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THE CALL

THE PHONE CALL CAME ON the third day of the Test match. Dunstan's favorite cricket player, Sanath Jayasuriya, had just led Sri Lanka's fightback and the team now had a chance of beating Pakistan. So intent was Dunstan on the game, he hadn't noticed his wife Helen standing in the doorway leading to the kitchen or heard her say his name. It was only when she said his name a second time, the tone of her voice so sharp it registered with a jolt, that he turned and looked at her. When he saw the worry in her face, he stood up. "The phone for you."

"If it's the office, tell them I'm watching—"

"It's from the States. It's the police. They want to talk to you."

"What police?" he asked, but she had already started to walk away from him into the kitchen.

He picked up the receiver gingerly, as if it were the phone, not the person on the other end, with the power to hurt him. They didn't get calls from America. They had only the one niece there—she had moved to New York City with her husband—and they hadn't heard from her in two years. It was a mistake of some sort. But, still, a vague fear nagged him. He stood for a moment, phone to ear, before finally asking, "Yes?"

"Dunstan Amarasinghe?" a voice, deep and nasal, pronounced the last name annunciating each syllable carefully. When Dunstan didn't reply, the voice continued, "I'm an officer with the N.Y.P.D." There was a pause. "That's the New York Police Department."

At the end of the kitchen, in the room that contained the stoves, the servants were banging pots and pans as they prepared the evening meal. Dunstan noticed his wife standing to the side and tried to signal her to ask them to stop. But she wasn't looking at him. She was staring at the kitchen sink. A dark stain spread over the surface of the basin. While he and his wife watched, a hole formed in the middle, exposing the porcelain underneath. As quickly as it had opened, the hole closed forming a thick, undulating mass. It took him a moment to realize what

he was looking at—hundreds of tiny, black ants. Someone had thrown food or a drink into the drain and then forgotten to rinse the basin. Later, his wife would remember the ants as an omen. Dunstan would remember the flash of anger that passed through him, the desire to slam down the phone and find who had done this, to shake them for such a thoughtless act. Maybe it had really only served as a way to distract him from the sorrow he had suspected inevitable when he first picked up the phone. But, still, he would always remember, with a little guilt, that it was through a veil of anger he heard what the officer had called to tell him. The news that began with a simple apology: "I'm sorry, sir, to be the one to have to tell you this."

Dunstan's aunt, Piyum-punchi dabbed at her tears with the faded corner of a handkerchief. "These things are such a shame," she wailed.

They sat on the veranda of Dunstan's house, finishing a pot of tea. It was early evening, and a funeral procession was passing. They couldn't see it over the walls separating the garden from the road, but they could hear the chanting and the drums. A cemetery was on the other side of their neighborhood, and the funeral processions passed by once, twice, sometimes even three times a week. Dunstan had lived in this house all his life—was born in it. Once as a child, even though he'd been forbidden to watch the funerals, he had snuck away from his nana to the corrugated sheets of steel that gated his home from the street. He stood on tiptoe and peered through the mail slot. From this vantage, he saw slices of grief: a face contorted beyond recognition; a woman, head buried in the drape of her white sari; a man with his arm around her shoulders holding her up so she could walk; the edges of the long, wooden box, as innocuous as any piece of furniture in his home, but the focus of everyone's sorrow. He stood there terrified until he also started to wail and scream. His nana tore him away from the gate and took him—still screaming—to his father, who asked him why he was so afraid. He couldn't explain. It wasn't until years later he recalled that incident. He was reading a poem by an American woman, a poet Helen had insisted he read when they had first fallen in love. She had told him that this poet knew best what it meant to be a woman. He had read the poems with all good faith, never admitting he had thought the woman mad. But there was one line that had stayed with him: I felt a funeral in my brain. When he read that line, he'd recalled the scenes from the mail slot. That's what he hadn't been able to explain to his father. The way the mourners' wails had thrown his thoughts into chaos, how his head had started to pound in time with the drums. How the mourners' grief had pushed its way into his skull, unbidden and unyielding. He couldn't help but think of the incident and that line from the poem now, as the pounding of the drums, once again, made its way up his spine and pulsated across the back of his head. He closed

his eyes and rubbed his temples. Helen leaned forward and gently stroked his knee.

"First Arthur and now Sopi," Piyum-punchi continued. Sopi was Dunstan's niece, the one who had just died; Arthur was Dunstan's only brother and Sopi's father. Arthur and his wife had been killed in a car accident ten years ago. "So much tragedy for this family," she added. When he opened his eyes, he saw his wife staring at him, worried. He took her hand and gently kissed the back of it. "And to be murdered." Piyum-punchi tucked the handkerchief into her sari jacket and leaned forward. "A suicide-murder. Killed by her own husband and then he kills himself," she whispered as if Dunstan was not already aware of the facts.

Helen frowned and looked down. She adjusted the photo album balanced precariously on her narrow legs. "It's so strange. I can't find a good picture of Sopi. She's always hiding her face or in the shade somehow."

"She was a very, very shy girl. She didn't like us to take pictures of her," Piyum-punchi said.

"But some of these are photos we took at the wedding."

"I said this!" cried Piyum-punchi. "Remember, Dunstan? The wedding photographer lost all the photographs. I said that was a bad sign. Nothing good would come of this marriage."

Helen looked up from the photo album, her eyes narrowed, her lips pulled into a tight line. Dunstan watched her, poised to intervene. Helen detested Piyum-punchi and blamed her for Sopi's death. She didn't say anything though. Instead, she turned the page of the album and scrutinized each photograph as if trying to find the one that would reveal Sopi.

Dunstan already knew that she wouldn't find a good phtograph. He had pulled the albums out the night before after the family had decided he would be the one to go to New York and identify Sopi's body. He had realized he couldn't remember what Sopi looked like. He remembered images. Sopi, after her parents' accident, huddled in the sitting room of her house, being told she would be going to live with Piyum-punchi. Sopi at her engagement party, always looking down, always being doted on by some auntie who seemed to block her from everyone else's view. Sopi at her wedding draped in a red sari. He could even remember features: her dark skin, her slight frame, her thick wiry hair kept in tight braids. But he couldn't piece her together to form a whole person and this inability left him feeling remorseful. He wouldn't be able to identify someone whose face he couldn't even recall.

"A pretty girl, but that skin! So dark. It wasn't easy finding a match. We had to do what we could for her," said Piyum-punchi.

"She was very beautiful," Helen retorted. Dunstan noticed that Helen's right leg had begun to shake in agitation. When they were younger, that habit—burning petrol his father had called it—had endeared her to him, had seemed a sign of her spunk and vigor. But now, for a woman in her early fifties who in all other ways had become elegant and wise, the gesture appeared embarrassingly girlish, an atavism from a long-shed past.

Piyum-punchi leaned toward Dunstan and asked, "Didn't you have a talk with the boy before the wedding? Didn't we have concerns?"

"We?" cried Helen. "We didn't do anything to—"

Dunstan put his hand on Helen's arm, "Yes, Piyum-punchi, I talked to him. He seemed normal. A little odd, perhaps, but a harmless fellow. Or so it seemed at the time."

Piyum-punchi nodded. "This is the thing. They are saying he was a good boy and that this was not like him."

"I don't understand?"

"That she must have provoked this in some way." Piyum-punchi leaned closer and whispered, "She was having an affair!"

"This is stupidity," said Helen. "Who would make up a lie like that?"

Piyum-punchi looked at Helen, concerned. "But, darling, I'm not suggesting she was in the wrong. I'm only saying that when Dunstan goes to New York he should find out the truth so we can fight all these lies."

Helen stared at her, blinking. Finally, she put the album on the table beside Dunstan, collected the teacups onto a serving tray, and walked into the house.

"Who is saying these things, Piyum-punchi?" Dunstan asked after Helen had left.

"The husband's family. Foolish people in our family."

He picked up the album and started to thumb absent-mindedly through the pages.

"Whatever she's done, this is a cruel end. There is no need to add more cruelty to it."

"Do not blame this on me—" Piyum-punchi was interrupted by a crash from the kitchen. "What has gotten into her?" she gasped.

"Enough, Piyum-punchi. Go. I'll call you later."

He found his wife crouched over shards of china. "I slipped," she muttered. He noticed that Helen had been crying. He tried to think of something to say but, before he could, she started to speak, "How can she talk like that—" She stopped. When she regained her composure, she turned and looked directly up at him. Her eyes were rimmed with red; the skin along the sides of her nose and cheeks glistened. "If you could kill people," she began, "if you could murder them for having affairs, there would be as many dead men. You of all people must know

that." She had stopped crying and something in the transformation of her features from sorrow to a certain, familiar remoteness reminded him of a door latch clicking shut. He quickly looked away. Helen stood up and brushed the dust from her skirt. "I'll go find one of the servants to clean this up."

During the flight to the States, he attempted to focus his mind, to recall an image of Sopi's face, some memory that would leave a clear impression of her, but his mind kept wandering to his meeting with Sopi's fiancée two years ago.

He had, the night before that meeting, been making love to his secretary in his office in Colombo. His hands had gripped her breasts, his lips tugged at the tender skin of one of her nipples, when all of a sudden his secretary yowled and batted the side of his head with her hand. "Thathi, be gentle," she cried. "Squeeze all you want. These breasts won't make milk for an old man." That she had called him thathi—father—had stunned him. She might as well have slapped him in the face. This might have left him more dignity.

It was with the memory of this humiliation that he met the boy the next day. He hadn't even thought the talk necessary. Helen had pushed him to schedule it. She and Dunstan had tried to pay special attention to Sopi after her parents' death. But perhaps because Sopi's presence reminded him of the absence of his brother or perhaps because it simply wasn't acceptable for a man to become close to such a young girl, Dunstan, despite his love, always kept a distance. Helen all but adopted Sopi. They had only sons, and Sopi was like a daughter to her. So, when Piyum-punchi announced she had found a match for Sopi, Helen protested vehemently. One night, she told her fears to Dunstan. At nineteen, Sopi was too young to be married, and there was something a bit off about the boy. If Dunstan would only talk to him, she would accept his opinion.

But as the boy sat timidly in Dunstan's office, Dunstan hadn't focused on him. Instead, he stared through the open door at his secretary's back as she huddled over the typewriter. Dunstan didn't really consider the boy's responses to his half-hearted questions, deliberating instead on the nape of his secretary's neck as it glistened with sweat. And it wasn't the boy's words he heard, but the memory of his secretary's cry, repeating endlessly in his mind. The boldness of her protest. It was true that he was, at fifty-one, nearly twenty years older than she was. Yes, a bad back caused him to stoop a little when he walked and, yes, his once thick, black hair was gray and receding. And it was true he needed glasses to read the simplest little note. Still she had seemed to enjoy him. So how could she call him an old man?

When the boy finished speaking, Dunstan shook his hand and walked him to the office door. Later that evening, Dunstan quashed all

Helen's concerns. Told her she was being overprotective. Now, he wondered, in that moment, if he had focused on questioning Sopi's fiancée and not on his own desire, he might have saved his niece's life.His protest along with Helen's would have put a stop to the wedding. Instead, he, an old man, lived, and Sopi—who he had believed would be protected by her youth—was dead. Surely, he was to blame in some way.

The pilot announced they would begin their descent into New York. Dunstan looked out the plane window and was surprised to see small, tidy squares of green between rows of neatly arranged brick houses. He had never been to America—had only traveled once outside of Sri Lanka—but he had seen New York City on American television shows. It was made of skyscrapers and concrete. He asked the man sitting next to him why they weren't landing in the city. His seatmate laughed and said, "That is New York City. Well, it's Queens, anyway." Dunstan looked back down, but now all that was visible was the ocean, black and shining, flecked with streaks of white foam, rents in the otherwise unmarred surface. This was nothing like the blue-green oceans surrounding Sri Lanka. This was dark and vast and solid. As it rushed toward him, unbidden and unyielding, he was forced to turn away, before nausea overwhelmed him.

It had been three days since the murder but the person on the viewing room monitor had changed beyond recognition. The hair was shaved and a line of black stitches ran across the forehead. The face was swollen; the skin, once dark, had turned gray; and a crescent of pink tongue protruded from between the lips, as if in death the corpse mocked the living world. This thing recalled a prop from some crude horror film, not his niece. This couldn't be Sopi. The investigator for the medical examiner's office, anticipating Dunstan's thoughts, began to list all the physical results of death he should expect. "Take your time," she said. "This is a shock, I know."

The desk clerk, when he arrived, had told him it wouldn't be necessary to identify Sopi. Dunstan had still requested to see her. He had expected a dark, dimly lit morgue and a shrouded body. He had prepared himself for the sheet to be drawn back and for him to be able to immediately recognize her. She would look peaceful, at rest. Instead he stood in a brightly lit viewing room, painted a ludicrously pleasant shade of pink, staring at a monitor. They would use the monitor, the investigator explained, to ease the process. But this thing on the screen—with its remote likeness to human being—invoked nothing at all, no sadness, no memories, only emptiness.

When he finally nodded, he wasn't sure he really believed this was Sopi, but knew there was nothing gained by denying what logically had to be. The investigator offered condolences and led him back to the

front desk. A young man began to explain the forms Dunstan would have to complete in order to receive Sopi's death certificate

The man was tall and thin, angry red pustules formed remarkably organized rows, like ritual scars, across the pale skin of one cheek. He half-listened to what the clerk told him. Dunstan's head had begun to throb in time with the flickering of the fluorescent lights. In Sri Lanka, it was blindingly bright outside but the rooms were kept dim during the day. Here in New York City, it seemed the exact opposite. It was unrelentingly gray outside, but all the buildings were brightly, even painfully, lit. He rubbed his temples with one hand and said, "I feel a funeral in my brain."

The young clerk's eyes narrowed, and he chewed the corner of his lip. "I guess I could try to find you a couple of aspirin," he offered. Dunstan shook his head and pulled out a small book from his pocket. It contained the only address he had for Sopi. He pointed to it and asked if he knew where it was and how to travel there.

"Jamaica, Queens?" said the boy, obviously relieved that he wouldn't have to search for a bottle of aspirin. "Yeah, that's pretty easy to get to. No problem."

Twice he had to stop and ask directions as he walked along Jamaica Avenue. From the throngs of people—all varying shades of brown, some dressed in jeans, others in colorfully-patterned cotton prints, a few spoke French to each other—he picked Indians each time. He wasn't sure why. Both men, from the way they wrapped their turbans and their long, trimmed beards, had to be Sikh and would be, if they were all in their own countries, as different from him as any American. But here, by the mere fact he was in a place whose newness made him a little afraid, he felt a bond that came from seeing someone that looked like him and sounded like him, as if the strangeness of a place trumped the other differences.

The neighborhood in which Sopi had lived was only a few blocks from Jamaica Avenue. The streets were neat and quiet with trim lawns turned yellow-brown by the chill November air. A group of teenage girls brushed passed him, chadors covering their heads, the hems of their *salwar kameez* swaying beneath their winter coats. One of them flicked the butt of a cigarette at his feet and glanced at him through the corner of her eyes as if daring him to say something. He crossed the street.

The address in the notebook led him to a small two-story apartment building. Each of the apartments had the same façade as the other but each was individuated by a very particular disorder. Toys and broken garden furniture strewn about; saris, *salwar kameez*, and caftans draped across the railings to dry. The disorder made it even easier to locate Sopi's apartment. It was the only one stripped bare; the single window

devoid of anything that would have signified a presence inside, just a dark square as seemingly thick and solid as the wall that surrounded it. A "For Rent" sign hung from the rail. He stood staring at the apartment wondering why he had come when a young man in a leather jacket stopped beside him. He held a bag of groceries in one hand and the other rested on the handlebar of a stroller. "Excuse me, sir, you've come about the apartment?" He was a short, light-skinned Indian man; his hair was tightly clipped revealing the grayish scalp underneath.

"I'm looking for one apartment in particular. My niece's."

"Who's your niece?" the young man said. "I know everyone here." Dunstan tried to place the man's accent and finally decided it must be American.

"I'm Sopi Perera's uncle."

The man dropped his bag and looked at Dunstan, his eyes wide. From the stroller, beneath a bundle of blankets, came a soft gurgling. The man looked down at the stroller as if only now realizing it was there. When he looked back at Dunstan, he asked, "You don't know?"

Dunstan shook his head, "Yes, yes, of course I know. I think I just wanted to see where she lived. There are things of hers left, no?"

The man relaxed, "Sure, sure, not a problem." They both stood in the street neither one daring to look in the direction of Sopi's apartment. After a few minutes, the man finally said, "My wife actually has the keys. She should be back soon if you want to come and wait at our place." He held out his hand, "My name is Amit, by the way."

The inside of Amit's apartment was tiny and with the same level of disorder as the exterior. A small living room opened up to an even smaller kitchen. A hall led to the back of the apartment. Along the walls were several photographs of Sai Baba and in the corner of the room was a small shrine with candles and paintings of the Virgin Mary.

Toys were strewn across the floor and the toddler, now unleashed from her stroller, waddled back and forth stopping only long enough to kick at any toys in her way. Amit took a plastic baby's bottle from the fridge and placed it in the microwave. He offered to make Dunstan a tea, which Dunstan gratefully accepted. Dunstan looked around for a place to sit and finally chose a couch with fading upholstery withered and peeling away from the frame like the skin from the carcass of a decaying animal. Amit grabbed the toddler and balanced her on his hip. He gave her the bottle. She began to suck furiously, making noisy slurping sounds.

"When did you get here?" asked Amit.

"Late afternoon, yesterday. I went to the medical examiner in the morning. My flight to Sri Lanka leaves tomorrow, and I have a little time."

Amit adjusted his arm a little so he could better support the toddler who was now a third of the way through the bottle. "She was a nice

woman."

"You know her well?"

"No, not really. I'm an assistant professor at Queens College. I'm usually at the university," he nodded toward his daughter, "but her babysitter was sick. So childcare duties fell on me today." A shrill whistle signaled that the water for the tea was ready. Amit put the baby down and pulled out a mug from the cupboard. "She was a lovely person. Very sweet. Very kind." The tenderness in Amit's voice reminded Dunstan of what Piyum-punchi had said. As if wanting to change the subject, Amit asked, "How are things back home?" He placed the mug in front of Dunstan. When Dunstan picked it up, tiny black tea leaves floated to the top and bobbed along the surface.

Dunstan wondered what Amit had meant by things. Did he know something about the family? Had Sopi mentioned something in particular? Had she spoken fondly of them or had she been angry?

"The same," he finally replied. "Always the same."

Amit nodded his head distractedly. He looked around him and realized that the toddler and her bottle had, while he was talking, disappeared. "Shit!" he cried and ran down the hall. "Just hold on one second."

Dunstan took a sip of the tea and noticed that a thin trail of ants had appeared where he had spilled a little on the table. He brushed them away with the flick of his hand. The door opened and a young woman in a business suit stepped inside the apartment. She stopped when she saw Dunstan. "Who are you?"

Amit appeared from the back of the apartment holding the wayward toddler in his arms. "Moina, this is Sopi's uncle. He wants to see her apartment and get her things."

Her expression softened, "I'm sorry for what happened." Dunstan mumbled a thank you, unsure of how else to reply.

Moina looked at Amit, "Why didn't you take him?"

"I don't have the keys. Anyway, I have the baby. It's not a good place for her."

Moina shook her head and turned to Dunstan. "I'm going to change and then I'll take you up."

The layout for Sopi's apartment was the same, but all the rooms had been emptied of furniture. A large picnic blanket had been spread neatly across part of the carpet. It did not quite cover the dark stain it was meant to conceal. The daintiness of the gesture surprised and unnerved him. "We couldn't get the place re-carpeted till tomorrow," Moina explained. "There's a lot of blood."

Dunstan saw a few boxes lining the wall of the room. "These are her things?" He gingerly navigated his way around the blanket and walked over to the boxes.

"I guess you're probably going to give away the clothes, but there's some things in there you might want." He opened the lid of one of the boxes. Moina started to move toward him, arm outstretched, "You know, you might want to look in another one."

Dunstan pulled a photograph from the box. It was of Sopi and her husband, but Sopi's face had been carefully cut away, leaving a large hole. Dunstan reached in and found another photograph and another all with Sopi's face carefully removed. He braced himself against the box. Who would do something like this?

"We should have thrown those out right away, but it seemed like bad luck somehow. To throw pictures away." She paused, "Look, you can't carry this stuff back with you. Let me mail you what you want. I'm going to go downstairs and get a pen and paper so you can write it down."

When she had left, he opened another box. There were a few books and a collection of porcelain figurines of animals and young women dressed in costumes of different ages. He'd forgotten about Sopi's menageries. He ran his finger along a chip in the surface of one of the figurines. He smiled remembering how Helen had given it to Sopi for her birthday. Among some of the books, mostly pulp romances, he found an appointment book. He noticed some of the pages had entries such as, "Dinner with Danni" or "Meet Danni late." Or just the name penciled in. Danni's.

The door opened up behind him. Moina handed Dunstan a pen and sheet of paper.

"Do you know what happened here? Do you know them at all?" asked Dunstan.

"A little. Not well."

"In her appointment book this name, Danni. Do you know who he is?" Dunstan pointed to an entry.

"Danni's is a store in Forest Hills. Sopi worked there. It's named after the woman that owns it, Danielle something." Moina drew her head back "Why?"

Her suspicion caused a pinprick of self-doubt, the need to explain. "We arranged her marriage for her," Dunstan replied. "Maybe she was unhappy and he knew this. This is maybe why he killed her?"

Moina sniffed. "All of you men think the same. Indian. Sri Lankan. Somehow you find a way to blame the woman."

"No, you don't understand." He paused, closed his eyes, and started to massage his temples with his hands. When he opened his eyes, he said, "I don't want to be the one responsible for all this."

The twitch of a muscle in her jaw, the lowering of her eyes, some gesture of hers—he wasn't sure which—betrayed the extent to which this woman, standing in front of him, was holding herself in, stowing herself away. He felt suddenly sorry for her.

"Look," she said after a long silence, "I apologize. This has taken a lot out of me." She turned and walked toward the door. "I'm sure you want some time on your own. Put everything you want in one box and leave the address on it. I'll mail it tomorrow." The click of the latch as she pulled the door shut amplified the emptiness of the room. He began to feel a little afraid. He wasn't a man who believed ghost stories, but the gloominess of the apartment and the thick, sweet smell that Dunstan suspected was dried blood made him increasingly nervous. Dunstan quickly searched the other boxes and found a telephone book. He flipped through the pages, tore in half the paper Moina had given him, and wrote down the address for Danni's. On the other half, he wrote a note asking Moina keep the porcelain figurines for her girl and throw everything else away.

Dukkha, he knew, was usually mistranslated from the Pali. It didn't signify suffering but a lack, like a hunger. It was the need to satiate that motivated life. Helen's sorrow had seemed its own type of hunger. Helen had placed the blame for Sopi's death on herself. She had the night before he left kept repeating self-recriminations. Why hadn't she tried harder to stop the wedding? Why hadn't she realized there was something wrong when she hadn't heard from Sopi? She might have found some time and visited? Dunstan hadn't understood his wife's reaction. She was, of all of them, the least responsible. His wife's questions, he suspected, reflected self-pity and also a reproach. He knew, without her having to tell him, the answer to everything she asked. She hadn't called Sopi because she had been preoccupied with him. She didn't visit because she had been too concerned with his needs. She hadn't tried harder to help because she was healing from his indiscretions. He wanted a way of absolving them both from their possible complicity in a tragedy and a way of breaching the distance that now yawned between them. But, as he realized how little he had known about Sopi, as he recognized all his missteps, the missed signs, he wondered if the distance hadn't been there all along between him and Helen, Sopi, all the people he knew in his life. The glimpses of their thoughts, their pains, their needs fed an illusion of proximity. In truth, they all spread across a dark vastness, barely discernible, moving away from him like the lights of the trawlers of the coast of Colombo. He wondered if he could, now that he recognized what was happening, stop their drift from him. The distance was far but he was not that old. If he started now he could open himself up and begin to swallow—gulp by gulp—the expanse between them. No, there wasn't enough hunger in the world to accomplish that.

From the large houses and the clothing of the women pushing their strollers along the sidewalk, Dunstan could tell that Forest Hills was

an affluent neighborhood. This was how Dunstan had pictured America—prosperous and attractive. But there was also a blandness about it. It was too clean, too regular. Even the wealthiest neighborhoods in Sri Lanka were clogged with clay dust, noise and people. These neighborhoods—and all their assumed precision—seemed to deny life, as if the purpose of wealth was to erase time.

He found the store easily, and when he entered there was only the one salesperson, a woman about his age carefully coiffed and made-up. She smiled broadly when he asked her his question, "Yes," she replied, "I'm Danni. What can I get you today?"

Her smile and the gentleness of her answer—not a hint of suspicion about why he would want to know who she was—caused him to hesitate. When, she leaned toward him, Dunstan noticed her perfume and a brief, but surprisingly enticing glimpse, of her amplified cleavage. "You're looking for something for your wife I bet. A birthday gift?"

"Yes, that's right. A gift for my wife."

"Well, what size is she? Is she like me?" Danni stood up straight, hands on her hip, shoulders pulled back.

Dunstan couldn't help but smile, "I'm not really sure of her size."

"Then I can perhaps interest you in a silk scarf. I have some that are haute couture in France right now, as we speak." She pulled Dunstan over to a display case at the end of the store. That's when he noticed it: the photograph on the wall. A spasm of recognition passed through him.

Sopi was neatly dressed, her unruly hair tamed into a tight ponytail. The photographer must have caught her by surprise because she had her hand up as if to block the camera and she was laughing. She looked completely natural and unguarded. She looked beautiful. Above the photograph a neatly lettered sign with Sopi's name and the words, "In memoriam." Underneath the photograph were tacked letters and a few drawings.

"That photograph," he stammered.

"She used to work for me."

He regretted not admitting from the beginning who he was. He felt the liar, but he knew if he told her, she would become as inaccessible as the others had. "What happened?" he asked, trying to control his voice.

"An accident. So sad. She was a really wonderful little thing. She came in here two years ago begging for a job. I wasn't even hiring, but see, I'm from North Carolina originally. So I know what it's like to try to make it in a place that's strange to you and all." Danni smiled. "She wasn't really good at the sales part of things. Too shy, bless her heart. But she had a brilliant eye and a talent for numbers.

"I was going to let her manage the store on her own. Give her a raise." She opened the display case and pulled out a few scarves, "Listen to me. I'm being depressing."

"Did she know?"

"Know what?"

"You were planning to make her manager."

Danni slowly placed a few scarves beside each other on the top of the case. "I did tell her. I took her to lunch and told her a couple of days before she died, and I'm glad she knew."

He picked up one of the scarves. The silk felt cool to the touch and comforting. He handed it to Danni.

"She was fortunate to have such a good friend," he said as she handed him the receipt.

"A lot of good it did her." The bitterness in her voice surprised him.

He stole a look at the photograph, trying quickly to sum up as many details as he could. But outside the store on the busy street, he chided himself for all the details he had missed. Already the memory had begun to fade.

It was a year after Sopi's death and this afternoon was Sopi's dhana, the alms-giving in her memory. Helen and the servants had cooked all morning and soon the family and the monks would be arriving. They had wanted to have photographs of Sopi on display in the sitting room, to honor her. Dunstan had pulled out a few of the best ones from the photo albums and placed them in frames. He added them to the small collection of baby pictures Piyum-punchi had found stashed in a box of Arthur's old things. Dunstan stood over a table of photographs trying to make final adjustments. He picked up a frame and gently polished a smudge from the glass. He remembered the photograph in the boutique and wondered if it was still there on the wall. What had she been wearing in that picture? Was she smiling or had she looked surprised? She was laughing. Yes, laughing.

He heard a car horn and saw a servant run across the gravel driveway to open the gate for the first guests. In a little while, the house would fill with the chanting of the priests, the smell of the food, people speaking quickly and softly. They would be telling Sopi's story. Retelling. Changing it to suit the formality of the occasion. Changing it to suit the passage of time. Today she would be remembered as beautiful and brave. They would forget, or at least not mention, the rumors and say of her she was blameless.

Dunstan's heart clutched at the thought of having to smile and nod sympathetically. He wanted a retreat, privacy to mull over his remembrances. He didn't want to be told what he already knew: someone had known her better, done more for her, loved her more. It shouldn't matter now, but it did. This weariness was the last thing left him. Even as he felt the urge to retreat, he saw Helen stand up from her chair on the veranda and begin to make her way toward the guests. She looked

resolute, and he knew he couldn't leave her alone. He flicked one last imagined speck from Sopi's picture and placed it back on the table. He walked out of the sitting room, drawn by his wife's hushed voice, the guests' solemn greetings, the bowed silhouettes. This day belonged to Sopi, and he would do what was required of him. He would do it well. He hesitated only once, at the bottom of the veranda stairs, while stepping out onto the driveway. He hesitated just long enough for his eyes to adjust to the early afternoon sun.