where they were still under the skin. What was it about beards? An infantile fascination with the father? She had spent so little time with hers. A memory of a photo, her father handsome in an eri shirt and rust-coloured flares, sideburns and a moustache. He was holding a gurgling Keteki, aged just under two.

Neil was saying, “. . . touring, moving around, it’s far from glamorous. It’s hard to maintain relationships, even keep up with your friends, you know?”

Keteki made an understanding face. “Excuse me for a minute,” she said and made her way without urgency through the large, happy bodies filling the two outer bars and towards the toilets. While she waited for a cubicle, she looked at her phone. Ved had sent a series of messages. “How are you?” said one, not a question he often asked and therefore a sign of desperation. “Missing you,” said another. She’d waited over a week for a sign of life from him. She washed her hands overly thoroughly.

While she was on her way back to the snug, the front door of the pub opened and a hugely tall, very broad young man came in, his face stormy. He was dressed head-to-toe in sap green: a jersey and leggings. He pushed past Keteki, and one of the other three young men in green who followed him glanced at her and stopped to say, “Sorry about that.”

Keteki’s gaze followed the other three. The backs of their jerseys said Green Knights Cycling Team.

“It’s for charity,” explained the young man who’d stopped. He had sandy hair and an appealing face. “Geraint, who bumped into you, he lost his brother to a degenerative muscle disease in April, so we did a five-hundred-mile charity ride to raise money.”

“I’m sorry about his brother,” Keteki said. “There was music earlier,” she went on, “but you missed it.”

“Oh, there’s generally a lock-in at the Rushcutters,” said the sandy-haired young man. “I’m Albert.”

"Keteki."

"Nice to meet you, Katy. What brings you here?"

"I'm doing some work in London," Keteki said. "I came for the weekend. My friend Tom's parents live nearby, in Great Morton."

"Tom Hurst? I know Tom," exclaimed Albert. "He was in my brother's year at school. Is he here?"

"At the back, in the little wooden room," Keteki began.

"Oh, that's the whettle room," said Albert. "Back in a minute."

Keteki went into the garden. At the water's edge, near a picnic table, she found a dog gazing at the dark river. "Hello," she said and sat down near the dog, but not too near so as to respect its space. The river flowed, making slapping and sucking sounds. She thought of last year, in the monsoon, when she and her friend Lueit had gone to north Guwahati, where the beach had vanished into high waters, and of the evening she'd spent with Ved on the riverbank at Uzan Bazar, the sky flaring into sunset, the air smoky. The grass felt damp beneath her, and she could feel the evening cool down and thin out, a fraying of all that was warm and aestival as the indoor world solidified and massed.

Voices, a sound of oars.

"No, that's not right. I'm telling you . . ."

"Fuck that." This voice sounded younger.

"Look, Andrew, be reasonable."

Keteki stiffened. Something about that older voice . . .

A rowing boat came into view, and a thin figure, crouching, leaned out to throw a rope over a mooring peg on the lawn. Then he got out and offered a hand to the other man. Keteki watched him stand, tall, broad-shouldered. The boat lurched. "Jesus, Andrew," complained the older man.

"It's not my fault," insisted the youth. "You're drunk."

With a final stumble, the heavier man attained the lawn. "Fuck's sake," he said. He leaned on the teenager's shoulder, and they walked into the pub. Keteki was pretty sure the older man was Jonathan Carlisle, then a twenty-six-year-old graduate student struggling to finish his DPhil, who'd broken her heart when she was nineteen. He was still only seven years older than Keteki, presumably, but she felt as though they had been aging at different speeds.

The dog got up and walked into the pub. After a while, beset by the urge to talk to someone, Keteki followed. Neil waved as she came in, but she

looked around for Tom. She couldn't see him in the front bar, and the back room was heaving. She went left. The tall red-faced man loomed near the doorway. "Hello," Keteki said.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm having a very strange evening," she admitted. "Although maybe it's just that I've hardly slept in the last week."

He held out his hand. "Richard Kerrigan." He pointed at a table in the side bar. "What's been keeping you awake, if I might ask?"

Keteki sighed and sat down. "It's so boring. A man. I can't explain how much I dislike myself for saying that."

Richard had an impish laugh. "Isn't that a bit extreme?" he said. "We're all human."

Keteki stared at the broad backs of drinkers in the middle bar. "I suppose I thought I was good at not caring," she said.

He smiled. "Let me get us a whisky." A few minutes later, he returned with two tumblers. "Now," he said, "I have a question, but I hope you'll be honest. The lock-in has begun, but would you mind if I smoked?"

Keteki grinned. "Not if you let me bum one."

He rolled two cigarettes and passed her one.

"It's nice to have a hobby that's going nowhere," she mused.

"Or only in one direction," he said.

She inhaled, laughed, coughed, and nodded.

"You said you hadn't slept in a week, why is that?" he asked.

Keteki smoked, aware of the cigarette marking time, and grateful for it. "I guess I was worrying that this man doesn't, well . . ." she said.

"That he doesn't love you?"

She nodded.

He thought. "How could he not?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're very kind, but . . ."

He looked at her and took a sip. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's been a while since I was in the grip of this sort of feeling. I do remember it though."

"He went away about a week ago," Keteki said. She tried the whisky. It was smoky and good. "I thought I was dying, but very slowly. I didn't hear from him, I couldn't sleep. And he did eventually get back in touch. But it was all so degrading. I don't want to feel like that."

"Oho, so he hasn't disappeared?"

Keteki shrugged.

Richard smiled. "If something is affecting you this intensely, maybe it's not just about this man. But as far as he's concerned, I think men fall in love differently. At first it's mainly about how the woman looks." He smoked and thought. "After a while, there's a time of pulling back a little. Actually getting to know her. And that's when the real falling in love happens."

"God, how annoying," said Keteki.

There were cries from elsewhere. "What *time* is it?" she asked.

"Sounds like trouble in the whettle room," Richard said. For a big man, he was up quickly. "I'd better go and see if Thaddeus needs any help."

Keteki looked at his half-empty glass, hesitated, drank his whisky, and got up to follow him in the direction of the whettle room. In the doorway, she walked straight into Jonathan.

"Sorry," she said and backed away. Their eyes met.

"Sorry," he said but didn't move aside completely.

Keteki smirked and walked past him.

"Wait!" he said. "Don't I know you?"

Her eyes slid away.

"Ketecky," he said.

"Hi," she said.

"You look great. Er, Jonathan? From Oxford? Merton?"

"Jonathan. Of course. How are you?" She laughed inwardly.

He passed a hand over his head. "Bit of a mess, honestly. Let's have a drink. Are you here with someone?"

"I was just going to find my friends," Keteki said. "Great to see you."

"Wait! Are you in the UK?" His eyes narrowed. "We should . . . Tell you what. You go find them and come back. I'll be here." He rumbled her hair and gave her a distracted beam. "I'll tell you all about everything when you get back."

Keteki smiled and hurried through the front bar, her eyebrows raised. It had been twenty years, and he wanted to tell her about his problems.

On her way to the whettle room, she finally saw Tom. "Hey Kato," he said. His hair was wild; he looked scrambled.

She clutched at the front of his shirt.

He laughed. "Everything okay? We've seen you with an assortment of gentlemen, but that's nothing new."

"I don't . . ." Keteki said toddlerishly.

He smiled down at her. "You don't?"

She laughed and shook her head. "I don't want to. When can we go home?"

"But it's the lock-in now, Kato. What about your new friends?" Tom asked. "For example, the musician. He looks very Byronic."

Keteki laughed but didn't let go of Tom's shirt. "What were you and Elsa having that serious conversation about? I could hear bits of it in that strange room."

Tom disengaged his shirt gently. "If you could hear, why are you asking?" he said, but he'd stopped smiling. "Relax, Kato. Have another drink." His eyes were clouded.

A further hubbub rose from the whettle room. "Let's see what's happening," Tom said. He put a hand on Keteki's shoulder and then let it go.

The back room was dense with smoke and voices. Around fifteen people stood a little to the right of the door.

Keteki paused. "What's going on?" she said. She touched an elbow, which turned out to be Pete's. "Where's Elsa?" she asked for want of knowing what to say.

"Probably wherever Tom is," Pete said.

Keteki looked at her shoes. In the middle of the knot of people, Neil's voice broke out. "Well, but why don't you just listen to the fucking music?"

A deeper, angry voice, very English. "I fail to see why someone who's just passing through the pub in my family's village should tell me how to behave in the whettle room of all places."

A younger voice. "Geraint, we're all tired. Let's calm down."

"Fuck off, Albert."

Keteki sighed. She touched Pete's elbow again. "I'm going to the bar. Do you want a drink?"

Pete shook his head. "I've had enough."

"Okay," Keteki said. She edged out of the crowd and could hear Neil saying plaintively, "I just wanted to try out some new material. It's influenced by . . ."

Jonathan was in the front bar. He had a corner table and perked up when he saw her. "Ketecky!"

She paused, wondering if it was a simple fact that life was better in a place where people pronounced your name properly. Briefly but authentically she missed Ved.

"Where's your son?" she asked Jonathan.

"Who?"

"The boy you arrived with?"

"Oh, Andrew. My nephew. Staying with me. Bit of a problem child, in all honesty."

"I'm going to the bar," Keteki said. The man behind it was courtly, with impressively curved sideburns. He inclined his large head towards her.

"Could I have some of that lovely whisky?" she said. "It might be an Islay malt. A new friend—tall, like you—he bought it an hour ago."

"I know the one you mean. Richard Kerrigan?"

"Yes," she said.

"He's a good man," said the landlord.

There were screeches and cheers from the back room. Keteki turned her head, but the landlord seemed unperturbed.

"How many whiskies for you, young lady?"

"Two, I suppose." She sighed and glanced at Jonathan over her shoulder. He was slumped, staring at his phone.

"Friend of yours?" inquired the landlord.

"He came here in a rowing boat," said Keteki in wonder.

"That's our skiff," said the landlord. "Thaddeus Miller. This is my pub."

"Ketek Sharma," she said and held out her hand. "Er, I met a gentleman earlier who cuts reeds," she said.

"Ian Swanton," said Thaddeus. "The Swantons are all a little eccentric."

Ketek giggled. "The man over there broke my heart when I was nineteen," she said. "I haven't seen him in twenty years."

"You don't look old enough for any of this to be true," Thaddeus said.

Ketek smiled. "You're flattering me," she said. "It's true I can't quite believe it happened."

Thaddeus shot Jonathan a look. "No more can I," he said.

"I wonder what he's doing here," Keteki said.

The strains of the last, least interesting song from Neil's set, "And I'll be seeing you again," broke from the back room.

"Can I ask you something?" Keteki said. She felt a tipsy kinship with the massive landlord, a person who, like her, seemed untied to anyone else.

"Anything you like, my beautiful young duchess."

"What is a whettle?"

Thaddeus smiled. "It's a bit of a disgraceful Suffolk story, in truth," he said, "but I can tell you that this part of Suffolk has always been a bit of a haven for smugglers. We're out of the way, but on the water. That's how they used to bring in their stuff to avoid the customs men."

"What were they smuggling?" Keteki asked.

"Rum and tea mostly, I think," said the landlord.

"Tea—we grow that in my place," she was beginning when Jonathan bellowed from the corner, "Ketecky!"

Keteki sighed and nodded to Thaddeus. She went back to the table and handed Jonathan a glass. "So," she said only a little ironically, "how have you been?"

"Thanks," he said heavily. "Now, did you know Janine? I've forgotten."

Keteki grinned. As far as she remembered, Janine was the girl he'd been with directly after her. "No," she said.

"Well, we were together for ages. But, disaster." He shook his head like a wet dog.

"Disaster for ages?" murmured Keteki.

"Two little girls," said Jonathan. "I hope they don't turn out like her." He continued to talk for some time, while Keteki zoned out, sometimes saying "Mm" and "Really?"

"It's exhausting," Jonathan eventually concluded. Keteki could not but agree. Ved, she reflected, was probably also flirting with some woman somewhere. She examined Jonathan. How like life to bring him back when she no longer had any interest in finding out why he'd left her. People just did things.

The phone in her pocket buzzed. It was a message from Ved. "Please reply," he said shamelessly.

"Do you spend a lot of time," Keteki asked Jonathan, "thinking about things from other people's point of view?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Jonathan said cautiously.

"You know. Do you imagine what other people think? Your wife, your children, your nephew. Where is he, by the way?"

"God knows," Jonathan said. "Probably looking depressed in a corner. Teenagers are impenetrable. Ket-ecky, it's so lovely to see you." He stroked her wrist. "We should have dinner sometime."

Keteki smiled and looked into her glass, where a small mouthful of whisky remained. Since the lock-in, the lights had dimmed in the front bar.

In the other corner, two black-jacketed men were deep in a sombre conversation like figures in a Cézanne painting. Behind the bar, Thaddeus was in shadow, but the darkness around him seemed warm.

“Why did you come here?” she said abruptly.

“My brother has a house nearby. King’s Bletchley. Um, give me a minute. Just need a slash.” He lumbered up, and Keteki slipped out of the front door. The garden was cool, but after a while she walked around to the mill pond. She took off her shoes and sat on the grass, the creak of the wheel and the rushing water replacing thoughts.

A while later, there were footsteps and a herbal scent. She opened her eyes and yawned.

“Hi, sorry, would it be all right,” a young voice asked politely, “for me to smoke here?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.” He sat a few feet away. After a puff he said, “Do you want any? It’s weed.”

“I noticed,” Keteki said. “No thanks.”

“No one ever wants to smoke. I shouldn’t have asked,” the youth mumbled.

“It’s nice that you asked,” Keteki said.

“I smoke a lot now,” the young man said. He edged closer.

“Oh,” Keteki said. “You’re Jonathan’s nephew.”

“Yes, did you meet him?”

“I used to know him in Oxford,” she said. “In fact, we . . . well, it was before he was with his wife. He kind of dumped me.” She chuckled.

“I wouldn’t worry,” said Andrew. “They’re miserable.”

“Yes, he did mention that.”

“But so is everyone. The system seems fucked. Are you sure you don’t want some?”

“Okay,” said Keteki. She accepted the joint, took a puff, and held it in as seriously as if she were doing a breathing exercise. She exhaled and took another puff. “That’s a lot stronger than I’m used to.”

Andrew finished the joint. “I’d better go and find Jonathan.”

When Keteki went back inside, Thaddeus, the Green Knights, Ian the rushcutter, and Neil were all at a table with high-backed benches. Everyone seemed to have been drinking dedicatedly for a while.

“But folk music,” the tallest, angriest Green Knight was saying. “It’s not

exactly for today, is it?"

"No no no," the Irish singer said. "You don't understand. Folk music isn't from yesteryear. It's from now. It's from any time, including the future, including today, including tomorrow."

"Can you explain that?" said the landlord, inclining his enormous head towards Neil.

"Well, it's like, there might be a nightingale and a fair maid in a song, but there might also be a trip to Penneys. I mean, Primark. And a space-man."

"Isn't that more like pop?" asked another Green Knight with red hair.

"You've an erroneous conception of—Keteki!" said Neil, jumping up. He had knocked over two glasses. "Oh feck."

"You idiot," said Geraint, the angry Knight. He stood up, dripping.

Thaddeus rose. He was wider than a door, it seemed, and stouter than oak. "Albert," he said, "go and get a cloth. We're all going to remain calm like the good friends we are." And he reseated Geraint by the simple method of pressing down on his shoulder as on a button that had mistakenly sprung up. Albert hurried off, and the other Knights stood back from the wet table. Keteki returned to the corridor in search of Pete, half thinking it might be a good idea to find him before he ran into Tom and Elsa.

In the now quiet, shadowy whetstone room, Pete was at a table with Richard and the two young women from the bathroom.

"Hey," said Pete, looking relaxed.

"Hey," said Keteki. Richard was telling a story. When he finished, both the girls, Lisa and Katie, laughed a lot. A shadow moved out of the corner, the dog from earlier. He left the room.

"I'm really tired," Keteki said to Pete.

"Find everyone," Pete said. "Maybe Tom's sober enough to drive."

Keteki sighed. "Oh. I forgot there'd be no question of a taxi." Pete rolled his eyes. "I'll ask the landlord," she said.

In the front bar, Jonathan was asleep, head on the table. The dog lay on the bar and looked at her with intelligent eyes.

"Can I get a whisky and ginger?" Keteki asked.

The dog looked deprecating and crossed his paws.

"I know," Keteki said. "Taps can't be easy."

His tail began to thump.

Keteki found Thaddeus in the side bar, peacefully chatting to the

Knights. "Yes, my lovely lass?" he said.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Thaddeus," she said. She sat on the arm of the settle and rested a palm on his massive shoulder. "I'm just really tired."

"Aye, it's late enough."

"I'm not sure what to do about getting home."

"To the Hursts'?"

"Yes. I can get into the house, but we seem to be missing two people."

Thaddeus sucked in his lower lip. His face looked like one of the presidents' heads at Mount Rushmore. "Albert will take you in the skiff and then the van," he said, "and Argus will go with you."

"Who?" said Keteki.

Albert smiled. "The dog."

"When do you want to go, maid? Ah, she's already asleep."

Keteki nodded. The world was swimming. She thought of her rooms in Guwahati, in Delhi, realized with surprise she wasn't in either of those places, wondered what her aunt was up to, thought of eating rice, and felt a vague sadness. In her pocket, her phone began to buzz. She took it out and saw with some surprise that it was Ved. On the third ring, the battery died.

"Albert," said Thaddeus.

"I'm ready," Albert said. "Can you bring Argus to the front?"

Keteki followed them to the front bar. Thaddeus held Argus' collar and bent to speak into the dog's ear. Then he moved back, and Argus got to his feet and poured himself off the bar, landing lightly on the floor. Keteki felt she was both floating and drowning in the surface of things. Thaddeus held open the door, and Keteki, Albert, and Argus went out. The darkness was loamy, like Guinness, chocolate mousse, velvet.

Albert followed the dog into the skiff. Keteki turned. Thaddeus stood, huge and reassuring, at the end of the land. "Thank you for coming to the Rushcutters," he said.

"I loved it," Keteki said. She put up her arms and hugged him.

"Albert and Argus will see you home," he said. "Sleep well."

Trees massed over the river, and the sky was made of thought and hope. The water was inky, distressing. Albert talked, a page of optimism. She couldn't understand the signs he used, the words, if that is what they were, but he kept up a stream of remarks, and Keteki, to her own bemusement, heard someone with a clear yet husky voice respond.

She felt a bump in her lower back. The boat had docked. Argus got out

first, then Albert tied up the boat, got out, and helped Keteki. There was soft damp grass, the metal of a van door, the sound of an engine, and a moment before that, or perhaps years earlier, Albert's voice saying, "Did you say there was a key?"

"Last but one in the dogfeed," said Keteki. She gestured at the greenhouse and sat down in the gravel of the drive.

Centuries passed, the Romans, the Visigoths, the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, the Ahoms, Xonkordeb, the Burmese invasion, the British. If there could only be bedding into which to put her face. But the back door was opened, Albert said something about her friends, Keteki said yes, Argus' warm, intelligent eyes telegraphed a message to Dexter, who was barking at the door, and she was up the stairs. The darkness folded in. As Keteki fell into sleep, she heard her own body letting out strange moans of relief.

"Are you sure you can't just drive back early tomorrow morning? That's what we're doing," she said, though the car was packed and Pete and Elsa were leaving.

"Work," Elsa said and shrugged. She looked tired but younger somehow because of the shadows under her eyes.

Keteki hugged them. She and Tom watched their car out of the drive. Back in the kitchen, under the gaze of the rushcutters in the tapestry, she helped Tom tidy. Things went in the recycling bin and the food bin; they loaded the dishwasher, scraped plates, rinsed dishes, screwed the tops of jars back on, squirted cleaning spray, and wiped surfaces. Keteki swept the kitchen floor, and Tom mopped it. They sat on the sofa, exhausted, with the second half of a bottle of red wine.

"Let's take a look at the headlines," Tom said. He reached for the remote and turned on the television, slightly to Keteki's horror. She leaned back, still immersed in the chemical scent of the kitchen cleaner and the memory of the food crud she'd collected from the floor.

"The tidying up . . ." she said.

"I know, the rest of the house is a mess," Tom said and yawned, "but I'll be coming and going, so I'll deal with it later."

Keteki looked at him sideways. "So, you and Elsa," she said.

Tom sighed. "I know. Fucking stupid. The only thing I can say is that, since Laura and I broke up, I've just been living a life without rules. But Elsa suddenly thought she might be pregnant, and we both freaked out. This

morning she got her period.”

“Whew!” Keteki raised an eyebrow.

“Phew indeed.” Tom grinned. “And what’s the exciting news in your love life?”

“I think it’s kind of the opposite. I’ve never really had any rules, but I’m getting bored of it. It sounds like complete freedom.” She picked at the cushion on her lap. “But it’s another kind of rut.”

Tom smiled, and his crows’ feet came out. “Thinking of settling down?” he enquired.

“No, God no. Well. Maybe.” They both laughed.

“Who’s the guy?” Tom asked.

“He’s English, but Indian. Ved. He does something in finance—works for a company that invests in other companies or something. He’s like a consultant.”

“Huh. Good guy?”

“I’ve no idea,” Keteki said. “We’ve been spending more time together in the last six weeks. It seems like it’s easy for us to be around each other. But I don’t know what he . . . if he . . .”

Tom chuckled. “You sound positively human, Kato. I guess even you had to face some challenges eventually.”

“I’ve faced plenty, thanks,” she said.

“Tell me more about . . . Ved?” Tom patted her knee with the remote.

Keteki sighed and hugged her cushion. “We met at the airport last year. He was on his way to India. Weirdly enough, the lighting company he was on his way to see is the one I’ve been working on the exhibition for.” She paused. “When Ved and I first met, we briefly . . . I mean, I didn’t think anything of it.”

“No, well,” said Tom drily.

“I wasn’t looking for anything,” Keteki said, “but we kept in touch. Then he came to Assam, but I wasn’t sure, and now I’m in England, and I don’t know what he thinks.”

Tom laughed. “Hang on, Kato. I want to change the channel. Then I can concentrate.” He fiddled with the remote. “Hm, *One Born Every Minute* . . . *Posh Pets* . . . oh fuck it, let’s have the cricket replay. All right. Now,” and he turned to a slightly affronted Keteki. “Have you talked to him about this?”

“Ved? No. Wouldn’t he have asked if he wanted to be with me?”

“Not necessarily,” Tom said. “He might not know what you want.”

Keteki sighed.

“It’s a conversation,” Tom said. “Find out.”

The next morning at eight o’clock, as they drove past the furniture and carpet warehouses of the North Circular, Keteki looked for the Everlasting Lucifer hot air balloon. But she didn’t see it. The city was upon them, grey, various, profuse, and her phone was ringing.

“Hello?” she answered.