






WAITING

  *for the*  

MONSOON

"A beautiful and sad love story." — *L'Officiel*

THREES ANNA



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FOR THE
MONSOON
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TRANSLATED BY

BARBARA POTTER FASTING



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This edition published in 2012 by
House of Anansi Press Inc.
110 Spadina Avenue, Suite 801
Toronto, ON, M5V 2K4
Tel. 416-363-4343
Fax 416-363-1017
www.houseofanansi.com

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Anna, Threes, 1959 –
Waiting for the monsoon / Threes Anna ; translated by Barbara Potter Fasting.

Translation of: Wachten op de moesson.

eISBN 978-1-77089-047-3

I. Fasting, Barbara II. Title.

PT5882.1.N63W3313 2011 839.31'37 C2011-902443-8

Cover design: Alysia Shewchuk

Cover images: Woman: Luca Zampedri/Getty Images; Fabric: Gallo Images/Getty Images;
Ornamental details: HiDesignGraphics/iStockphoto; Interior image: Jasmine flower: Gizele/Shutterstock



Canada Council
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du Canada



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CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

We acknowledge for their financial support of our publishing program the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund.

To my dear father, who never had to fight in a war.

IF HER SOUL had been as spotless as her lawn, she would not have died that year. She was like the old Lloyds. For years it was the only electric lawnmower for miles around: the fact that it was still functioning was thanks to the brand and not to love.

The machine hummed softly as she pushed it along. On the horizon the sky began to colour, and the electrical cable came to the end of its reach. With a jerk, Charlotte steered the Lloyds to the left and began to push it in the direction of the house. This was even more arduous, since it was uphill and she had to be careful not to run over the cable. She was panting. Again she had barely made it. In the distance she heard the bus starting up for the first run of the day. In one of the houses at the bottom of the road a light came on; the crickets had fallen silent and the birds were still in dreamland. India was slowly awakening.

Charlotte pushed the Lloyds into the shed and began to rein in the cable, which consisted of a series of extension cords strung together. Every time she had gone to New Delhi the gardener asked her to get an extra cord, so that he could go farther down the hill. Until one morning six months ago, when he didn't wake up.

She had been jealous of the *mali*'s peaceful death. It was still dark when they came to get her, just like now. Against the back wall of the shed, next to the old Lloyds, stood his simple bed, knocked together out of wood and rope. The old man was out on the bed: he was wearing a long white shirt, his hands were folded on his chest, and his feet were slightly apart. His rib cage was visible through the thin material and his eyes were closed. It was as if he were praying. "You have a better god than I do," she whispered.

After breakfast, three of the gardener's nephews whom she'd never seen before had arrived to claim their uncle. Charlotte was always amazed at how fast news spread. The men rolled the body in a length of cloth and placed it on a bamboo stretcher. All of his earthly possessions were rolled up in another cloth and disappeared into a small bag. After Charlotte gave them money for the cremation, the men left, the body rocking slightly between their shoulders. The following week she had tried to sell the bed but no one was prepared to pay money for the wooden affair in which the *mali* had died.

She put the bundle of extension cords on the rickety bed. It was time for tea, before the sun began to scorch the land and only the cuckoo was willing to sing. In the kitchen, a building some twenty metres from the main house, a light went on. Charlotte snuck up the monumental staircase and quickly went inside and back to her bedroom. She didn't want Hema to see her in her old work trousers.

The butler's real name was Hemavatinandan, which she found difficult to remember. So for twenty-nine years she had called him Hema, which was a girl's name. But Charlotte, whose full name was Charlotte Elizabeth, didn't know that. Just as she didn't know that Hema had waited in the kitchen until she was finished mowing the lawn and putting the mower away before he turned on the light. He had made the necessary preparations in the dark, knowing that she would ring the bell for tea as soon as she was back in her bedroom.

Charlotte kicked off her slippers and got out of the trousers. She was still wearing her cotton nightgown. With a sigh she crept under the mosquito net and back into bed. The bedroom windows

and shutters were wide open, and the sheets finally felt cool to the touch. Within a quarter of an hour the sun would make its appearance, cruel and merciless. She dreaded today, as she dreaded every Tuesday, and more than ever during the hot months. She pulled the cord hanging next to the bed. Outside, the sky had turned pink and the birds under her window twittered as a light morning breeze swept the last breath of nocturnal air from the room. She stretched and waited for her tea.

IN THE KITCHEN, the bell sounded. Hema wiped the sweat from his forehead and laid the Calor gas bottle on its side. The fire beneath the kettle had already gone out twice, and he didn't have a spare bottle.

He'd tried to start a fire in the old fireplace in the corner, but the coals wouldn't catch. Moving quickly, he went out to the shed. He pulled the battered portable stove the gardener had used from under the bed, and took it with him into the kitchen. Most of the English households had long since installed electric furnaces, but Charlotte had informed him that she didn't like the taste of food that was prepared on such a modern furnace. Hema had no idea how she could taste the difference. He placed the tray with tea things next to her bed and poured her a cup.

"Didn't you hear the bell?"

"Sorry, Charlotte memsahib." He bowed his head. "Gas cylinder empty and no new cylinder."

"But there are still coals?"

Hema nodded as he closed the bedroom shutters.

"The old *bobajee* always cooked on coals," came the reply from the bed. The fact that the old cook never kindled the fire himself but always called on the gardener for help was something else that Charlotte did not know. She took a sip of her tea and smiled. "Fortunately, your tea tastes better than the old *bobajee*'s."

Hema pulled the curtains across the shutters and the room was completely dark again. There was a rumbling sound, a light bulb was illuminated, and the fan on the ceiling began revolving. Charlotte looked at the man's back as he walked over to the window again.

"Ma'am?" Hema smoothed the curtains with his hand.

"Yes?"

"Can I buy new gas bottle?"

"Why don't you use the coals?"

Hema bowed his head low. "Yes, ma'am, but very busy."

"I know, Hema, but I would still prefer that you finish the coals before buying a new bottle."

The old man walked to the door in his bare feet, his head still bowed, as he mumbled, "Of course, Charlotte memsahib, of course."

Charlotte closed her eyes. The first of the morning heat seeped through the cracks in the shutters and entered the bedroom. She heard Hema open the bathroom door and turn on the faucet.

"You won't forget to shut the upper windows in the nursery?" she called after him.

THE CLOCK ON the landing struck six. A pigeon scurried around outside the attic window, searching for a way to get in, and Hema took the key that was hanging from a nail next to the nursery. Everyone tried to make the most of the early hours of the day, before it got so hot that no one wanted to move. Charlotte opened her eyes and saw that there were blades of grass clinging to her feet. She hoped that Hema hadn't noticed. There were a lot of things Charlotte didn't know, but she was certain about one

thing: Hema's eyesight was still excellent. She reached under the mosquito net in the direction of the bedside table. Opening the drawer, she rummaged around among the medicine bottles, handkerchiefs and various odds and ends until she found a small box in the corner. It was made of wood and had once been baby blue; now it was grubby and the paint was peeling. Charlotte picked it up and pulled it under the mosquito net. She hesitated for an instant, about to put it back. But then she opened it quickly: in the box lay a cigarette and a lighter. Her nostrils quivered slightly and the tip of her tongue flicked across her upper lip. The noises in the house died down, and outside the birds had ceased their dawn chorus. Slowly she brought the lighter to the tip of the cigarette, but just before lighting it, she paused. She took a deep drag on the unlit cigarette, filled her lungs with air, and then exhaled large imaginary smoke rings. She relaxed and flicked the ash into an imaginary ashtray next to her on the bed. She took another drag, deeper than the first. Then she pursed her lips and slowly blew out the smoke. The day had begun.

CHARLOTTE HEADED DOWN the hill on her old Raleigh. Her hair and skirt billowed and her speed made the sand swirl around her. At the bottom of the path there was an old sign so rusted that no one knew it was a right-of-way sign. She crossed the road without looking to the right or left. A truck filled with watermelons was coming around the corner. The driver swore at her, but she didn't hear him, since by that time she was already passing the vegetable stall, where a bandy-legged man was busy piling tangerines into a great heap. He raised his hand in greeting. She waved back at the man, who was good at repairing tire punctures. Her bike slowed, not because she braked, but because the hill had become flat road leading to the outskirts of the city. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead, her skirt clung to her legs, and her breathing accelerated. The dust that lent the air its greyish tinge clung to her skin. She could feel her knees creak and cursed the rattletrap she was sitting on. A car honked, and Charlotte glanced in the direction of the driver. Behind the chauffeur she saw the wife of Nikhil Nair, attired as always in pink, waving in her direction. Her lips were moving, but her voice was inaudible: no one would dream of opening a car window unless it was absolutely necessary. Charlotte lifted one hand from the handlebar and waved back. For a brief moment she hoped that the wife of the district director of the Eastern Indian Mining Company would offer her a lift, but the car drove on and she breathed in the exhaust fumes it left behind.

If she hadn't had stomach troubles three weeks before, she wouldn't have missed the talk by the professor from Calcutta at their regular Tuesday-morning get-together. He had impressed on the ladies the importance of daily exercise in the battle against cellulitis. "Aha," said one of the ladies, "hence the bicycle." The others nodded. None of them had understood why Charlotte, who always drove to the meeting, had sold the Vauxhall and from then on came by bike. The car disappeared into the distance. She didn't know what made it was, but that it was new, big, and expensive was no secret. What was a secret, however, was the fact that Nikhil Nair wanted to buy Charlotte's clock, the large standing clock that had stood on the landing since her earliest youth. Her grandfather had carried it on a tandem bike as he crossed the Khyber Pass, with his wife walking behind him. Again a car horn sounded; this time it wasn't a club member who honked, but the driver of the truck with watermelons. Charlotte glanced in passing at a storefront clock. The meeting would be starting in ten minutes. Today's speaker was a doctor, a fingernail specialist. As a child, Charlotte had seldom been given fresh milk, and she was convinced that that was responsible for her weak nails. Today she had carefully filed

her nails and painted them bright red, the only colour she had on hand, knowing that the club members would be certain to examine each other's hands with extra interest.

Suddenly a cow crossed the road. Charlotte barely managed to avoid the animal as it trotted off in the direction of a wooden cart with a large iron drum, parked at the side of the road. The cow began to bump the drum with its horns. A small boy sitting on the rim shouted something to the animal, dived into the water, and emerged with a bucket of water, which he poured over the animal's head. The cow opened her mouth. The water sloshed down her throat and she drank greedily. In the distance Charlotte heard a piercing noise that was coming steadily closer. Her heart always missed a beat at the sound of a fire engine siren. She breathed a quick prayer that it wasn't a big fire and that no one would die, especially not the firemen. The siren ebbed away and she was glad there was no sign of the large, red fire engine. The boy climbed out of the drum with a second bucketful of water and poured it into the animal's open mouth. Charlotte was thirsty, too. When she arrived at the club, there would be a pitcher of ice water alongside the coffee and tea.

She pedalled under the archway. The guard was sound asleep in the shadow of the guardhouse. In his hand he held an empty cola bottle, and beside him, under a blue and white umbrella, the secretary's dog lay panting next to a water bowl. The lawn of the New Rampur Club was yellowed and arid, and the stream that once ran through the terrain had disappeared. The eucalyptus trees that lined the long driveway cast shadows on the road, providing a modicum of cool shade. Before her stood the clubhouse, built in classic English country style and surrounded by enormous old plane trees. She heard a car approaching behind her and moved to the side of the road. The widow Singh's 1957 Ambassador went by at top speed, her elderly chauffeur at the wheel. Charlotte did not raise her hand since the widow never waved. She was asleep. She was always asleep, in the car and during the presentations. Whenever she sat still for two minutes, her head would drop forward, and she'd begin to snore softly. Charlotte appreciated the breath of air created by the speeding car.

THE BUILDING THAT housed the New Rampur Club was — to put it mildly — due for renovation, and the library was in even worse shape. Most of the thousands of books it housed had been attacked by small black beetles, and the mice had also helped themselves. Moreover, as a result of repeated leaks during monsoon, the closely packed books on the topmost shelves had been transformed into lumps of pages pasted together, and they gave off a stale, musty odour.

The Reverend Das, who was not often seen at the club, entered the library with a weighty pile of books. He had lost all of his hair at the age of twenty, and it was perhaps for this reason that his vanity was reflected in his moustache, which was very large and dyed black. He went over to the reading table, shoved the women's magazines aside, and replaced them with his own books. The door to the room reserved for the ladies was half open and he heard the chatter from the Tuesday-morning club as the members introduced themselves to the guest speaker. Without even glancing inside, he closed the door softly. Peace and quiet returned to the darkened library.

The minister began arranging his books. Above his head, the fan whirred at full speed, and the sole remaining fluorescent tube wheezed softly. Five months ago, he had himself been the guest speaker at the ladies' club meeting. He preferred not to recall his talk on the subject of good causes. He had spent weeks working on his presentation; he collected begging-letters from all over India, which he kept in a plastic folder. He told the ladies about child labour, rural poverty, ritual killings, and the sacrifice of

widows, but they decided that their annual club dues would go to a lapsed nun from Calcutta who wanted to set up a dog pound. The Reverend Das had no idea how the lapsed nun's letter had got into his folder. He had never seen the application and suspected that the epistle — which was full of grammatical errors — had somehow been slipped into his folder when he wasn't looking.

Dusty and perspiring, Charlotte walked into the library. She had hoped to freshen up in the change room at the tennis court, but it was occupied, so she washed her hands and face in the ladies' room, ran a comb through her hair, and brushed most of the dust from her dress. She was surprised to find Reverend Das at the table with ladies' magazines. It was rumoured that he had become a member in order to keep a closer eye on his parishioners. Seeing how furtively he was going through the reading material on the table, the evil tongues may well have been right.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bridgwater. How are you today?" he inquired, in the same booming voice he used in church. The thought struck him that she was still worth looking at, despite her age.

"Thank you, Reverend Das, a bit warm but in good health. And yourself?" Charlotte was about to walk away, but the clergyman stopped her.

"Are you familiar with this book?" He pressed a book into her hands. The title was *The Lord, My Shepherd Even When It Rains*.

"No, but we could certainly use some rain. And some cool weather." Charlotte walked over to the whirring fan and stood directly under it.

"It's an excellent book. I just finished it. You must read it." He lowered his voice. "It describes the problems of an immigrant family with . . . er . . . their demented father."

The clergyman had been carrying a pile of books the last time Charlotte ran into him. He had tried to interest her in the story of a woman of easy virtue who became a missionary in Africa. She told him she only read real literature, which prompted an interminable oration on the importance of devotional reading material, and he wouldn't let her go until she promised him she would read it. So Charlotte accepted the book he handed her.

"Very interesting." She turned it over and skimmed the back cover.

The clergyman looked at her red fingernails. "What did you think of that other book?"

"Quite unusual." It was none of his business that it was still lying — unread — in a pile of books in her living room. "If you don't mind, I came for the Tuesday-morning talk. I think they've already started," she said as she tried to walk past him.

Reverend Das nodded but did not step aside. He pointed to the plaque above the door. "Your father . . ."

Charlotte looked up at the row of names on the wall. Her father had prided himself on the fact that he had financed the construction of the library, and she was glad he had never seen how dilapidated it had become. The clergyman moved closer to Charlotte; she tried to step back, but the table with the women's magazines was in the way.

"Mrs. Bridgwater . . ." He was wheezing slightly. "I am collecting money for the restoration of this library. You do know that we have an extensive collection of religious books here?" He pointed to the high shelves behind her, full of books that for the most part hadn't been borrowed. "I thought it would be splendid if . . . as a kind of family tradition . . . out of respect for the work your father did back then . . . you could make a donation."

The then minister had paid a visit to Charlotte's father shortly after the death of Mathilda Bridgewater and asked him if he would consider building a library in memory of his wife. The military man had stared at him for a long time with a hard look in his eyes — it was so long that the clergyman began to feel uncomfortable and finally mumbled that a bookcase would also be very much appreciated.

Victor Bridgewater approved of the idea of something to do with books, since his wife had died holding *Gone with the Wind* in her wasted hands. He muttered that he would support the new library provided that all the religious books were kept on the topmost shelves. The minister was euphoric. He was unaware of the fact that those shelves would be so high that no one could reach them, and his entire collection would remain unread.

"I'll give it some thought," said Charlotte, after a slight hesitation. The minister stepped aside, and she entered the room bearing the sign ladies club.

1934 Rampur ~~~

THE MUSIC REACHES her from below. Charlotte is squatting next to the large standing clock, which has just struck nine. All of the candles in the enormous chandelier above the stairwell are alight. Below, in the marble hall, the British officers who are stationed at the army base nearby are arriving. They are in gala uniform, each with his wife, attired in a magnificent ball gown, on his arm. The Indian servants are wearing brand-new uniforms: yellow jackets and navy blue trousers with gold piping. The door of one of the bathrooms opens and a woman with elaborately coiled blond hair steps onto the landing. She's wearing dangling earrings and her lips are deep red. She giggles when an officer with a chest full of medals offers her his arm and leads her down the stairs. Charlotte hears her father's voice behind her and slips back into the nursery. She closes the door, careful not to make any noise. On a mat next to her bed lies her ayah, Sita, sound asleep. They played together all day, but while she was singing a lullaby for Charlotte, the young Indian girl fell asleep herself. Charlotte creeps past her. The balcony doors are open. She glances over her shoulder, but Sita doesn't stir.

Peering over the balcony, Charlotte sees the driveway, which is illuminated by torches, and shiny automobiles parked next to the house. On the broad flight of stairs leading to the front door, men in blue jackets and gold caps are stationed on either side of the red carpet. They are carrying plumes, which the guests pass under, and just before the guests go through the door, two servants throw rose petals before their feet. The sweet scent rises to the balcony. Charlotte wishes she were already grown up.

Behind her she hears her father's voice again. She ducks down, but then realizes that he is in her mother's bedroom, next to the nursery. Charlotte crawls over to the open window and looks over the windowsill and into the yellow room. Her mother is sitting at her dressing table, wearing a long, pale green dress and a gold tiara in her hair. She's painting her lips red with a brush.

"Mathilda, you look perfect." Her father, in full regalia, is standing near the door. He taps his sable against the sole of his boot. There is a medal on his chest.

"Almost, Victor, almost," her mother says with a smile as she carefully alters the contour of her lips. "Do you like this colour?"

"It's the same colour as the uniform jackets of the Irish Guards."

“Yes. Scarlet. Would you hand me my black gloves?”

“These?”

“No, Victor, the long ones.”

He tosses them to her.

“Ah, my gallant knight.” She smiles and pulls on the close-fitting gloves. Then she stands up, walks over to her husband, and puts out her hand. It seems to Charlotte that he is about to salute, but then he takes Mathilda’s hand and leads her out of the room.

Charlotte waits until her parents are gone and then creeps through the open balcony door into the room. Once before, during a violent thunderstorm, when Sita was spending the night with her own family, Charlotte sneaked into the yellow room. Her mother didn’t wake up, and Charlotte fell asleep pressed against that warm, unfamiliar body, longing for Sita’s arms around her.

The room smells sweet. There are dozens of bottles on the dressing table. Charlotte picks up a small green one, pulls out the stopper, and puts it to her nose. Then she closes her eyes and inhales the pungent scent. It smells like her mother after she returned from Delhi wearing the blue sun hat. She picks up another bottle and opens it: this one smells like her mother about to leave for church. The next one reminds her of a garden party, and a pink bottle smells like her mother decked out in her jewels. *Being a grand lady is the best thing there is*, she decides.

Suddenly she’s jerked from the stool. She sees her father’s image in the mirror, next to her own. She hadn’t heard the door open. He picks her up and carries her over to the large wardrobe. He opens it, shoves her inside, closes the door, and turns the key. Charlotte hears the bedroom door open and shut. She sits there, surrounded by her mother’s sweet-scented clothes. She starts to cry. *Sita, please wake up and let me out. I’m afraid.*

1935 Rampur ~~~

AT THE BOTTOM of the stairs stands a chest. It’s been there for weeks. No one dares touch it, since Major Victor Bridgwater is away and the chest arrived the very day that Mathilda delivered her first son. She has been able to leave her room the last few days, but she hasn’t given orders for the trunk to be moved. Although the unwieldy wooden object is sitting smack in the middle of the hall, no one has complained. For the first few days the servants would sneak a look at the object on their way upstairs with clean nappies and hot compresses, curious about the seals and stamps on the cover and convinced that it must have something to do with the newborn baby. But ever since Charlotte told Sita the nursemaid to whom she confides everything, that it contained a machine that can take over their work, everyone is afraid of the trunk.

The old butler, bearing a large teapot on a silver tray, sees one of the sweepers shoot past the trunk at a considerable speed. “Stop!” he orders.

The *mehtarani*, a young woman in a colourless sari, gives him a guilty look.

“Why haven’t you swept the dust from the trunk?”

“But, sir,” the woman whispers, “then he’ll break loose!”

“Who?”

“The iron beast, sir.”

Although he would never admit it, the butler is also afraid of what's in the trunk. He heard it from the *bobajee*, who had heard it from his *masalchee*, who talked to a coolie who's acquainted with a friend of the coolie of the principal official at the post office: the trunk contains a machine that can walk and talk. The coolie saw how the official opened the trunk to verify that it contained exactly what the customs papers said it contained. He recounted how his boss had uttered a cry and slammed the lid of the trunk down, after which he ordered it to be transferred as quickly as possible to the general, who actually only a major.

"There's dust on the chest. Memsahib is going to complain."

"I have three small children," the *mehtarani* wailed. "The youngest is not even weaned."

"If you don't dust the chest, you can leave."

"I've worked for the general for five years, and I've never forgotten a single corner. I even sweep under the low cabinets every morning, and on the day my father was cremated I came to sweep and also the day after I had my last baby. How many of the other sweepers can say that?"

"Dust the chest."

"It'll be my death, sir," she blubbered. "Can't we do it together?"

"I don't sweep. Butlers never sweep."

"But please, sir, couldn't you stand very close to me while I do it?"

"Memsahib just called. I have to go upstairs."

The *mehtarani* begins to sniffle, wringing the broom made of dried grass between her hands.

"And don't break the broom."

"What's going on?" Mathilda looks over the balustrade at the two servants standing next to the chest.

"Nothing, memsahib, nothing."

"I thought I heard someone crying."

The butler, a middle-aged man who previously worked for other English army families, has been with the Bridgwaters for the past six months. He looks up. "No, memsahib. There's nothing wrong."

The *mehtarani* runs from the hall with her head down; the butler smooths the pleats of his uniform.

"Oh, that's all right then. You know I can't abide the sound of crying." Mathilda turns to go back into the nursery, where Sita is changing the baby's diaper, but before she enters the room, she calls out, "And will you see to it that the chest goes to the shed? My husband is coming home tomorrow to his son, Donald." She stresses the word "son."

The butler stares at the chest, which is as tall as he is and resembles an upright coffin. There is lettering on one side, but he has never learned to read. He thinks of his father, who after the Great War was given the task of capturing a tiger for the London zoo, along with a Scottish officer named Macintosh. It wasn't difficult to find a tiger and kill it. Macintosh had already killed some forty tigers. But this one had to be taken alive. They built a chest and set a trap. With the raging tiger in the chest, they drove to Bombay, where they were to deposit the beast in the hold of a ship. During the five-day car journey to Bombay, his father lost first his forefinger and later his entire right hand, because Macintosh refused to help him feed the animal. The butler looks at his own attractive hands with their long fingers. . . . Not a scratch to be seen.

THE ENTIRE STAFF is assembled in the kitchen, a stone building with a roof made of palm leaves. Forty

Indian men and women, each and every one in uniform, are packed together in the narrow space, looking at the butler with shocked faces.

“Anyone who’s afraid can leave now,” he says.

No one moves a muscle. The servants are terrified of the butler. Everyone knows that he comes from heroic Kashmiri stock and that an English zoo once named a tiger after his family. But they are also struck with fear when they think of the general, who is arriving home tomorrow.

“Pick up the poles.”

The servants walk back to the house carrying the long poles. The butler, a worthy descendant of his forebears, has explained to them how they are to transport the chest. They will lay the poles on the ground, tip the chest over using another pole, and then carry it to the shed as if it were a stretcher.

“Quiet now, or you’ll wake the baby.” The butler opens the door.

In the hall stands Victor Bridgwater, his swagger stick still under his arm. Next to him stand his five-year-old daughter, Charlotte, and his wife, Mathilda, with the baby in her arms. The chest is open.

“General! You’re here already?” the butler stammers, surprised that he didn’t hear him coming.

“With my hands still covered in blood!” Victor booms. “What’s the meaning of all those poles? Is this how you protect my son?” He laughs heartily and turns to his wife. “Your troops would appear to be more competent than mine, Tilly.”

Mathilda glances uneasily at the group of dark-skinned men and women holding their sticks, relieved that her husband has returned just in time. But why are all the servants suddenly carrying poles? She clutches her newborn baby tightly to her breast.

Victor pushes the lid of the chest aside and says, “Have any of you ever seen an electric lawnmower before?”

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THE GENERAL IS standing at the top of the stairs. The toes of his boots extend over the edge of the top stair. At the bottom, Sita is holding the howling infant in her arms. Next to him stands his wife, Mathilda. Charlotte, who spent all afternoon playing with Sita and her dolls, slips noiselessly over to her mother’s side and searches for her hand, which she holds hidden in her skirts. Excruciatingly slowly, her father’s white-gloved hand goes up. He points his swagger stick at the outer door, where the butler is standing with an umbrella. Everyone stares at the motionless stick. The only sounds are the crying of the baby and, in the background, the monotonous strokes of the sweepers’ brooms in the salon.

“But, *sarkar* . . .” The words issue haltingly from Sita’s mouth as she gently caresses the wailing baby. “*Chota-sahib* is so little.”

The swagger stick seems to grow larger. Sita, in her faded sari, walks hesitantly toward the large green pram with its hood and lace trim, all the while comforting little Donald with her caresses. The baby stops crying. The young woman, still a girl herself, transfers the baby to her other arm. Charlotte’s sigh of relief is audible. She knows that Sita will protect her little brother, as she has always protected her. Outside there is a loud thunderclap and the sky breaks open. The baby starts to cry again. Charlotte finds her mother’s hand and squeezes it hard. There is no response.

The swagger stick motions briefly in the direction of the pram and then points again to the outer door. Sita puts the baby in the pram. He starts to cry even harder. She goes to pick him up again, but

sound from the top of the stairs stops her. The butler opens the outer door. The rain pelts down on the tiles. Sita rocks the pram gently back and forth, in the hope that the cries will subside, but the opposite is the case when a flash of lightning illuminates the hall, followed by a deafening peal of thunder. For the second time, Sita slowly pushes the pram with the screaming baby outside. As the first raindrops hit the hood, she stops.

“The middle of the lawn,” orders the general.

The girl cautiously pushes the carriage down the stairs. She tries to cushion the jolt at each stair, as she used to do with Charlotte, but the child’s cries grow even louder. Once on the path, she looks back. Behind her the door is already closed. In despair, she walks onto the grass; the rain is pounding down with tremendous force. She slides the baby as far under the hood as possible, so that he doesn’t become soaked, but on the inside the sound of the rain must be deafening. In front of the salon window stands the broad figure of the general, who has just returned from a mission during which he made short work of a group of Indian protesters whom he regarded as mutinous slaves. Sita stops in the middle of the lawn. She bends over the pram and tries to quiet the baby. She knows that she must now leave him alone, otherwise the general will come storming outside and she will lose her job. She caresses the child once more and pulls the sheet over him as best she can. The lashing rain continues unabated. She walks away, leaving the pram in the middle of the lawn. Out of sight of the window, she crouches down near a bush full of winter roses. She hears the cries over the peals of thunder.

Charlotte runs back to the nursery. Looking out the window, she sees Sita sitting next to the bush, not far from the lonely pram, ready to jump up at any moment. “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” she whispers to her baby brother. “If you go on crying, he’ll leave you out there for hours, just like he did with me.”

### *1995 Rampur ~~~*

ALL THE WOMEN gazed in bewilderment at the secretary of the New Rampur Club. No one said a word. Once before had he walked into their midst unannounced, after Mr. Chatterjee — the owner of two fashionable ladies’ apparel shops in the town centre, but a poor tennis player — hit the ball straight through the windowpane of the “Ladies Club.” Now the secretary was standing before them again, wiping his brow, while the women stared at him. The ceiling fans were going at full speed.

“Are you sure?” The query was launched suddenly from a corner of the room.

The secretary nodded. He was surprised by the identity of the speaker, seeing that the wife of Alok Nath, the goldsmith, invariably spoke in an inaudible whisper because she thought it sounded aristocratic.

“What?” said the widow Singh, who was sitting next to the wife of Alok Nath and was awakened by the unexpected sound of a voice next to her.

“That’s impossible! Quite impossible! On my way to the club I dropped off a very expensive length of pink Chinese silk.” The corpulent wife of Nikhil Nair, district director of the Eastern Indian Mining Company, was on her feet, glowering at the secretary. “He walked out to the car with me to get the material, and there was nothing wrong with the man.”

The secretary then turned to the wife of Ajay Karapiet, who ran the town’s biggest hotel as well as two cinemas. “Your husband just called. He told me that your daughter went to the workplace with a

piece of brocade and that just as she was about to hand it to him, his eyes began to roll and he slowly collapsed, without making a sound.”

“With the brocade in his hand?” shrilled the wife of Ajay Karapiet.

“I have no idea,” said the secretary. “Your husband didn’t say anything about that.”

“I brought him a length of material, too,” said the woman who was married to a coconut oil manufacturer.

They were all talking at once. In the previous weeks each of them had delivered a length of cloth to Sanat the *darzi*, one more costly than the other. Only Charlotte and the wife of Adeeb Tata, the local landowner and a distant relative of the immensely wealthy Ratan Tata, had not given the tailor their material — the wife of Adeeb Tata because she had already bought a dress in Paris, and Charlotte because she didn’t have any fabric yet.

“He said I could pick up my dress the day after tomorrow. It still has to be embroidered.”

“Does anyone know if he has a successor?”

“What am I supposed to do now?”

Many of these women wore a dress or a *salwar kameez*, in contrast to the ladies of the Wednesday-morning group, who wore saris. The garments, all made by Sanat, were indistinguishable from one another. This was not surprising, since they were all based on the same pattern. The only difference was that some had long sleeves, others short, and the neck was either square or round. That is why the embroidery, the buttons, and the lace were so important: together with the material itself, it was the details that made all the difference. The bicentennial of the club was coming up soon and it was going to be celebrated in style. Small wonder that the ladies had gone to such pains to find an exceptional piece of fabric. Charlotte had heard that some of them went all the way to New Delhi or Bombay to ensure exclusivity. It was obvious that this group of middle-aged women would like nothing better than to set off en masse to the workplace of the recently deceased tailor in order to check on the safety of their fabric. However, that would not be appropriate. They would have to wait until after the cremation and the subsequent farewell rituals. Their concern that the costly fabrics were in danger of mysteriously disappearing or shrinking in size was not entirely unfounded. The wife of Nikhil Nair suggested they post a guard at the door, but the other women felt that the family of the tailor might interpret that as a motion of non-confidence. The wife of the goldsmith knew the wife of the tailor’s cousin, and she could ask him to keep an eye on things, but the wife of the builder who had submitted the proposal to renovate the club reported that in his youth the tailor’s assistant had been involved with the police. The wife of the police commissioner knew nothing about that but promised she would ask her husband to look into it. The widow Singh had dropped off again, and was snoring softly.

The nail specialist was still standing in front of the group holding a plastic hand on which each finger displayed a different nail problem. But he was already surreptitiously sliding the carrying case closer with his foot. The fan turning rapidly above his head no longer provided cool air, and he wanted to go home. He surveyed the flushed faces of the women. They couldn’t get enough of the discussion about the deceased tailor and the problem of what they would wear to the party. Although he had hundreds of tips for festive nails, he could not get his audience to listen. His gaze came to rest on the only European woman in the group, and he wondered how she had become a member of a club for Indian ladies. There were almost no British citizens left in his country, which had shaken off the yoke of the

Raj several decades ago. Her dress was just as unappealing as those of the other women, except that hers bore a Scottish tartan pattern while all the others had opted for a floral or botanical design. Clearly the late tailor was no great talent when it came to the design and fabrication of women's clothing.

"I know a very good tailor," he said suddenly.

It was a while before the message got through to the women, but then they began bombarding him with questions. Where did the man live? Was he expensive? Had he ever worked with Chinese silk before? Did he have more than one pattern? What was his family background? Did he have his own sewing machine? When could he start? etc.

"I've never met him myself," the nail specialist stammered.

There was a collective sigh of disappointment.

"But my first cousin on my father's side says he's an absolute master." The man looked at the group of women in their tent dresses. "He has several different patterns and apparently he's not expensive. But . . ." Here he hesitated.

"What's the matter?" the women wanted to know.

"He'll only come if he really wants to."

"If he wants to," sneered the wife of Nikhil Nair.

"He's . . . well . . . different from other *darzis*."

"Like the fashion designers in Paris," cooed the wife of Adeb Tata, who liked to remind the other ladies that she'd seen more of the world than they had.

"Yes, perhaps something like that," the nail man said as he put the artificial hand back in its case.

PANTING AND DAMP with perspiration, Charlotte parked the bicycle in the shed. The piercing rays of the sun streamed through the holes in the roof. She resolved to move the Lloyds and her bicycle into the music room as soon as the monsoon began. She seldom went in there now that the piano was gone. She shuffled off to the house, where the heat that had plagued her the entire morning was even more intense, and saw to her relief that Hema had closed the upper windows in the nursery. In the distance the siren began to wail. And again her heart skipped a beat. She looked around to see if there was smoke anywhere, but the sky was clear and cloudless.

Inside, the heat had not been tempered by the closed shutters, curtains, windows, and doors. Charlotte turned on a lamp, set the fan on "high," and lay down on the sofa positioned beneath it. Her legs throbbed and her feet were swollen. She wished that Hema was there: he would have brought her a bucket of cold water. But the butler had gone to the town centre to shop, since she could no longer buy on credit in the neighbourhood stores. She looked at the sideboard filled with the Wedgwood china service, which had been a wedding present. A month ago, there had been a dealer prepared to buy it, but the price he quoted was ridiculously low. In the end he left with only the silver soup spoon, one of her parents' wedding gifts.

Charlotte rose from the sofa, trudged up the stairs to the bathroom, and filled the tub with a layer of water. She began to relax when her feet reached the cool water. She looked at her veined feet in the old cast iron tub. They bore clear traces of wear and tear. Her big toe toyed with the black string attached to the plug. She remembered that when Donald was little he insisted on pulling it out because he thought the string was some kind of animal. He was afraid of snakes and spiders and insects as well. It



had been a long time since she'd heard from him. Her last letter, written at Christmastime, had elicited only a beautiful card with New Year's greetings, but no news. Was he still having problems with his back? And did his wife still suffer from kidney stones? The photo of his daughter, taken years ago on a trip to Disney World, was downstairs on the mantelpiece. Charlotte seldom looked at it. Old photographs made her feel sad.

The front doorbell sounded. She withdrew her feet from the water and without drying them walked into the hallway, down the stairs. When she opened the door, she was momentarily blinded by the glare of the sun, and it was a while before she could see the man standing in front of her.

"Mrs. Bridgwater?" he asked in a nasal voice.

Charlotte nodded.

"Will you sign here?"

Absently, Charlotte signed her name, and the man left without saying another word. He gunned the engine as he drove off, scattering pebbles in all directions.

She tore open the envelope, even though she was already aware of the contents. The only thing she didn't know was the exact amount. She put on her glasses, glanced at the figure under the line, and with a sigh placed the letter in the dresser drawer with the other bills. She closed the drawer, but then opened it again, fishing around until she found the business card. She walked over to the telephone next to the dresser and dialled a number. Someone answered immediately. Charlotte's first impulse was to hang up, but instead she said in a low voice, "This is Mrs. Bridgwater."

On the other end of the line someone began to talk very fast.

"Yes, the big house on the hill," Charlotte said. "Come by when you have time."

### *1936 On board the King of Scotland ~~~*

ON THE QUAY Mathilda waves to her daughter, Charlotte, who is standing at the railing far above her. The little girl does not wave back.

"I'll write to you every week!" her mother calls.

Charlotte keeps her lips pressed tightly together.

"And don't open your birthday present until the day itself, promise?"

The box, which her mother handed to her just before she boarded, is on the bed in her cabin. She threw the doll — which has real hair and a white dress — into the corner so hard that the head broke off. The ship's horn sounds and a thick cloud of black smoke rises from the smokestack.

Charlotte feels the ship start to move. She clutches the railing with both hands and looks at her mother, who is waving vigorously. She can't hear her voice because of the horn blaring out its farewells.

"Oh, there you are!" An older lady with a shawl in her hand comes over to her. "Where were you? I couldn't find you anywhere. I don't want you to leave the cabin without my permission." The lady puts her hand on the girl's shoulder. She is still staring at her mother in the distance, still silent. "Go ahead and cry if you want to. Everyone cries the first time. I've seen children try to climb over the railing, but the captain stopped them by shutting them up in a cabin at the bottom of the ship. He didn't let them go until Bombay was out of sight." The woman starts to wave her shawl. Charlotte sees her mother take out a handkerchief and start to wave even more vigorously. "You can call me Auntie Ilse. Come o

now, wave to your mother. You see? She's waving, too. When you say goodbye, you're supposed to wave. Come on now, wave!"

Charlotte grasps the railing even more tightly; the horn is bawling its farewells and the ship is starting to move. The passengers around her call out, "See you soon," "Goodbye," and "Until next year."

The woman she's supposed to call Auntie Ilse drops her arm. "Well, if you're not going to wave, then neither am I. I don't even know your mother. Come along, we're going to get something to eat." She walks in the direction of the dining room, but Charlotte remains at the railing. "If you're going to act this way the whole time, I'll have to ask the captain to lock you up somewhere in the bottom of the ship." Charlotte lets go of the railing and follows Auntie Ilse.

Down on the quay, Mathilda is crying.

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IT'S DARK OUTSIDE. Charlotte opens the door and looks into the corridor. There's no one there. Quickly she slips out of the cabin. She's holding a bundle in her hand. She runs up the stairs and pushes open the heavy door. It's quiet on the promenade deck. Everyone's in the huge auditorium, where they're showing a movie that Auntie Ilse doesn't want her to see. She walks along the railing in the direction of the stern, where she sees the English flag waving. Today is her birthday. At breakfast the people at her table sang "Happy Birthday." The chef brought out a cake with six candles on it, and she had to blow them out all at once, which she did, and then Auntie Ilse gave her a scarf she had in her suitcase and after dinner she was allowed to see the wheelhouse but she didn't enjoy that because the captain was there too and she was afraid he'd lock her up in the bottom of the ship if she did anything wrong. She walks toward the stern, clutching the bundle to her chest. Two sailors are standing at the bottom of a flight of stairs, smoking a cigarette, but they don't notice her. There's no one on the afterdeck. She walks over to the railing and looks down. Far beneath her, the sea is foaming. The water is white, and by the light of the moon she can make out the trail they leave behind.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?"

She gives a start and turns around. There's a man standing behind her, his black hair waving in the wind.

"Or did you think the film was scary, too?"

Charlotte shakes her head.

"What's your name? I'm Ganesh, named after the god with the head of an elephant. I'm lucky I didn't get such a long nose." He laughs.

"My name is Charlotte Elizabeth, just like my grandmother who's dead."

"Oh, that's too bad! Do you miss her?"

"No. I never met her."

Ganesh squats down and looks out to sea with her. A gull dives into the water and comes up with something in its beak.

"She walked over a mountain with my grandfather and our big clock, then she got an infection on her foot because it was so cold that they couldn't stop to rest. They had to keep walking and her whole foot went black and had to be cut off, otherwise she'd die. But then she died anyway, but my father

didn't cry."

"You come from an adventurous family. Too bad I can't say the same about mine. For centuries they've lived in the same little town at the foot of the Himalayas. I'm the first person in my family to travel."

"Why?"

"I got a scholarship to study in England, so I can become an engineer."

"I have to go to school, too. A boarding school, because I'm six."

"Are you really that old?"

Charlotte nods her head fiercely. "I'm travelling alone," she says firmly. "And I didn't cry."

"That's brave of you. I did."

"Did your father let you cry?"

"No, but I did it in secret."

"All alone?"

Ganesh nods.

"I sometimes cry when I'm alone, but nobody knows," Charlotte says softly.

"I won't tell anybody," Ganesh whispers and locks his lips with an imaginary key.

Charlotte smiles.

"Why are you up this late?"

The smile disappears from her face. Again she presses the bundle to her body and looks out to sea.

Ganesh waits.

"I have to bury her."

"Who?"

Charlotte opens up the cloth that holds the doll with the broken neck.

"Are you going to throw her into the ocean?"

Charlotte nods. "Auntie Ilse says that if I die at sea, they'll put me on a plank and throw me into the sea, because otherwise I'll start to smell and the other people will get sick."

"She could be repaired."

"No."

"Do you want me to try?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Charlotte shakes her head but gives the doll to Ganesh, who gingerly takes it from her.

"What a lovely doll."

"It's a stupid doll."

"She has real hair."

"She's stupid."

Ganesh examines the broken doll. "Shall I try to fix her?"

Charlotte doesn't reply.

"If it doesn't work, then tomorrow we can drop her into the sea, together, with a real wooden plank. But if we manage to fix her, then you can give her a name. A really pretty name."

"What's a pretty name?"

“Maybe something like Khushi. That means ‘happiness.’”

1901 Khyber Pass ~~~

HE IS FRIGHTENED Very, very frightened. William Bridgwater, a young and ambitious road builder who comes from a family of teachers in Ipswich, has made the mistake of his life. He has fallen in love with Elizabeth Charlotte Elphinstone, daughter of the wealthy director of the New Indian Railway, and she with him. They are not just in love, they are head-over-heels in love. For more than six months they have taken advantage of each and every opportunity to meet in secret. The garden of her house is walled, but among the bushes at the back there is a small opening, which William has enlarged. Elizabeth is not allowed to leave the house on her own, since her father is afraid of assaults by members of the Afridi tribe, who continue to oppose British plans to build a railroad through the mountains. Last night, as the first snow of the season was falling on the tents of the railway workers, Elizabeth Elphinstone stood in front of the opening in the wall, showed him her belly, and announced that she was pregnant.

William doesn't get a wink of sleep. The tent that he shares with another engineer stands on the edge of their encampment. After breakfast he writes a letter to his parents telling them that he is going on a long journey. After pushing the letter through the opening in the red box that serves as a mail pickup, he makes it known that he will be away on business for several days. He then leaves the camp, carrying a suitcase. Once outside, he makes his way through the bushes to the path leading to the garden behind Elizabeth Elphinstone's house. He doesn't want to be seen with a suitcase.

Near the opening in the wall he sees a boy with a standing clock. William gives a start. All those months he had managed to avoid her overprotective father and today, of all days, he's been discovered. The boy sees William and raises his hand. Only then does he see that it's Elizabeth. "Are you ready?"

She nods.

"Are you sure you're not going to regret this?"

She shakes her head; a wayward curl escapes from under her heavy cap.

William pushes the curl back under the cap and strokes her cheek with his finger. "Come, shall we be off?"

Elizabeth points to the clock.

William looks at her in astonishment.

"It's the only object of value I have."

"A clock! We can't take a standing clock with us."

"Well, you told me to take my valuables with me. This clock was a present from my grandfather."

"Don't you have a necklace, or a ring or something?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "All I have is this clock. And my belly."

William looks at the clock in desperation. It's taller than Elizabeth herself.

"If I can't take my clock along, then I'm not going," she says firmly.

"But how?"

She points to the hole in the wall. Following her gaze, William sees a bicycle among the bushes.

"It's stuck," Elizabeth says.

“But a bicycle isn’t big enough to carry a grandfather clock.”

“It’s a tandem.”

William starts to pull. There’s a sharp crack, a large chunk of stone breaks away from the wall, and he falls flat on his back in the snow, tandem and all.

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He pulls the blanket over her. It’s cold and dark. The icy wind blows more and more snow onto the mountain.

“Are you hungry?”

Elizabeth nods. William pulls a piece of chocolate out of his coat pocket and gives it to her. They don’t speak. They’re too tired and too cold. William kisses her softly on the mouth. She kisses him back. He can taste the chocolate on her cold lips. They huddle close together.

“If only we could make a fire,” Elizabeth whispers.

William points to the clock, which is firmly tied to the side of the bicycle with two ropes.

“No, not the clock. It’s for Victor.”

“Victor?”

“That’s his name,” she says, and puts both hands on her stomach.

IT IS STILL DARK. William pushes the handlebars of the bicycle while Elizabeth pushes on the back. The clock is on the left and the suitcase on the right. William wants to get past Fort Maude before it gets light. It’s been calm there ever since Afridi tribesmen set it on fire and the British army left, but his mind is still not entirely at rest. The highest point of the pass is now in front of them. Elizabeth sings lullabies softly and William gives thanks to the Lord for this woman. Tonight, when they get to Jamrud, he’ll see to it that she has a warm bath and a warm bed. He’ll make sure that the mother-to-be wants for nothing. He knows a hotel where they can have a good meal.

It starts to snow again. The wind is stronger and fiercer now, blowing the swirling flakes through the opening between the mountain walls. They trudge on, without speaking, the clock and the suitcase between them.

THE STORM RAGES through the pass. Slowly, they plow their way forward. Again and again the tandem comes to a dead stop in the snow. Together they manage to push it forward. They pause, and while Elizabeth beats her arms against her sides, trying to create a bit of warmth, William tightens the ropes around the suitcase and the clock.

“The clock is the future,” she whispers in his ear.

*It’s firewood,* thinks William.

From the top of the pass, where the icy wind has blown the snow from the road, it is all downhill. They attempt to get on the bicycle, but it proves impossible with the clock and the suitcase already on it.

*1901 Jamrud ~~~*

ELIZABETH ELPHINSTONE IS running a high fever. She's lying in a small attic room in the house of an old coppersmith, who doesn't speak a word of English. They spent three days in a hotel, but the owner became more and more curious about Elizabeth's condition. William had to find someone who was willing to help them. The new room is small and has no windows, but it is warm and dry.

Elizabeth has not eaten in days. Nothing but a little tea and the soup that William feeds her. The clock stands in the corner of the room. William hates the clock. If it weren't for the clock, they could have navigated the pass more quickly, and Elizabeth wouldn't have fallen ill. The clock strikes twice. William brings a spoonful of lukewarm soup to her mouth. Suddenly her face is contorted.

"Don't you want any more soup?"

She shakes her head and tries to speak.

William puts his ear close to her mouth.

"It's starting."

"What's starting?"

"The baby."

William looks at her in disbelief. Elizabeth nods weakly. He jumps up and calls out that he's going to get help, but before he reaches the door he runs back to the bed.

"What do you need?"

"You."

"But I don't know anything about how babies are born. I'll ask the owner if he has a sister, a mother, someone who knows about babies."

"Don't leave me alone."

"I have to fetch someone. A woman. I don't know what to do."

Elizabeth's face is twisted in pain. William runs out of the room, down the steps, across the courtyard, out the gate, and into the street. He sees men in long coats. Nowhere does he see a woman. He runs down another street, he peers into tunnels and alleyways. Wherever he looks, he sees nothing but men. He runs back to the house. In the courtyard he knocks on the owner's door. The man with the long red beard opens the door. He drags the man up the stairs by his arm. Elizabeth is lying in bed, moaning softly. In desperation William points to her distended belly.

THE WOMAN IS wearing a long black dress and a headscarf. After sending William out of the room, she bends over Elizabeth. The owner brings buckets of hot water up the stairs. William sets them down inside the room but is immediately sent away again. He sits down at the top of the stairs. He hears Elizabeth's weak cries.

The clock strikes nine. The woman comes out of the room. Her hands are covered in blood. William races in. Elizabeth is lying on the bed, deathly quiet, in a pool of blood. On her belly lies a baby covered in blood, still attached to the umbilical cord. His eyes go not to the child, but to the woman with whom he hoped to grow old, the woman he had intended to worship for the rest of his life. He knows at once it is over. She has left him. He walks out of the room, and behind him he hears the baby's first cries.

*1936 On board the King of Scotland ~~~*

CHARLOTTE BRIDGWATER STARES in amazement at her arms.

“Auntie Ilse! Look! I have pimples all over my arms!”

“That’s gooseflesh,” says Auntie Ilse. “It’s because you’re cold.”

Charlotte runs her hand over the pimples. She’s never been this cold before. But once, when she was in the kitchen with Sita, she put her hands on a block of ice, so that it gradually turned to water.

“Go back to the cabin, put on two shirts and two pairs of underpants on top of each other,” orders Auntie Ilse, who’s wearing a woollen sweater and a tartan skirt.

Charlotte tries to push the pimples back into her skin.

“Stop playing with yourself and put on your scarf. I didn’t give it to you for nothing.”

The girl walks down the deck with Khushi, who is also wearing a scarf around her neck. She sees Ganesh standing at the door to the dining room.

“I have gooseflesh.” She proudly shows him her arm.

“You see? I was right. When you get to England, you’ll see that everyone’s wearing a scarf.”

“You’re not.”

“I was born in the snow. I don’t mind the cold.”

“Is it always cold in England?”

“No, only in spring, autumn, and winter. In the summer it slowly starts to warm up, and sometimes people even go around without a coat.”

“I don’t have a coat.”

“Didn’t your mother pack a coat in your suitcase?”

“I guess she forgot.”

“How about a sweater?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“Do you want to borrow one of mine?”

CHARLOTTE SKIPS AROUND in a thick green woollen sweater — on her, a short skirt. Ganesh’s grandmother spent a good many hours working on it. The sleeves are rolled up and he has tied a string around her waist. Ganesh is proud of the result. Charlotte looks like his little sister. When would he see her again? Would he ever see her again? On board not many people talk to him. Most of the passengers are British couples and military men heading home on leave. They play bridge and midget golf, or drink whisky at the bar, none of them things he’s used to doing to pass the time.

“What shall we play?” Charlotte puts her doll on a chair and looks at him.

“Do you know blow-blow-I’ll-catch-you?”

“Is it scary?”

“Sometimes. If you play it at night, when there’s no moon.”

Ganesh spreads his arms as far as he can and bends over, while holding his head up. “Choose a wind.”

“A wind?”

“Yes, a hard wind or sharp wind, fat wind, soft wind, warm wind, cold wind, tickle wind, swivel wind, morning wind, or winter wind.”

Charlotte looks at him open-mouthed. “Do you know that many different winds?”

“In the mountains we have lots more winds. Feather wind, sand wind, snow wind, race wind, quiet wind, bride’s wind, summer wind, dive wind, clap wind, fall wind, push wind, north, west, east, and

south wind, and of course the dream wind. There are lots more, but those are the most important ones. First you choose a wind and make it blow. The other person has to guess which wind it is. If you guess right, you have to grab the wind and make a new wind blow. Do you get it?"

Charlotte nods. "I'll go first." She spreads her arms wide, bends from the waist, narrows her eyes to slits, and whooshes around the deck.

"Hard wind?" Ganesh shouts.

She goes on blowing.

"Sharp wind? Race wind? Whirlwind?" Ganesh shouts the names of all the winds he knows, but the little girl isn't satisfied with any of them.

"No, no," she shrieks.

"Night wind . . . dry wind . . . fleece wind . . . devil's wind . . . sun wind . . . ?" Ganesh calls out the names of more and more winds.

"It's a really easy one."

"Top wind?"

She shakes her head.

"Finger wind . . . sulphur wind!"

She runs around him in circles, she laughs, arms wide open, her head bowed. "Wrong, wrong, all of them wrong. And all of them right."

"That's impossible."

"It's the wind of India," she crows, "the wind that blows around our house just before the monsoon. She hurtles past. "Now that you know the answer, you have to catch me."

Ganesh runs after her, arms wide apart and head low, his steps becoming longer and faster than hers. With a sweep of his arm, he lifts her from the ground and swings her around and around. They're going faster and faster. And laughing harder and harder.

There is a hair-raising scream, and two hands pull her down. Charlotte lands on the deck with a smack. She cries out in pain. Auntie Ilse grabs her hand and jerks her to her feet.

"Help! HELP!"

People come running from all directions, shouting questions.

"He, he . . ." Auntie Ilse points to Ganesh. "He tried to steal my child!"

Two men grab him by the shoulders, drag him backwards, and push him against the wall. A tall man with a moustache punches him in the stomach. Ganesh doubles over. A man wearing brown boots gives him a kick.

Auntie Ilse pulls the sweater over Charlotte's head and throws it over the railing.

A shower of blows rains down on Ganesh, mercilessly, without stopping. "Brown rat, you'll pay for this." He doesn't feel the blows, he doesn't feel anything. All he hears is Charlotte crying.

### *1936 Grand Palace ~~~*

THE MAHARAJA'S SEVEN daughters are gathered together in the silver room on the first floor. They are all attired in costly saris and jewels. Chutki, the youngest daughter, is bothered by the weight of the gold chains around her neck, wrists, and ankles, and the nose ornament, which her eldest sister had insisted



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- <http://dadhoc.com/lib/Jackpot--High-Times--High-Seas--and-the-Sting-That-Launched-the-War-on-Drugs.pdf>
- <http://wind-in-herleshausen.de/?freebooks/Killing-the-Second-Dog.pdf>
- <http://thermco.pl/library/Strangers.pdf>
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- <http://transtrade.cz/?ebooks/The-Quantum-Rose--The-Saga-of-the-Skolian-Empire--Book-6-.pdf>
- <http://test.markblaustein.com/library/Thinking-Kids--Math--Grade-1.pdf>