

1

I DECIDE TO COME OUT TO MY PARENTS AT SUNNY APU'S engagement party.

Not because of Sunny Apu and her groom, or the buzz of the wedding in the air. And not because everything about a Bengali wedding is so palpably heterosexual that it's almost nauseating.

I decide to come out because of the way Ammu and Abbu look at Sunny Apu, with a mixture of pride and love and longing. It isn't directed at Sunny Apu at all, really; it's directed at the future. At *our* futures, mine and Priti's. I can almost see Ammu and Abbu stitching it together in their heads: Castles in the air, made of deep red wedding saree dreams and lined with thick gold wedding jewelry aspirations.

I've never thought of my parents as traditionalists before this. I'd seen them as pioneers, people who made things happen even when those things might seem impossible. They'd broken rigid tradition, and have what Bengalis call a "love marriage." Though they've never told us the story, I always imagine a movie-moment meeting, exactly like in a Bollywood movie. Their eyes meet across a crowded room, maybe at a wedding of distant relatives. Ammu's in a saree, Abbu in a sherwani. Suddenly, a song starts in the background. Something romantic, but upbeat.

My parents' "love marriage" is one of the reasons they work so well here, despite the lack of family and support. Without anything, really. They uprooted their lives one day to come to Ireland. To bring *us* here. To give us a better life, they said, even when in some ways they are stuck to the past. To Bangladesh. To everything Bengali custom tells them.

Unfortunately, one of those things is this: a wedding consisting of a bride and a groom.

But my Ammu and Abbu did make it past the customs that told them love before marriage was unacceptable, and that love after marriage was to be hidden in a locked bedroom like a shameful secret. So maybe—just maybe—they can accept this other form of love that blooms in my chest sometimes when I see Deepika Padukone in a Bollywood movie, and *not* when I see her male love interest.

So that is how I spend Sunny Apu's engagement, trying to construct the perfect coming out moment, and wondering if that even exists. I try to think back to every movie, TV show, and book that I've ever seen or read with

gay protagonists. Even gay side characters. Each coming out was tragically painful. And they were all white!

“What are you doing?” Priti asks when she spots me typing on my phone in the midst of the engagement ceremony. Everyone’s eyes are turned to the bride- and groom-to-be so I thought this was the moment I could Google “gay happy endings” without someone peering over my shoulder.

I quickly slip the phone into my bag and shoot her a wide-eyed, innocent smile.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

She narrows her eyes like she doesn’t believe me, but says no more. She turns back to the bride- and groom-to-be.

I know Priti will try to talk me out of it if I tell her what I’m thinking of doing. But I also know I can’t be talked out of it now.

I can’t keep living a lie. I have to tell them at one point or another.

And tomorrow is going to be that point.

It’s weird, but after I’ve made my decision I feel like I’m on borrowed time. Like this is my family’s last day together and something is about to break open between us. When we’re driving home from the engagement party, it’s past midnight. The streetlights cast a strange glow on the road ahead, marred by the bright, full moon in front of us. It’s a clear night, for once. Priti is dozing in the backseat beside me. Ammu and Abbu are speaking in a low hum, so I can barely understand what they’re saying.

I wish I could bottle this uneventful moment—a flash of time when we’re all at peace, together and apart at once—and keep it with me forever.

I wonder if this is what things will be like tomorrow too, after I’ve told them.

But then the moment’s over and we’re home and stumbling out of the car. Our churis jingle against each other, sounding too loud and bright in the dead-of-night quiet on the streets.

Inside, I strip my face of all the heavy makeup Priti carefully dabbed onto it just hours before. I slip out of my itchy, uncomfortable salwar kameez and bury myself in my blankets, where I pull up Google again and translate the word *lesbian* into Bengali.

The next morning, Priti flits off to her best friend Ali’s house with a smile on her lips. She’s promised to tell Ali every detail she can about the engagement party, and the upcoming wedding. With pictures.

There are still a few hours until Abbu has to leave for the restaurant, so it's perfect, really. I take my time making my morning tea, stirring especially slowly and going over the words I practiced last night. They seem lackluster and silly now.

"Ammu, Abbu, I have something to tell you," I finally say, trying to breathe normally but somehow forgetting how breathing works.

They're sitting at the kitchen table with their phones in their hands, Abbu reading the Bengali news, and Ammu scrolling through Facebook—so reading the Auntie news/Bengali gossip.

"Yes, shona?" Abbu says, not bothering to glance up from his phone. At least my momentary breathing amnesia isn't obvious.

I stumble forward, nearly spilling my tea, and somehow make it to the chair at the top of the table.

"Ammu, Abbu," I say again. My voice must sound grave because they finally look up, twin frowns on their lips as they take me in, trembling hands and all. I wish all of a sudden that I had spoken to Priti. That I'd allowed her to talk me out of it. I am, after all, only sixteen, and there's still time. I've never had a girlfriend. I've never even kissed a girl, only dreamed of it while staring at the cracks on my ceiling.

But we're already here and my parents are looking at me with expectation in their eyes. There is no turning back. I don't *want* to turn back.

So I say, "I like women."

Ammu frowns. "Okay, that's good, Nishat. You can help your Khala with the wedding."

"No, I'm ..." I try to remember the word for lesbian in Bengali. I *thought* I had committed it to memory, but clearly not. I wish I'd written it on my hand or something. Like a cheat sheet for coming out.

"You know how Sunny Apu is going to marry Abir Bhaiya?" I try again.

Ammu and Abbu nod, both looking equally bewildered by the turn this conversation is taking. I'm right there with them, if I'm being perfectly honest.

"Well, I think in the future I won't want to marry a boy at all. I think I'll want to marry a girl instead," I say lightly, like this is a thought that just popped into my head, not something I've spent years agonizing over.

There's a moment when I'm not sure they understand, but then their eyes widen, and I can see realization settling into them.

I expect something. Anything.

Anger, confusion, fear. A mixture of all of those things, maybe.

But Ammu and Abbu turn to each other instead of me, communicating something through their gaze that I don't understand at all.

"Okay," Ammu says after a beat of silence passes. "We understand."

"You do?"

Ammu's frown and the chill in her voice suggests anything but understanding.

"You can go."

I stand up, though it feels wrong. Like a trap.

The mug of tea burns into my skin as I grab hold of it and carry it upstairs, stealing glances back the whole way up. I'm waiting—hoping—for them to call me back. But there's nothing except silence.



"I told them," I say as soon as Priti slips in the door. It's just past nine o'clock. I don't even give her a chance to breathe.

She blinks at me. "You told who what?"

"Ammu and Abbu. About me. Being a lesbian."

"Oh," she says. Then, "Oh."

"Yeah."

"What did they say?"

"Nothing. They said ... 'okay, you can go.' And that was it."

"Wait, you actually *told* them?"

"I just said I did, didn't I?"

"I thought maybe ... you were kidding. Like an April Fool's joke or something."

"It's ... August."

She rolls her eyes and shuts the bedroom door behind her before flopping onto the bed beside me.

"You okay?"

I shrug. I've spent the last few hours trying to figure out exactly that. I'd spent years going through all of the various scenarios of coming out to my

parents. None of those scenarios had included *silence*. My parents have always been forthcoming enough about their thoughts and feelings; why is now the moment they choose to shut themselves up?

“Apujan,” Priti says, wrapping her arms around me and resting her chin on my shoulder. “It’ll be okay. They probably just need to think, you know?”

“Yeah.” I want to believe her. I almost do.

To distract me Priti pulls up a movie on Netflix, and the two of us slip under my duvet. Our heads touch lightly as we lean against the headboard. Priti loops her arms through mine. There is something comforting about having her there; I almost forget about the rest of it. The two of us must drift off to sleep because the next thing I remember is blinking my eyes open.

Priti is softly snoring beside me, her face pressed against my arm. I push her off—gently. She groans a little but doesn’t wake up. I sit up, rubbing my eyes. The clock on my phone flashes *1:00 a.m.* There’s a murmur of voices off somewhere in the distance. That must be what woke me.

I crawl out of bed and push my door open a smidge, letting in the air and the voices of my parents. They’re speaking in low, careful voices just loud enough for me to make out.

“Too much freedom and that’s what happens. What does it even mean?” Ammu says.

“She’s confused, she’s probably seen it in the movies, heard her friends talking about it. Let her work it out and she’ll come back and change her mind.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“She *will*.”

“You saw the way she was looking at us. She believes it. She thinks she’ll ... she’ll marry a *girl*, like that’s normal.”

There’s a deep sigh and I’m not sure if it’s Ammu or Abbu, or what it means, or what I want it to mean.

“What do we even do while she *works it out*?” It’s Ammu’s voice again, dripping with something akin to disgust.

Tears fight their way up my body, trying to burst out. I choke them down somehow.

“We just act normal,” Abbu says. “Like nothing’s happened.”

Ammu says something else, but it’s lower. I can’t make out the words.

Abbu says, “We’ll talk about it later.” And the night descends into silence once more.

I push the door closed. My heart is going a million miles a minute. But before I can even think, even process, Priti flings her arms around me in an embrace. We both stumble backward, making more noise than anyone should at one o’clock in the morning after eavesdropping on their parents’ conversation.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I woke up.”

“Clearly.”

“It’ll be okay,” she says.

“I’m okay,” I say.

But I don’t think either of us really believes that.

3

MY ABSOLUTE FAVORITE PART OF THE WEDDING DISTRACTS me from all of my worries. It even perks Priti up from her bridesmaid melancholy. Food!

For starters, the waiters bring out kebabs and sticks of chicken shashlick with green and red fried peppers stuck between the pieces of chicken. I start piling food onto my plate before the waiter has even set everything down. The Auntie sitting opposite us looks at me fearfully, like she didn't think Priti and I could be so ravenous in our hunger. I smile back at her, hoping that she's not too closely related to Sunny Apu.

I'm about to start eating when Priti stops me with a tap on my shoulder.

"You can't eat with your hands," she says with a frown.

"Why not?" But I realize the answer as I look around and notice that everybody else has picked up the cutlery next to their plates and is politely cutting into their kebabs. Like we're Westerners and not Bengalis.

"I can't believe we're supposed to eat like white people even at a Bengali wedding," I complain in a whisper.

Priti rolls her eyes, but says nothing, probably hoping I'll get fed up with complaining and just shut up. I have more to say, but I'm far too hungry, and the Auntie at our table has piled so much food onto her plate already that I'm afraid I won't get to seconds unless I start stuffing my face right now.

I reach out for my knife and fork, but knock them over in my hurry to get to the food. They make a loud clanking noise on the way down. I catch *her* looking over out of the corner of her eyes, and my cheeks heat up with embarrassment. Does she remember me?

"This is what happens when we give in to Western traditions," I whisper to Priti before ducking underneath the table. Grabbing hold of the knife and fork, I try to stand, but due to the pencil heels I never wear, I underestimate my height and bump into the table with a loud bang.

"You're making such a scene!" Priti says in a delighted way. Like she couldn't have asked for anything better.

"Shit, shit, shit," I mumble. Priti's head appears under the table, and she extends an arm adorned with clinking gold churis. I take it, muttering, "shit, shit, shit," all the way up because my head is throbbing. This is definitely not what I need before sitting down to a lovely wedding dinner.

The Auntie opposite us gives me a filthy look as I take my seat, and I feel my face heat up all over again as I realize she must have heard me curse.

“Siss!” I cry this time. “The floor of this wedding hall is so gross, Auntie! You wouldn’t believe it.”

She doesn’t look like she *does* believe me but I give her a smile nonetheless. Priti is in a fit of giggles beside me. I shoot her a grin before enthusiastically digging into my kebab. All of the embarrassment, and the Auntie’s judgment, will be worth it if the kebab is good.

“Mmmmmm,” says Priti, when she has finally gotten over her giggling fit for long enough to put some food into her mouth. I’m too busy piling more kebabs onto my plate to reply.

“You know there’s a main course, right?” Priti grins after I’ve eaten my fourth kebab.

“Will the main course have these kebabs though, huh?” I’m feeling pretty glad that we managed to find seats separate from Ammu and Abbu.

“I wonder what the main course will be?” I ask Priti. I’m hoping for biryani. That one’s easy enough to eat with cutlery. Priti rolls her eyes. As if she’s not thinking the exact same thing as me.

We talked about this wedding for ages. The whole summer, really. It’s the first wedding we’ve attended where we actually play a role—but that wasn’t the part we were excited about. We were far more excited about what the cuisine at a Bengali wedding set in Ireland could be like.

“They won’t have the typical Bengali wedding dishes, right?” Priti had asked one summer day—a day where the sun had decided to grace us with its presence and we were both lounging in our backyard, me with a book in hand and Priti with one earbud in her ear and one dangling down her neck.

“What? You don’t like korma and polau?” I asked.

She frowned. “They’re just a bit boring, aren’t they?”

I rolled my eyes. Priti never complained about them being too boring when we were in the midst of wedding season in Bangladesh.

Still, one thing was clear from the get-go—for us, this wedding is all about the food.

I can barely contain my excitement when the waiter brings around the main course: Platters full of biryani that smell like heaven on a plate. Priti gives me a look that says *don’t grab the biryani dish before the rest of the table have taken some*, presumably because the Auntie opposite us is eyeing

the biryani with even more fervor than me. I think this is a little unfair. The Auntie is an adult and can have as much biryani as she wants any old day. I can only have it when Ammu deems it enough of an occasion to cook us some.

Priti and I patiently wait, watching the waiter bring out more and more dishes—a bowl of steaming lamb curry, plates of naan, a small bowl of mung daal, and a plate of chicken tikka. While the Auntie spoons biryani onto her plate I grab the naan, tossing one to Priti and another onto my plate.

“Am I supposed to eat this with a fork and knife too?” I grumble under my breath, tearing at the bread with my fingers and following it with a forkful of lamb curry. It’s the most unsatisfactory way of eating I’ve ever been subjected to. It’s cruel, really, to have a Bengali wedding full of Bengalis but expect them to eat in a totally non-Bengali way. I’m almost missing the weddings in Bangladesh; at least there we were free to eat with our fingers, even if it was unbearably hot and the food was almost always korma and polau.

After our plates are hoisted away, all the guests begin to rise. The bride and groom have obviously finished their dinner and are sitting up on the stage at the front of the hall. They sit on a settee lined with gold and silver that looks more like a throne than commonplace furniture. Sunny Apu looks a little bit like a princess sitting on it in her red and gold dress, her urna draped over her head almost casually. I know from experience that it has probably been pinned into place by a stylist to maintain that casual look.

What really makes her look like a Rajkumari, though, is the jewelry she’s draped with. There are heavy gold bangles clinking on each of her hennaed wrists and a gold chain hanging from her neck, settled gently over her dress, but the bit I love most is the golden chain that clasps around her nose and stretches all the way to her ears. It seems heavy, but somehow it works on Sunny Apu. She pulls it off almost effortlessly.

I touch my own nose ring self-consciously as I look at hers. After putting on my salwar kameez earlier today I swapped out my usual stud for a golden hoop. I wonder if I can pull off a chain like Sunny Apu. I wonder if I’ll ever get the chance to. You only really wear them at your wedding, after all. And with the way things are going ...

“Will you come with me to take a photo with them?” Priti asks, cutting off my train of thought. She’s already whipping her phone out of her beaded

white clutch, so I know I don't have much of a choice. But right now I'm so grateful that she's here, that she's my sister, that I don't care.

"Sure." I give the Auntie at our table a smile that I hope conveys apology, condescension, and mischief all in one, and the two of us slip away from the tables and into the throng of people waiting to take a photo with the bride and groom.

"She looks so happy now," I say.

"Well, duh," says Priti, even though it's not very "duh" at all. She thrusts her phone out, nearly punching a guy in a khaki sherwani standing in front of her. He ducks out of her way, shooting us a glare while I try to give him an apologetic smile. Priti is too busy checking that she has nothing in her teeth to even notice.

"I gotta run to the bathroom to fix this." She waves her hand over her face.

"It looks okay," I say. I want to add "your face," but that might be too complimentary. And "your makeup" might make her scoff, because she probably means something specific. So I settle for adding nothing.

"Thanks, now I feel confident. Do you want to come?"

"To the bathroom?"

"No, the moon. I hear there's a really big mirror there—perfect for fixing up your makeup and taking selfies, didn't you know?"

"Okay, there's no need to get sarcastic." I punch her on the shoulder.

"I'm going, I'll be right back. Don't go up on stage without me, okay?" She turns around and whips me in the face with her urna.

"Okay," I mumble, but Priti has already disappeared into the crowd. I turn back to face the stage. The Irish girls from the back room are up there now, their faces arranged into wide grins as the professional photographer clicks away. One of them rushes off the stage, nearly tripping, and hands the photographer her iPhone, mumbling something. The photographer frowns but begins to click away with the iPhone. I wonder if photographers feel a little insulted when people ask them to do that.

"So is this what weddings in your country are usually like?"

I turn around and come face-to-face with the girl with the curly brown hair who has been dancing in the back of my mind all night. She must remember me to come up to me like this. There's a hint of a smile on her face; I can't tell if she's impressed by the wedding or if she's trying to insult it.

“Sorry?” is all I can say, though there are a million other things I could have said that would have made me seem a little more charming and a little less dumbfounded.

“You don’t remember me.” Her smile shifts into a smirk. It suits her, weirdly. There’s a dimple that forms on her right cheek.

“I do.” It comes out more defensive than I want it to, but I *do*. More clearly than I should.

“And my name?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

I bite my lip. Then, acting braver than I feel, I say, “Do you remember *my* name?”

“Nisha.” More confident than *she* should feel.

It’s my turn to smirk. “Wrong.”

She looks bewildered. “No, I’m ... that’s ...” She knits her eyebrows together, like she’s really thinking about this. “That *is* your name. I remember, you’re from Bangladesh. Ms. O’Donnell made you do a presentation about it in your first week in class and you were so embarrassed or shy or something that your entire face was on fire, and you stuttered through the whole presentation.”

I do remember that presentation. It was my first week in school, my first month in the country. Everything was still new and everyone’s words blurred together in an accent I couldn’t yet understand.

“It’s Nishat,” I offer. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“You were kind of distinctive.” She’s trying to bite down another smile. I can tell from the way her lips are turned up at the edges.

“Flávia,” I say, and she brightens at the sound of her name, like she really didn’t expect me to remember.

“You look nice in that.” The words slip out, and I immediately feel heat rushing up my cheek. But she does look nice. She’s wearing a salwar kameez that a Desi girl wouldn’t be caught dead in at a wedding, but Flávia wears it with such nonchalance that she pulls it off. It’s royal blue, with a silver floral pattern on its torso. She’s wrapped the urna around her neck like a scarf, with the long end of it hanging off to the side. It’s beautiful, but far too simple a design for an elaborate wedding like this.

“Thanks.” This time she does smile, dimple and all. “I like your henna. Did you do it yourself?”

I look at both sides of my right hand, filled with vines and flowers and leaves darkened to a deep red.

“Yes. I’ve been trying to teach myself.”

“Do you find it difficult?”

I shrug. “A little. It was ... really just for the wedding.”

“Oh ...” Her eyes leave me, and travel up to the stage where Sunny Apu and her husband are sitting with a group of people that I don’t recognize.

“Do you want to go up?” she asks. “I don’t really know anyone else here.”

She doesn’t really know *me* either. It’s been years since I last saw her. She’s changed so much that I hardly recognize her now. And we weren’t exactly friends back in primary school, either, but now I’m kind of wishing we had been.

“Sure, yes. That’d be nice,” I say.

“You haven’t yet?”

“No, um ... there’s a queue.” It’s not so much a queue as people pushing in front of each other whenever they get the opportunity.

“I think you have bridesmaid priority. Come on.” She takes hold of my hand. Her grip is soft and warm and kind of sweaty because there are a lot of people around us, but I don’t really mind. I’m on cloud nine because this beautiful girl is holding my hand. I’m sure it doesn’t mean anything, but my heart is beating a mile a minute and I can’t help but think that this is better than the kebab. Maybe even the kebab and the biryani combined.

I’m barely aware of pushing through the crowd and onto the stage. I only realize we’re there when Flávia lets go of my hand and smiles. She takes a seat next to Dulabhai and I slip into the space beside Sunny Apu, suddenly uncomfortably aware of how small the settee is.

“Congrats,” I whisper to Sunny Apu, taking hold of her hand and giving it a small squeeze.

“Thanks, Nishat,” she says. “Where’s Priti?”

My eyes dash to my right, like I’m expecting Priti to simply appear there. It only occurs to me now that I did exactly the one thing she told me not to do.

“She’s in the bathroom,” I say, turning back to Sunny Apu.

“Oh,” she says with a polite smile.

“She has to fix her face,” I say. “Like ... the makeup.” I should have probably shut up at bathroom.

“Excuse me?” The photographer is looking at me with some exasperation. She gives a wave of her hand, indicating that we should all

look ahead. There are a few clicks and flashes, and then the photographer is ushering us off the stage.

“Bye,” I mumble to Sunny Apu. In a moment, my seat is occupied by a petite girl that I’ve never seen before. She whispers something into her ear, and I feel a weird pang of jealousy, realizing that this is probably an in-law. It feels as if Priti and I have already been replaced by Sunny Apu’s new relatives.

“Coming?” Flávia asks with a tilt of her head. I nod, hoping she’ll take my hand again, but she doesn’t.

We’re ambushed by my sister before we’ve even descended from the stage.

“I told you not to go up without me!” Priti cries, standing at the bottom of the stage with her hands on her hips. She looks so much like Ammu when she’s angry that I have to bite back a smile.

“Sorry,” I say, not really meaning it. I figure it’s best not to mention how much she looks like Ammu because it’ll make her even angrier. “Just ... Flávia here doesn’t know anyone.” I nod at her standing beside me. “This is Flávia, by the way.”

“Hi,” Flávia says.

“Hello.” Priti looks Flávia up and down, judgment flashing in her hazel eyes.

“She used to go to school with me,” I say, and add—again—“she doesn’t know anyone here.”

“She has a sister. She was a bridesmaid, remember?”

“Priti.” I try to squeeze a lot into her name; a warning, and some of my excitement about the fact that Flávia was holding my hand only minutes ago. And also an apology.

Priti obviously doesn’t understand any of it, because she just glowers at both me and Flávia.

“I actually better go find my sister,” Flávia says, and even though I want to say, *no, stay and hold my hand for longer*, I say, “Okay, see you later.”

But of course, I won’t see her later. Or maybe ever again. Then all I’ll have to remember her by is the way our hands fit together for those few short moments.

“You know we can go up to the stage again,” I say once I’m sure Flávia is out of earshot. “It’s not like there’s a rule you only get to go up once!”

“I ... I know,” Priti says, some of the fight gone out of her now. “I just ... wanted to go up together. I’ve never heard you mention her before.”

“I told you, we went to school together. A long time ago,” I say, feeling deflated. *And we probably won’t see each other for a long time again. If ever.* “Well, do you want to go up then?”

Priti looks so huffy that for a moment I think she’ll say she really doesn’t want to. But she nods, even through her pout. I have to smile because it’s kind of adorable. I even mumble an apology as we step up to the stage again, taking either side of the bride and groom.

After the photographer has clicked away for a few moments, Priti rushes toward her—heels clicking loudly—and hands over her phone.

“Can you please take a few on this?” Her voice is all sugar and sweetness.

The photographer looks a little exasperated, but nods. It’s as she clicks away with Priti’s phone that I realize how ridiculously forgetful I’ve been.

Why didn’t I do this when I was with Flávia? I had the perfect opportunity to document the moments we spent together—fleeting and out of the blue as they were. But I was so busy telling Sunny Apu about Priti being in the bathroom doing her makeup that I missed my chance.

“Wow, these are definitely going up on Instagram,” Priti says, flicking through the photos on her phone as we step off the stage. “You look really nice.”

“I doubt it.” After all, I didn’t dash off to the bathroom with Priti to touch up my makeup. I haven’t even looked at myself in a mirror in hours. I can’t imagine what all of those helpings of food has done to my makeup.

“You do. You look even happier than Sunny Apu in this one. Look!” She holds the screen up in front of my face. It’s zoomed onto my smiling face. I don’t look half bad, even though my urna is half falling off of my body.

“Wait. I’m sitting next to Sunny Apu here. But I was sitting next to Dulabhai?”

“Yeah, in the picture with me. This is the one *I* took of you with ... you know, that girl.”

“Her name is Flávia ...” I mumble. I can’t really mean it as a reprimand when Priti has done what I naively forgot to do. I feel a strange flutter in my stomach that I know too well but don’t want to know at all. “Did you take many photos of us?”

“Only a few.” Priti’s head is buried in her phone once more.

“Can you send them to me?”

Priti looks up at this, a frown on her lips.

“Okay, what’s with you today?” she asks. “And with this girl, Flávia?”

“Nothing. I don’t know what you’re on about,” I say. “Look! They’re cutting cake!”

I cry it out loud enough for a few people in front of us to turn their heads and look at me. I don’t care because Priti does look ahead at where Sunny Apu and Dulabhai have come off the stage to cut a cake that looks to have at least eight different layers.

“Oooh, what kind of cake do you think it is?” she asks.

5

I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING TO THE TRICKLE OF RAIN outside my window. It's a pleasant sound on mornings when you can wake up lazily, listening to the steady hum of the rainwater beating against your windowsills. But when there's a looming school year ahead of you? There's nothing pleasant about it.

When I eventually get up from bed to get into the bathroom, Priti is already inside.

I rap my knuckles on the door as loudly as possible.

"HURRY UP!"

There's a low groan from inside the bathroom and I wonder for a moment if maybe Priti fell asleep inside. That image makes me feel a little better about having to get up at seven o'clock.

"Maybe don't scream at me in the morning," Priti croaks at me a few moments later, peeking her head into my bedroom. Her hair is a right mess. Wisps of it stick up every which way, and her eyelids are still drooping with sleep.

"Sorry." I grin.

Ammu looks at us with pursed lips when Priti and I finally stumble down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Did you even iron your skirt?" she asks Priti instead of wishing us a good morning. "It's all wrinkled up!"

"I ironed it, I promise!" Priti cries defensively, looking down at the plaid skirt and trying to smooth out the few wrinkles with her hands. "It just ... got a bit wrinkled when I put it on, is all."

Ammu doesn't look like she believes her, but her eyes skip over Priti and her semi-wrinkled skirt onto me. She seems to take me in for a moment, and I wait for the criticism that's custom in our house. But it never comes. She turns away instead and allows us to reach for our bowls of cereal and milk.

I've never felt so horrid for not being criticized before. It feels like a slap in the face—like the ultimate criticism is this sudden lack of criticism.

I feel a lump rise to my throat as I stuff spoonfuls of cereal into my mouth. It tastes like cardboard. For a moment, I wonder if that's to do with the fact that we've spent all summer eating the breakfasts of Maharajas and now are back on a Western diet of cereal; I already miss waking up to the

smell of porotas or khichuri, and eating all together in the kitchen like messy Desis, getting our hands down and dirty.

Now, I wonder if we'll ever have that again. Not just because the summer is over, but because of my revelation.

Priti and I almost miss the bus, and have to run to catch it before it leaves the stop. We're both panting as we slip onto a bus that's full to bursting.

"Should we try upstairs?" Priti asks in a deflated huff as the two of us squeeze our way through the crowd.

"Priti ..."

"I know, I know."

We eventually manage to squeeze into a corner with a handrail within reach. The bus gives a lurch as it starts up and I almost fall onto the lap of the guy sitting in the corner seat. Priti grabs me and I give him a sheepish look.

"I'm so sorry." He shoots me a sleepy glare before going back to staring at his phone.

"This is the bane of my existence," I whisper to Priti as soon as the guy turns away.

"Buses? Falling on people? Crowds?"

"All of it!" I cry. "But ... school. And getting there like this," I wave my hand around, but only in a small circle because I'm afraid I'll accidentally poke someone and I don't need any more glares from strangers this morning. "I'm so over it."

"We just started it, gadha," Priti says.

"Don't call me a gadha." I shoot her a glare but she just rolls her eyes. Instead of replying, she edges closer to me and lays her head on my shoulder. Despite the fact that Priti had a weird growth spurt a few years back where she actually grew taller than me, I managed to outgrow her eventually. We're still almost the same height but I have a few inches on her. I wear them with pride.

I'm tempted to push Priti off of me now since I'm not really in the mood to have 128 extra pounds on top of me this early in the morning, but knowing how Priti gets in the morning—cranky, like really, really cranky—I decide that I'll leave her be. I make the mental note to not let this become a habit.

Instead I put my arm around her shoulder and lean back against the railing. I watch the trees and buildings and people rush by outside the window, trying my best not to think about the way Ammu seemed to avoid my eyes this morning.

Something like regret weighs heavily on me, but it's not regret, exactly. It's something adjacent to it. Shame, maybe? Or the regret that something didn't happen the way I wanted it to, that things had to turn sour. Or in this case, *silent*.

As soon as we slip into school, Priti waves goodbye and runs off, no doubt to find Ali and fill her in on all of the wedding shenanigans. I watch her disappear down the hallway, weaving through crowds of girls wearing the same checkered maroon uniforms, her bag swinging behind her. Before I have a chance to turn around, somebody has wrapped me in a tight embrace.

"Nishat!" A familiar voice squeals in my ears. I turn around to find two delighted faces staring back at me. There's Chaewon, with her dark black hair at least a few inches longer than I remember it to be. Beside her stands Jess, with brand-new bangs that cover half of her face. It feels like I haven't seen them for an eternity, even though it's only been a few months.

"Hey!" I muster up the brightest smile I can offer at this time of the morning.

"We missed you!" they say in almost perfect chorus. Then I *do* smile, because I've missed this. Chaewon and Jess, joined at the hip to the point that they're finishing each other's sentences.

"I missed you too," I offer. "I have to go by the lockers and dump all of these books." I point at the giant bag swinging from my back, filled to the brim with all of my books. Maybe that's what's weighing on me, instead of the regret adjacent thing?

"We'll meet you at the assembly, okay?"

"Sure." Waving goodbye, I head toward the lockers. There are chattering girls in every single corner of the school. Leaning against lockers and walls, catching up with delighted squeals after a summer spent apart. All girls Catholic schools aren't always the most exciting places to be, but there's something enthralling about being back here and seeing everyone again after a whole summer. I bite back a smile as I swing open my locker door. I haven't even thought about what I'm going to tell Chaewon and Jess. *If* I'm going to tell them anything. Now, with that regret adjacent

feeling inside of me, I don't know if I want to tell them at all. I don't know if I can stand to lose my family and friends all at the same time.

"Hey, Nishat," a familiar voice mumbles from beside me. When I turn, Flávia is opening up the locker right beside mine.

I blink.

Did I fall asleep? Did I hit my head on my locker somehow? Did my heavy bag cut off the blood flow to my brain?

"Um. Hi. Why ... are you here?" The question is out of my mouth before I can stop it, and I can feel the heat rising up my cheeks. For once I'm glad for my dark skin, which somewhat obscures what would otherwise be a red face.

She smiles. The dimple makes an appearance.

My heartbeat escalates more than should be humanly possible.

"I just started here. Did I not mention that?"

No, she hadn't mentioned it. If she had I'd have thought about it nonstop, I'm pretty sure.

"What ... are ..." I'm in the middle of blurting out another nonsensical question when the crackle of the intercom interrupts me. Principal Murphy's nasally voice fills the hallway.

"Good morning. All students should proceed to the main hall for assembly. We'll begin at eight-thirty sharp. Any latecomers will receive a late slip. Thank you."

Short and sweet, that's Principal Murphy's style.

"We should probably ..." Flávia gestures with a nod of her head. Except she's nodding in exactly the opposite direction of the hall.

"Do you ... know where the main hall is?"

It's her turn to look flustered. I notice a bloom of pink in her dark cheeks and it sends goosebumps across my skin. She shakes her head.

"I thought maybe I could pretend not to be such a newbie." She chuckles.

"It's okay. Follow me." I begin to lead the way, weaving through crowds of excited schoolgirls who are also shuffling toward the hall. My heart is still beating a little too fast and I'm trying to tell it to stop hammering, to stop getting its hopes up, to stop feeling ... well, *feelings*.

When we enter the hall alongside a trickle of other girls, I spot Priti almost immediately. She's in a deep conversation with Ali but looks up and catches my eyes as soon as I walk in. Her eyebrows shoot up to her hairline

at the sight of me. Or—probably—at the sight of Flávia by my side. I’m not looking forward to whatever she has to say later, but right now I don’t really care that much.

From the other side of the hall, Chaewon and Jess wave me over. I’m about to sidle over to them but Flávia’s voice stops me.

“I better go join my cousin over there,” she says. And, to my surprise, she points right at Chyna Quinn. Now, *my* eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. How can Flávia, beautiful perfect Flávia, be related to *Chyna Quinn* of all people?

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah, you know her?”

I have a million anecdotes that I can offer her but I bite my tongue.

“Kind of. We’re in the same year, I mean.”

“Well, my mom said she would show me around today.” Flávia shrugs like she has no choice in the matter. “I’ll catch you later though?” And then she shoots me a smile that makes me go weak in the knees and forget all about Chyna Quinn. I nod, dumbfounded, and watch Flávia drift toward my mortal enemy.

“Who was that?” Chaewon asks when I join them, after my legs have finally solidified again.

“Flávia,” I say, a little more breathlessly than I should. I clear my throat, and repeat it again in a deeper voice that makes me sound a little like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. “Flávia.”

“That ... doesn’t tell us anything,” says Jess.

“We used to go to school together. Way back when.”

“And now she’s here?”

Yes, she’s here and I think I’ve fallen in love with her. I smile and nod like my stomach isn’t doing continuous somersaults. Thankfully, our conversation is cut short by Principal Murphy tapping her microphone, sending a loud crackle throughout the hall. Slowly, everyone comes to attention. Heads turn to the front as all the chatter comes to a halt.

“Welcome to the new school year,” Principal Murphy begins with a tight-lipped smile. My gaze strays toward Flávia, standing side by side with Chyna Quinn, and I wonder what exactly this new school year will have in store for us.

6

CHYNA QUINN WASN'T ALWAYS MY MORTAL ENEMY. In fact, once upon a time, we were friends. Kind of.

On our first day of secondary school, as we all flitted into this new place with butterflies in our stomachs, Chyna and I found each other. Fate—or the school administration—had decided to stick our lockers next to each other.

As we both got down on our knees to jerk open our lockers, murmuring our combinations to ourselves under our breaths, our eyes met. We exchanged a nervous smile.

She was braver than me, unsurprisingly. She stuck out her hand and said, “I’m Chyna!” in the brightest voice I’d ever heard.

“Nishat.” And that was how I survived my first day in secondary school without my little sister. I was navigating an uncharted sea, but with Chyna by my side, all of it felt easier. We developed an easy friendship that was confined to school grounds, but it blossomed like any new friendship does.

The problem was that we didn’t really have much in common, other than a shared anxiety of being friendless in a new school environment where we didn’t know a soul.

Our school also suffers from lack-of-diversity syndrome, which basically means that in First Year I could count on both hands the number of people in our entire school who weren’t white. To be accepted by Chyna—beautiful, porcelain-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Chyna—felt like starting secondary school off on the right foot.

“So I got invited to Catherine McNamara’s birthday sleepover,” Chyna told me during our second week. It wasn’t surprising, considering she’s always been more outgoing than me, more talkative, more charming, more *everything* positive. “And she was *really* exclusive about who she was inviting.” Chyna looked smug about it, like tween party invites were akin to winning Oscars.

“Oh, cool,” I said, trying not to sound deflated but definitely, one hundred percent sounding deflated.

“She said I could bring a friend.”

“Oh, cool!”

She grinned and I grinned and I felt like we were going to be friends forever and exchange friendship bracelets and, if we added two more

people to our gang, do a *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* thing. Even if I had to be the token person of color. I was down to be the token POC.

But of course good things don't last for long, and friendships built on shaky foundations tend to fizzle out quite fast. So before we got to the stage where we were wearing friendship bracelets and exchanging magic pants, we were at Catherine McNamara's birthday party together.

It was my first secondary school party and only my second sleepover, because Ammu and Abbu are way overprotective and slow to trust white people.

I was all nerves and texted Chyna at least fifteen times before the party started.

What are you wearing?

What should I wear?

What are you bringing?

Do you think my gift is boring?

Did you tell Catherine that you're bringing me?

Are you sure it's okay for me to come?

She only responded to about five of my texts, but I couldn't really blame her for that.

Chyna was already at the front door when I arrived, ringing the bell and waving at Ammu while she backed out of the driveway with one eye on me the entire time.

"Hey," Catherine said after flinging open the door. She was smiling at me tight-lipped, and I immediately knew the answer to half of my texts. Chyna hadn't told Catherine she was bringing me. It wasn't okay for me to come.

But I was there already, my hands full of bags, my Ammu already halfway home, and there was nothing I could do. So I swallowed my pride and stepped inside, mumbling a half-hearted, "happy birthday!" and thrusting a present into Catherine's hands.

Chyna fit into the party like the final piece in a puzzle. I fit into the party like somebody really bad at puzzles had tried to super glue a piece in out of frustration.

For a while I hovered around the edges of the party, watching Chyna be the life of it.

I texted Priti, pretending that my phone was the most interesting thing to ever exist.

This party is awful, I want to leave!!!

Priti texted back, *you have to stick it out, it's your first party with those girls!! YOU'LL BE OKAY!*

I squeezed in next to Chyna mid-conversation.

"Hi!" I tried to be bright and bubbly like I'd seen Chyna be with other people. On her, it was charming. On me? Pathetic, maybe. That's what I gauged from the way everyone in that room looked at me, with smiles that didn't reach their eyes.

"Oh, this is ... Nishat." Chyna was smiling the exact same sort of smile as the others. She waved a hand at me as if everybody couldn't see me clearly. As if my brown skin didn't set me apart like a question mark in a sea of full stops.

"Nesha, hi, I'm Paulie," a girl with bright red hair said, sticking out her hand like we were middle-aged moms and not twelve- and thirteen-year-olds.

"Uh, hi. It's Ni-shat."

"Neesha."

"Nishat." I tried again.

A wrinkle appeared on her forehead, like pronouncing my name was a difficult math problem she couldn't quite get right.

"Hey, can I talk to you for a sec?" Chyna was already pulling me up and away from the crowd of girls before I managed to reply to her. She pulled me into a corner of the hall, right by the door. I remember seeing a reflection of the sunset on Chyna's face—gold and orange and red.

"I think you should go."

I frowned. "You invited me here."

"It was a mistake. I thought it'd be okay but I think Catherine just said I could bring a friend to be nice."

"But I'm already here."

"Yeah, well, you can make up an excuse and leave. Tell Catherine you're feeling sick, I'm sure she'll get it."

"What about you?" I asked. I didn't think both of us could pretend to be sick and get away with it. "You'll tell her you need to go with me, to make sure I'm okay?"

Something passed over Chyna's face. A shadow, or maybe just the sunlight on its way down. But there was a shift. Not just in her expression, but in the air around us.

“I’m not coming with you.”

“Why not?” But even as I asked it, reality was dawning on me. Chyna had found her place, and her place here didn’t—and couldn’t—include me. I was being thrown out into the cold. Literally, because it was about thirty seven degrees outside despite it being September.

“I can’t go. That would be impolite.”

“Oh,” I said, even though it made no sense. “I guess I’ll call my mom and—”

But Chyna was already turning around, already slipping into the sitting room, already grinning like she was glad to be rid of me.

As I called Ammu to pick me up, I could hear Chyna recounting the story that made her fit right into that clique of girls.

“So why is your name Chyna?” It was redheaded Paulie that asked the question. “I’ve never met anyone with such a unique name before.”

I would have rolled my eyes into the back of my head if my hands weren’t shaking as the ring-ring-ring of the phone kept fading in and out with no indication of Ammu picking up anytime soon.

“My mom went to China after she finished university, to teach English. And that was where she met my dad. They stayed there for about a year, dating, so it was like the place where they fell in love, and they decided to name me after it.”

There was a round of awwws, and Chyna’s face lit up.

“Have you ever been?” Catherine asked.

“Not yet, but Mom and Dad promised that someday soon we’ll go so I can see for myself!”

“That’s so exciting.”

Ammu finally picked up the phone. She agreed to swing back around and pick me up, though she didn’t sound happy about it. Surprisingly, Catherine came to see me off, though she still wore that tight-lipped smile.

“Shame you couldn’t stay, we were going to watch a horror movie,” she said, turning the lock so she could open the door. “I guess it’s bound to happen though, with the food you eat.”

“Excuse me?”

“Chyna said ... you know, because Indian people eat so much spicy food, you had ...” She leaned down to whisper the next words, like they were a dirty secret. “Some digestive issues.”

“I don’t have ... I’m not ...” But my words got lost because the next minute Catherine had opened up the front door and was pushing me out with a cheery wave of her hand.

That was how the rumor that my father’s restaurant gave people diarrhea started, and spread around the whole school.

It was also the last day Chyna and I were friends.