

ONE

Divya had no reason to feel threatened that fateful morning a year ago when Raghav kissed her tenderly on her forehead. She was wearing an olive green outfit that he said complemented her hazel eyes. Her eyes were brown, but he had made them hazel. She had not meant to follow him as he accused her later—there had actually been no motive in that idle saunter.

She blinked at first when she saw Raghav and Anu together, their faces close, Anu's tear-stained. Could it be true? His fingers touched the hair that fell in wisps on her face, her dimpled smile buried in anxiety. His tone hushed as though he were comforting her; her face lowered and vulnerable. The wonderful weather, birds chirping in the hustle and bustle of Mumbai, and even the wind turned conspirator.

Anu and Raghav had a history. Friends at college, back then they were always together. Platonic was what they described themselves as, but Divya knew that platonic had the potential to grow into something else.

Raghav's shirt was creased, his tie loosened. He was not the Raghav she knew; this one was a player, suave, his jaw line prominent, his smile concerned, his face nearly touching hers. Tenderness. How could he?

Her own reflection in a shop window added to the duped feeling. Things came together like a fallen jigsaw suddenly making sense—the late nights, the sudden trips when Anu was on 'sick leave', the unexplained phone calls, the gifts. A photo frame that Raghav would never buy, the white lies, the unfamiliar perfume scent.

Divya had taken a cab home—she couldn't drive. She kept seeing Anu's fingers wrapped in his. What had gone wrong? Why was their life not good enough? Was it because they didn't share the same geography, he a Maharashtrian and she a Keralite? Was it because he liked traditional and she liked classical western? Was it because of other things she didn't even know about? Like what Anu really meant to him.

She didn't take the lift that day but ran up four flights of stairs. She didn't notice the little boy in the building who ran to her and cried, "Aunty." She didn't notice her absentee maid who hurried past, hiding her face in her *pallu*. All she saw was the reason for her restlessness and doubt, coiling like a snake around her over the past year. All of it made sense.

* * *

Five years ago they couldn't stop their fingers from touching. They had met at a pub. Raghav had found her gawkiness and height alluring. He didn't understand why he walked towards her and introduced himself since he normally didn't do those sorts of things. "I guess it's destiny," he would tell her later when they were married.

It had to be, as he hardly ever visited pubs. One of his friends had coaxed him into waiting for him at a pub that day and he didn't turn up. Raghav waited uncomfortably, his mind a hotbed of complaints. *I don't like the smoke, the heavy smell of alcohol and the dim lights.* Then he saw Divya and their eyes locked. His heart beat frantically and he followed it.

He knew that Divya was special. "Let's go someplace else," he said. His friend forgotten, they walked out of the darkness into the world.

It was a night that stayed with him, almost a movie moment. He grew up watching movies, but then movies were always movies, right? Those first kisses, caresses and dreams in slow motion could not come true for an aspiring architect from a conservative middle class family.

Mumbai disappeared into sea spray. Divya's eyes were brown lozenges that turned gold at certain angles. Her skin was tanned and taut. Her English a drawl, so different from his text-book rendition. She smelt sweet when they kissed. Her skin melted into his.

They tried to leave it at that. After all, they had little in common. Besides, he already took it for granted that he would be with Anu. Anu who lived next door, with whom he shared all his little triumphs and failures. His parents took it for granted too.

As luck would have it, he kept bumping into Divya—at the railway station (can you imagine meeting someone by accident at a railway

station in Mumbai?), the supermarket (imagine meeting someone you like at Big Bazaar), the Gateway (again and again, like a sign).

Divya had lost her mother when she was very young and the thought that she could achieve so much (a degree, a career, a house) on her own made him proud. He had no choice but to break someone's heart—it had to be his or Anu's.

Anu did not seem important any more. He began to remember things about her that he didn't like—her oily pigtailed when she was in school, her plumpness that could turn into obesity, her complacency, her button eyes, cute at best. Besides, when he looked at her eyes, there was no spark. All he felt was familiarity and that was not what he wanted in marriage.

His parents were baffled. His colleagues warned him. Anu was taken aback. But he was sure that he was doing the right thing when he packed his things and moved out. He remembered thinking how antiquated the people around him were. This must be how a bird felt when it went out on its own; this big feeling, the feeling of being a man.

When was it that love turned on its head?



TWO

When you fall off the cliff, you clutch at anything you can get. The will to live is so great that it consumes your every breath. The thought of being cheated on drove Divya into mission overdrive. She began to log into his account and scour through his friends list. She started checking his text messages when he bathed. She would eavesdrop on phone conversations and check his bags after he returned from a trip. He was careful though, and gave nothing concrete away.

Sharing words became a burden. So they tiptoed around each other, avoided conversation and pretended that brushing dust under the rug would tidy things up. Their silences became long.

When Raghav passed her, Divya would smell another woman's perfume. This unsettled her and she began to dream. This drove her to the edge—the suspicion, the silence and the dreams of a woman whose sadness multiplied within her being.

Her friends saw the void in her eyes; her colleagues observed her lackluster performance during board meetings; her father heard it as protracted gaps when she talked self-consciously on the phone. Only Raghav did not see it—or pretended not to.

The couple hadn't said the D word yet. She had written the word down on pieces of paper (then crumpled it up, too schoolgirlish), typed it into an email (then deleted it, in case he forwarded it to Anu), texted it into her mobile (but it looked ridiculous in the confines of the smaller-than-her-palm screen). All the while, she was afraid that he would say the D-word, relieved that he hadn't polluted her desire to fix their marriage.

She had heard all about Dr. Ray from her socialite friend Emily.

“He has a magic touch with broken marriages. You'll just open up when you see him,” Emily promised.

The first time she saw Dr. Ray, she was nervous. Questions filled her mind—*how could you tell a stranger your sorrows? Why do you need a sounding board? Why not just find a solution through prayer?* She had been taught by her

father to conceal weakness, brush aside grief like dust, just as when her mother had left and the chapter was closed.

Dr. Ray was everything Emily had promised her he would be—a real yogi, his silver hair wrapped in a black turban, large opals and amethysts on his rings, a man with the magic touch.

How right Dr. Ray was. How little Raghav knew about the real Divya, the girl that hibernated inside her like a dream. All Raghav knew about her now was her simmering mind, the fractured brain trying to cope with his misplaced intimacies.

Dr. Ray was right about one knot that she had to untie—the knot of suspicion. It was far too much to live with the feeling of being cheated on—the thought fragmented her.



THREE

*Do you know what loneliness is?
It's the cracking of the bone and the hungry fire burning you from within—for what
else can fire do but burn?
The fire begins with a glance or a brush of the fingers.
You cease to know who you are unless experienced by the other.
A new center that catapults you to a universe you believed could not exist, a universe
outside yourself.
And then that fire is temple-like; a thousand diyas in your heart, organized rows of
happiness.
The mornings are for him as are the evenings.
Love is simple—it is lying down in the altar and sacrificing your blood for the light.
What happens then, when the fire begins to spread and the man you love cannot
quench, will not quench it?
What happens, when the moon becomes a threat and reminds you of the woman you
are, the shadow you will remain, the unsatisfied breath that is your destiny?
Forests are burnt and then all men.
Beauty disappears in a moment. All that remains is charred blood.*

The doctor looked at the page intently and then at her long sad-eyed face. It couldn't be she who wrote it, of course it wasn't. He couldn't believe that tall, unsure Divya, crippled by disappointment Divya, could write poems like the one she had shown him. She said the words had poured out of her one restless night when her sleep was disturbed by too many dreams.

She was from a place called Cherakad, a small village at the edge of the sub-continent, a lush tropical village filled with snakes and elephant herds. He had been there once, many years ago. Memories of shadows thrown by palm fronds and lost reflections from a lake had stayed with him. The words on the page that Divya showed him took him there. The script was ancient but he could decipher some of it, scholar that he was. It was the story of love.

“How remarkable that you were able to transcribe the words down to the very script,” he told her, looking at the clumsy handwriting, the characters jumping out at him like the moving tips of flames. “Did you know that Coleridge wrote the poem Kubla Khan this very same way, as from a dream? Remarkable!”

Divya had not read a word of poetry in her life, “These words keep playing in my head like a broken record,” she said. “I don’t know what any of this means. It’s like a premonition, isn’t it, doctor? It frightens me.”

The doctor sighed. How could he put it to her delicately? Her problems had a psychic source. “Divya, these dreams only point to a wellspring within you that must be tapped. The song in your memory is an arrow from the past pointing to the future. Will you tell me a little more about your past, about Cherakad?”

He was good at this: opening up other people’s Pandora boxes, looking deep into their souls, pulling out stories that they themselves had buried and forgotten. It never ceased to amaze him that often it was childhood memories that were the key. There was more to Divya’s pain than her husband’s transgressions. The source lay outside her current life, in something that had absorbed her a long time ago perhaps?

In the beginning she hesitated, but under his gentle probing, she eventually gave in and out poured a torrent of memories and thoughts held back for years. She told him about the man that was Raghav. It was as though her sadness was a story waiting to be heard.



FOUR

When Divya was ten she would go to Cherakad for the holidays. It was an alternate world devoid of technology. No phone access, no television, no computers. The 1980s. She didn't remember her mother much, but she did remember her grandmother who was like the house she told stories about. The house with a hundred rooms and stories that filled every molecule of its existence.

"My grandmother told me all the usual stories that kids were fed with, but the stories about the Big House filled my mind with wonder. Maybe because the house was right there before my eyes," she told Dr. Ray. He knew about the Big House. He had been there.

It was the traditional eight-pillared house with black floors and ancient hand-painted murals. Inside, there was a courtyard through which you could watch the rainfall. The rooms were small—one boxed into another; many families lived there at one time. Nobody knew when the house was built and when its inhabitants dispersed. Only one person remained—a woman with lotus eyes and lustrous black hair like the ocean.

In his consultation chamber, Dr. Ray asked Divya to relax on the plush divan, drenched in the memories of so many before her. He decided to cancel appointments for the rest of the day.

"Regress, turn back the clock and enter your inner core," he said, his voice turning into a whisper.

As Divya shut her eyes, her mind transported her to the entrance of the Big House. The doctor shut his eyes and listened as she described the enormous lichen-covered gates and the rain that fell.

"There was a paved road to the steps that led to a verandah which was empty," she said. He asked her to imagine herself opening the door of the house and to tell him what was inside.

"Inside? But it's dark. Now I can see a little—there are sepia portraits, bronze lamps and old rusted swords. There is a courtyard...."

“And then?” Dr. Ray raised his voice. “And then? In the courtyard watching the rain, who is it?”

“Bats fly away, so many of them. The smell of bat droppings. Snakes. They come out of their eggs.”

“Bats, snakes...are there people in the house?” the doctor asked.

“There is one,” Divya searched the air as though she felt its skin. “But she is not real.”

“She?”

“She...a woman in white. She doesn't look at me, always away.”

“Have you seen her before Divya?”

“My grandmother...she told me about her. Long ago.”

“What did she tell you?”

“A story.”



FIVE

Five centuries ago Cherakad was enormous forestland, tamed and made habitable by some snake-worshipping clans who were tolerant of each other. The place was infested with snakes and since they were worshipped, the King of the Nayaka dynasty was advised by his astrologer not to colonize this tiny piece of land.

In the King's court were several illustrious poets and scholars. The King loved knowledge but dearer than all his pursuits and queens was one concubine in particular, the blue-eyed Meenakshi. She was a voracious reader, rare at that time; so he built her a library to quench her thirst that only deepened as did his love for her. She enjoyed the attention and company of his scholarly coterie—eight worldly poets who had swords for tongues and exchanged knowledge as pearls with the Dutch.

It reached Meenakshi's ear that there was a philosopher boy from the hills who, many believed, had been touched by the finger of God. One bright morning, when Shankara walked into court, Meenakshi was taken aback. She fell in love all over again for here was a prince clear of voice and mind—half man, half sage. The King was a good lover, no doubt, but here was incomparable youth.

"I come to pay homage, I come to provide but/What can I give with my begging bowl?/Your quest is all," he said to the King.

Meenakshi watched the lithe-limbed Shankara as he described his walk from the hills that started with a dream in his heart. As a young boy, he had always yearned for things beyond his grasp. He did not fear the unknown as he knew that when a vagabond opens up his heart, his feet would find a palace.

A fire was lit in her heart.

"If you want to impress, you must be bolder with your poetry," she teased him during the poetry sessions.

Meenakshi held Shankara's hand and led him into her library filled with books from all over Madurai—there were even books from Europe

that the Dutch had gifted the learned King. Meenakshi traced the lines of the maps with her fingers,

“Can you imagine, Shankara, how these seafarers came with their love of gold? They were not ashamed of wanting more—of want itself.”

Shankara bowed his head graciously and left with a gift, the keys to the library. He realized that within him there was a quiet sanctuary that no one could enter—not the King, not a concubine. Only art was his sanctuary—he was entitled to take on the role of court poet.

He disappeared into a realm of study to discover seafaring nations, the routes they conquered and the maps they drew. Meenakshi’s library opened up his heart—half-truths began to find light. Fables and myth shed their plumage to reveal reality. There were not enough poems written about the world and he had such a gap to fill.

Whenever rhymes came to him, he hurried off to his solitary space to write. He replaced his iron stylus and palm leaves with the flourish of the quill on creamy reams of paper. When he closed his eyes, images came to him of opulence, of the King and his coterie of eight, of the beautiful concubine who showed him the world with the tip of her nimble finger, of the library of a thousand books, and his fingers raced to write it all down.

With each new poem, the prolific Shankara Shastry began to be considered more and more worthy of joining the court dialectics. He learnt the ways of the court. The power of the poet was supreme; the poet was an acknowledged legislator when it came to all things, except the King’s harem.

Perhaps this was why he was anaesthetized when it came to the milky-skinned moon-faced Meenakshi. He was unable to be aroused by her presence. He found it surprising that a woman of her beauty had no effect on him, so conscious was he of the haloed King. Would court life deprive him of any emotion, would it make him incapable of love?

The moon and the sun, the wind and the sea/

In your lashes, your dimpled smile/And yet, and yet/ I am blind.

Meenakshi often visited Shankara Shastry in her library where the large French windows opened on to an enormous lake. This image was etched into his heart—a motif of how one should live. One day she arrived, butterfly-like, and let her fingers graze his skin. He took in her

scent and admired her openness. The women he knew were of the earth—this one of the heavens.

Shankara was immersed in a historical tract when Meenakshi entered. It was just when his imagination entered that clash of cultures of the southern tip and Beijing that the spell was broken. He asked Meenakshi to leave.

Her lavender and white silk robes, the smell of Arabian fragrances and the expectant smile disturbed him. Meenakshi's blue eyes turned green and turquoise, like angry peacocks dancing the rain song.

She bent toward him, loosened her hair and touched his arm. "I will teach you all there is to know, boy from the hills," she said. "And those things are not in books."

Shankara rose and touched Meenakshi's face. Of course there were things he knew little about but knowledge had opened his heart. "I take your leave," he said, leaving the sheaves of the manuscript he had read flapping in the breeze.

He left Meenakshi in the quietness of the library. She tied her hair and with it her resolve. No man had remained this stoic to her touch. She had seen men with tingling spines aroused by her mere fragrance—she had a gift she knew was hard to resist yet here was a man who refused to bend. He could be dangerous, he could tell on her and ruin her prospects.

She conferred with the Odiyan—the voodoo man with the ability to ruin lives. He could transmogrify into a dog and bite the flesh off the poet—a single bite and he would go rabid with love for the first woman who came his way, even if it were a bitch or a sow. "Let him know love also," Meenakshi said.

The King could not know about this wound in her heart—he had drawn her out of being a mere concubine. It frightened her that she wanted Shankara to lean her against the table while the light streamed on his lean arms and lithe frame, kissing her lips as the curtains bounced gently in the breeze. It frightened her that she could no longer have her way with a young man.

The accusation was aired. Shankara had frequented the library with Meenakshi and attempted to molest her. "Poetry is one thing, but acting on it! I am as shocked as you are," the King confided in Meenakshi when she revealed how she tried to tear herself from his embrace. "I was so

surprised, taken aback, that I turned into a lump of stone. I saw him as a brother your highness, now when I set eyes on him—I burn with rage.”

The King banished Shankara from the Nayaka court for a year. He wished he could distrust his concubine but he knew that he was ensnared. His wives had warned him a hundred times over that the woman had the power to bewitch, but in her eyes he only saw the truth.

A single proclamation later, Shankara left the palace with a sheaf of poems. He muttered the name of the lord and walked into the outskirts to Cherakad—he looked behind at the receding kingdom—like dreams disappearing when you wake up in the morning.

Banishment was destiny—perhaps his poetry would profit from this, perhaps the verses would die. As he walked, thorns bled him and trees loomed like a threat. For food, he plucked berries. He dreamt of fallen heads and caressing fingers and would awake soaked with sweat.

This went on for many days—the walk, the disorientation, the fright at slithering shadows and the ambush of forest life. A grotesque looking wolf-like creature grabbed his foot and bit off a piece of his flesh. Blood poured out of his wound creating a red river on the ground he sat on. The creature disappeared so quickly after the attack that he wondered whether it was a nightmare.

Dreams die like this, he thought, looking at his wounds. *Palaces turn into forests*.

He could go no further. He thought of truth, the white crystal heart that was the wellspring of all his poetry. Where was it? Why had he gone in search of fame and name? Look at what happened. He had been happy enough in the hills—but he had been pulled downward to the labyrinthine court life.

He sat beneath a tree that spread itself out in wide embrace of all the elements. Perhaps he gave up, perhaps he meditated. After a while, when he opened his eyes, he felt refreshed. His disgruntlement, regret and sadness felt like memories. It was as though he had a sip of elixir—there was a lot of clarity. Only clarity that had a form—a woman stood before him.

A woman in white, the woman in Divya’s dreams, the woman her grandmother described, Thathri, unhappy Thathri. She hovered in the air ever so slightly; you could never tell if you didn’t look carefully.

Shankara had never seen hair such as hers; Meenakshi's paled in comparison. Her eyes were lotus buds and he fell into their quicksand depths with a passion. Suddenly he receded into the shadows of his imagination and she was all.

He followed her into the house while a dog howled in the distance.



SIX

Dr. Ray stroked Divya's hair and waited for her to regain composure.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Divya shook her head sadly—some images surfaced of whiteness and rain but perhaps she needed an interpreter. Her eyes were sad and heavy with kohl that had spread.

"What's wrong doctor?"

"It is as I suspected," he said. "Divya, with some patients the solution could be within their grasp. Little steps they take could free them from their misery."

"What about me?" Divya asked. The fog in her mind had disappeared and again—with crystal clarity—her life with Raghav, her worse half, was back to haunt her.

"You?" Dr. Ray said. "Yours is an interesting case. The solution is by no means unreachable but...."

"But?"

"You must free yourself of your dreams."

Divya went pale. Dr. Ray felt a wedge of compassion go out to his patient. She was haunted by the unconscious memory of a *yakshi*, a bloodthirsty, magical, mythical being. Some said they were women whose souls remained on earth even after they died by suicide or ill will. Others called them spirits who were misunderstood, misplaced beings from some other world where they fed on star light and moon dust.

Divya was in a troubled marriage, a media professional stumbling in her personal life. The path of love was difficult and thorny. Divya squarely blamed Raghav for her misery but the root was from another source and perhaps even another time. He looked out of the French windows and saw her leave. The poem called out to him and he read the words again.

Do you know what loneliness is?