

THE MAGICIAN'S BOX

*I don't need no axe
to split/ up yu syntax*

John Agard, "Listen Mr Oxford Don"*

On 7 November 1981, my family left our village, which sits along a creek surrounded by sugar cane, which grows in grids cut by canals, which criss-cross the coastline, which sinks below sea level in a wet and muddy corner of South America. In the picture we took to mark the moment, we stand in the front yard of the house my grandfather built, the house I grew up in, a house raised on artificial wooden legs like all the rest. In the photo, everyone looks annoyed. My mother, in bellbottoms, holding my baby sister, appears to pout. My father, in sideburns, his arm hanging over my mother's shoulder, looks cross. His eyebrows are knit. Mine are, too; they counter the optimism of my kiskadee-colored dress and matching ponytail holders, blinding balls of yellow. I wonder what was wrong. Why do we look so displeased? Was the sun in our eyes? Were there packages from neighbors, intended for sons somewhere in America, waiting to be stuffed, somehow, into our suitcases? My grandmothers, flanking us, neither headed for America just yet, seemed content enough. Maybe we weren't looking forward to the long journey ahead, over the Canje Creek Bridge by car, across the fat, pulsing Berbice River by ferry, through even more geometric fields of cane to our country's capital and then, finally, across ear-ringing skies on our first plane ride ever, a Guyana Airways flight to New York City. Into the house in the picture, electricity had just come, but there was no phone or indoor toilet.

* Epigraph from *Mangos and Bullets*, Serpents Tail, 1991. Used by permission of Profile Books.

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I was almost seven, old enough to have memories of Guyana and young enough to be severed in two by the act of leaving it. Emigrating was like stepping into a magician's box. The sawing in half was just a trick. In time, limbs and coherence would be restored, and a whole, intact self sent back into the audience. But at my age, unformed and impressionable, I didn't know that. All I knew was that everything seemed to split apart. Time became twofold, divided into the era BA, or before America, and the one after it, after 7 November 1981. Space was also sundered, torn slowly and excruciatingly into two conflicting realms, inside and out.

My memories of Guyana are almost all set outdoors. The houses there stand on stilts, to avoid the flood underfoot. That kicks open, underneath, a concrete terrain known as the Bottom House. There, curries are cooked and eaten, laundry washed and set to dry. There, life unfurls, exposed to the eyes of the lane, open to the comment of neighbors. And there, visits are paid. Hammocks rock back-and-forth, marking the absence of time, as hours pass in *gyaffing*, a West Indian brand of aimless talk, encompassing everything and nothing at once.*

I remember the outside of our house in Cumberland Village much better than the inside. The Bottom House opened into the front yard, where we posed for our photo that last day. To the left stood our *guinep* tree, the scant, sweet pulp of its fruit encased in a green shell. To the right stood our concrete temple, the size of a toolshed. It lay outside the frame of that final picture, but I remember it vividly. The *mandir* was honeycombed for ventilation and painted as blue as the clay gods within. It sat next to my grandmother's garden, where so many times, zinnias tucked into our braids, sheets wrapped like saris around our waists, my cousin and I played at being brides. We staged our weddings in and around a curvaceous blue car parked inside the gate. It belonged to Brudda, a taxi-driving cousin renowned for his ability to squeeze in a dozen passengers in any one go. The car had died and, for some reason, Brudda had laid it to rest under the guinep tree. Three decades later, Brudda is in Canada, and we are in America; but the remains of the car still lie there, an indestructible shard of blue in the weeds choking our abandoned plot of Guyanese earth. The temple, the garden and the car comprise the hazy landscape of my first childhood, like stickers pasted onto a board-game map of the past. Flat, but brightly colored, they represent what was, in the wide-open place we left behind.

In the America we arrived in, it was too cold for all that. Our aunts gave me and my cousin matching grey winter coats. We wore them through our first season of snow. We learned how to speak and shoved indoors the Creole words that vibrated with Bottom House and playmates. There wasn't much extra room for those words in the close spaces of our new life, on the first floor of my uncle's house in New Jersey. We rented three tight rooms and slept five in a row, on two beds pushed together,

* In the novel *The Sly Company of People Who Care*, the narrator, an Indian travelling in Guyana, says, tongue-in-cheek: "I was still not versed in *gyaffin*—the key was to make a joke, preferably obscene, denounce something strongly, share a rumor or at the very least discuss somebody's plight."

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for half a decade. My grandmother, who had crossed a border crawling on her belly to join us by then, made the fifth. From the fire escape, we could see the Twin Towers. Despite the panoramic view of Manhattan, our apartment promoted claustrophobia. The door swung into the windowless bathroom to reveal my mother balanced on the edge of the bathtub, attacking clothes in sudsy water, pummeling hand-me-down jeans until they screeched, beating the ugly green corduroys that made me look as awkward as I felt. She nearly fainted once, with the fumes of Clorox bleach concentrated in that tiny room.

The gods were also crowded; they, too, had been forced inside. From the airy temple perfumed by zinnias, they were driven into the closet—the linen closet in the bedroom, to be precise. There was a box of Barbie dolls on the bottom shelf, and nightly, the rats made incisions into the pale plastic of their perfectly formed legs. On the top shelf rested framed prints of the gods: elephant-trunked Ganesh, the remover of obstacles; Hanuman, the monkey with a mountain in his palm; and Sarasvati, the goddess of knowledge.

Every Sunday, the white shutters of the linen closet would open. Fresh flowers were placed on a bronze plate, and incense sticks lit. My mother would sing *bhajans*, Hindu devotional songs. She knows very little Hindi. Yet there was always in her cadence—in that lovely, high voice—a crack of sadness seducing me into false belief. It led me to believe that she had occupied the insides of every last syllable of song. Those early years in America often sent my twenty-something-year-old mother to her shuttered gods. They gave the hymns she did not understand, from an India she had never seen, a tangible quality. You could touch the words. They bent down to your feet, imploring your blessings. *Main ik nanha sa, main ik chota sa, baccha hoon*. I am a tiny child, I am a small child. She stood in front of the makeshift shrine with a white lace scarf over her head, and she prayed with her eyes tightly shut.

Hindi echoed through our apartment, hinting at India, every Sunday—and not only through the soft rustle of my mother's prayers. It blasted with shoulder-shimmying force from our television set, tuned to a station that broadcast Bollywood on the weekends. I remember sitting on the edge of our bed one morning, playing with the Velcro straps on my sneakers. We were about to see off our cousins on a visit to Guyana. The hour was obscenely early, and I was in a sour mood. But that changed when I saw Kumar Gaurav's face fill the screen. It was a scene from *Love Story*, a Bombay musical I had last seen in Guyana, at a cinema hall near our village. The hero, a Romeo repackaged for the subcontinent, was haunting the grounds of his Juliet's home on the day of her wedding to someone else. His chiseled face was long and soulful, and his star-crossed song seduced me all over again through the static of the Zenith.

It's not that I was in love with Kumar Gaurav (although, aged nine, I might incidentally have been). I used to dream then of waking up in our Bottom House from forever-long stays in a Nighttown made up of three small rooms. At that time, Kumar Gaurav had the warm glow of a flashback to Guyana, triggering memory like Cod Liver Oil or Marmite or an overheard snippet of Creolese on the otherwise ordinary

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street. All belonged to an inner enclave, severed from the external world. Outside, Americans were speaking “Proper English.” Inside were all our secrets, good and bad: the cracked English, the hidden gods, the dal and roti on Sunday mornings and the lachrymose lyrics of Lata Mangeshkar, the GOLDEN VOICE of BOLLYWOOD, as the men who gave us our cassette culture kept insisting in singsong promos.

Indian movies were part of the landscape of inside, existing in a rarefied private place that had little to do with a specific location on a map. For me, Bollywood did not refer back to India. In fact, I did not know to call it Bombay’s Hollywood until college. Nor did I know what most of the Hindi words I had picked up from film songs meant. I had heard them all intoned onscreen so many times, melodramatically cueing violins, that they were part of the airtight space of my complicated ethnicity, having sensibility without sense. Intuitively I knew, without knowing, these words: *Pyar, zindagi, shabdi, mushkil, akela*. Love, life, wedding, troubles, alone. These were words well suited to the play of little Guyanese girls rehearsing futures in Bottom Houses on the edges of rectangles of cane. They were arguably less relevant to futures imagined from claustrophobic apartments on the margins of Manhattan.

Hindi films imparted nothing of the social rifts or other realities in India. After all, Pinky and Bunty weren’t star-crossed because one was Muslim and the other Hindu, or one Brahmin and the other from a “backward caste.” If India looked anything like the country of Bollywood, then it was a place where lovers ran into each other’s arms across flowering fields, while breaking into song—a land where arch-criminals cavorted in underground lairs with scantily-clad dancing girls. For some reason, the arch-criminals always wore beards and dark glasses, and the lovers changed outfits every two minutes, mid-song. Even so, Indian movies *did* impart an odd, foetal sense of identity to me. I received it effortlessly, through the navel string* of culture, becoming as familiar with Rekha, Shashi Kapoor and Amitabh Bachchan as with the Technicolor deities inside the linen closet. The Bollywood megastars were gods, too. Both religion and the cinema gave me the conviction that I was Indian, although I had never stepped foot in India, nor had my parents, nor had my grandparents. Bollywood and the *bhajans* also gave me language.

Frantz Fanon, the Caribbean intellectual who was a freedom fighter in Algeria, once wrote: “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.”¹ It’s an apt statement from the frontlines of a struggle against a colonial power. Take away my language, and you also take away access to the stories that my forebears created, in the cadences that they created them. Educate me in a language lacking the rhythms of home, and I am likely to speak as a segmented self, to sound surgically snipped and etherized in the official world, shorn of the words that resonate with Bottom House and *gyaffing*, altercation and intimacy, mother and father.

Over the generations, various Indian tongues have been lost as spoken languages in Guyana. The missionary-run schools during British rule taught English—not

* umbilical cord.

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Hindi or Tamil. Many Guyanese living in the gravitational pull of sugar plantations got little or no formal schooling, well into the twentieth century. Whether educated or not, they still had to assimilate into a multiethnic society where various versions of Creolese, an English dialect that evolved from plantation pidgin, was the idiom. This is what we spoke inside our immigrant home; this was our cracked, our stained-glass English, made from smashed bits of multicolored glass, a thing of beauty constructed from fragments, including fragments from India.

Shards of Hindi have remained, indestructible, like the scrap of Brudda's fender in our Bottom House. Words for family, for religion, for food, for love have survived, as has something more difficult to define. Colonialism and migration are inextricably joined in my family history. Colonialism caused us to migrate, first to British Guiana, then from an independent Guyana still struggling to emerge from its colonial past. Migration involves resistance, too—resistance against the loss of culture, of memory, of dialect. Those of us engaged in this daily struggle against loss know that it's possible to "have" a language on many levels. We know that it's possible for a language to resonate emotionally even when it has been literally lost. We know that, even when slurring the surmised remains of our once-upon-a-time language or parroting it without understanding it, it's possible to wrap our tongues possessively around the world it expresses and implies. My mother, worshipping her shuttered gods with shuttered eyes, knew that.

There were reasons for her to pray with her eyes tightly shut. In 1987, the same year we moved to our very own house, bigots began terrorizing the neighborhood. We picked up the local newspaper to find their crudely scrawled manifesto. They signed their note "The Dot Busters." It was a few years after the release of *Ghostbusters*, and their nom de guerre was a terrifying play on the movie title and on dothead, an anti-Indian slur mocking the *bindis* that some married Hindu women wear on their foreheads. "We will go to any extreme to get Indians to move out," the note read. "We use the phone books and look up the name Patel. Have you seen how many of them there are?" Soon after this declaration of violence was published, three white men assaulted an Indian doctor with baseball bats. They were prosecuted, but their victim could not remember the details necessary to convict them; such was the severity of his brain damage. Days after the attack, another Indian man was beaten to death less than a mile away, in an adjacent town.

The assaults both occurred a few blocks from my family's house in the Heights, a hub of working-class respectability in Jersey City. This city of a quarter-million people, located directly across the Hudson River from Lower Manhattan, styles itself as a sixth borough of New York. Its brittle row houses lean close together, ogling the backside of the Statue of Liberty like a cluster of lewd old men. Its landscape is squat, huddled, massed with immigrants. At the time, a third of its residents were born outside the United States. Many were recently arrived Indians, mainly from the state of Gujarat. They comprised the largest and the most visibly different group. It wasn't just the color of their skin, which was also the color of our skin. It was their saris, their accents, the bindis enunciating their foreheads. It was their Mahatma Gandhi

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Square, its air thick with curry, its lamp posts hung with Indian flags. Most of all, it was their striving, their ambition in a city that had seen better days. The Dot Busters made Indians in Jersey City fear for their lives, and they made us, Indians nearly a century out of India, feel just as menaced.

My parents wouldn't let us play outside that autumn. Once, a man in a car idling next to ours at a red light spat directly into my father's face. Another time, hoodlums brandishing a broken bottle chased him for blocks. Someone scrawled "Hindus Go Home" in black paint across the side of our house, and my mother spent the next day scouring the aluminum siding with paint thinner. The vandals didn't know that their decree was not a straightforward one. They couldn't have cared less that home was not what it seemed—was not, in fact, easy to define. To them, Indian-looking meant Indian. Certainly, there was no command of the cracks that colonialism had created. They didn't imagine that, among their Indian-looking neighbors, there might be strangers eyeing each other from a distance, fascinated and even moved by what linked them and by the limits of what linked them. What makes an Indian? Did our religion, our movies, our shards of Hindi make us Indian? Did the attacks of a racist gang targeting people who looked like us? Did hate crime make us Indian?

We did feel solidarity with Indians in our neighborhood because of the attacks, and many of my school friends were Indian-American. But the embrace offered to Indo-Caribbeans by immigrants directly from the subcontinent often has a subtle edge. Their tenderness can be patronizing. Probably, they are only trying to bond when they point out that the unraveling of our arms, when we dance, is *like* North Indian folk dance but, somehow, off. Indeed, they are eager to tell us our own story—what part of India we probably came from, what dialect of Hindi our ancestors probably spoke, how our singers inevitably garble those dialects when they perform chutney, the hybrid dance music indigenous to the Caribbean but rooted in India. I doubt they mean to offend, or to hold us to the light like an artifact, a fascinating shard of pottery. Often, there is no embrace at all but just a nod, like one given to a poor cousin, barely acknowledging kinship. Sometimes, there isn't even that. Sometimes, they would rather deny us like an "outside child"—which is what West Indians call a child born outside a legal marriage. To some, we are India's outside child. When class isn't their issue, authenticity—some apparent concern over our parentage—seems to be.

My parents did not make any new friends because of the hooligans who terrorized the Indian and the Indian-looking in the Heights. In fact, they had hardly any friends at all, beyond family. They continued to turn inward, and except for the constant intimacy of so many uncles, aunts and cousins, our home became a fortress. Outside, after all, there lurked physical danger. Outside, there were racists armed with spray paint and spittle, baseball bats and broken bottles. But America in all its habits and promise also lay there. Outside defined "normal." For one, everybody there knew girls have boyfriends, go to proms, grow up to move away and own their own lives. Inside, my immigrant parents knew no such thing because an elsewhere continued to exert its influence. Entrenched inside, my mother kept throwing up ramparts against the world outside her home.

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We rarely returned to Guyana after emigrating. My parents were too busy working, striving, building new lives for us. They couldn't spare the time or money for sentimental journeys, especially once all of our close relatives had followed us out. The country they fled, the country we fled, was a country without. Ruled by a dictator who had rigged elections for decades, it was a country without legitimate democracy. Because it banned foreign goods as neocolonialist, it was a country without the wheat flour needed for staples such as roti and bread. Divided by race, and ruled by the African-dominated party, it was a country without equal opportunities for Indians, who were largely shut out of higher education and the civil service. And for some time, ever since Cold War interference by both the Americans and the British, Guyana had been a country without real control over its own destiny.

I was too young to remember ration lines, or empty grocery store shelves, or the black market, but my father did. He remembered having to buy back-lane baby formula, because Enfamil, a foreign import, was what he wanted for me, born two months premature, weighing 4 pounds-3 ounces. He also remembered refugees coming to live in our village when he was a boy of eleven. They were driven out of a town at the mouth of Guyana's forested interior, where gold diggers and miners gathered, a town later renamed Linden, after the election-rigging, flour-banning dictator. The refugees had been ethnically cleansed. Indian homes had been burned down, my father said. Indian women had been raped, Indian people killed. For the record, African people were also killed. Guyana's race riots scorched in both directions, but the intervening First World governments anointed the African-led political party, less socialist at the time, and its constituents as the winners. Despite all this, scarcity and injustice did not loom large in my memories of Guyana. I did not see it as others might have: a Third World basketcase, one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere, the nation that had welcomed Jim Jones and his suicidal Kool-Aid cult into the heart of its darkness. For me, the country of my birth and first childhood was an area of mystery and longing, a place of imagined wholeness.

My father probably understood this when, sixteen years after migrating, he took me to Guyana as a graduation gift: my first trip back as an adult, our second return ever. It was the summer of 1997, and as we waited for our flight at Newark Airport, I watched other passengers lug duct-taped bags—bags bulging, I was sure, with Goya Sardines in Tomato Sauce, Betty Crocker Instant Potatoes and Cadbury's Chocolate. These things had made Guyanese mouths water in seasons of shortage, and relatives overseas still kept hefting them back home whenever they visited, as if the regime had not ultimately changed, as if the economy had not eventually liberalized, as if import bans had not finally been lifted. The foreign brands—this kitchen cabinet largesse—had become part of the ritual of homecoming, intended as much for the gift-givers as the gift-receivers. I listened to the other passengers talk about how the country was coming up, how the days of shortage were gone: "Guyana nice baaad, maan. Everything you can waaant, you can ge'. Plenty, plenty ting." Everywhere around us, they spoke in a dialect so private, so intimate to my ears, that every time they opened their mouths, there was a tingling fusion of inside and out, an electric union of outside and in, a sparks-flying soldering together of the soul.

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This trip home led me to ask about another, more epic journey. As we sat, poised to board our flight, I asked my father what he knew about our family's roots in India. My father—my responsible, caretaking, in-charge father—keeps the records in our family. If anyone had a paper trail to our past, he would. And he did. My father lost his father when still a child. The old man died of chronic bronchitis the year before the refugees came to our village. His Will contained the place and year of his birth: *The Clyde*, 1903. My father grew up knowing that his father was born on a ship from India, and he knew which ship, in which year. He also knew that his grandmother, Sujaria, had climbed aboard that ship as an indentured servant. "She was a pregnant woman travelling alone," my father told me, matter-of-factly. Any more than that, he could not say. He had no insights into this earth-shaking revelation. All he knew was that Sujaria had given birth to my grandfather at some point during the passage from India, and she had given him the name "Lalbahadur." This name, the short version of which my father and I both carry in the world, was not her own. Like most Indians who migrated, she did not have a last name.

I never knew Lalbahadur, of course. A black-and-white studio portrait of him, probably taken in his late fifties, hangs in our house in New Jersey. In the photograph, he stands straight and tall, his hands hanging stiffly at his sides. His nose is my father's nose, once narrow but in later years slightly swollen, like a snail in the middle of his face. He wears patent leather shoes, a long-sleeved button-down shirt, properly-creased pinstriped trousers. He has the bearing of a dignified man. My grandfather was a peasant farmer, growing rice and raising cows and chickens, which is what most Indians with ambition did in rural Guyana at the time. He also worked on sugar plantations for most of his life. He belonged to the gang of muscular men who dug drains, disciplining the cane fields, imposing straight lines and right angles with his shovel. Long before I was even born, he laid out the landscape of my childhood in the same orderly way. He built the first house I called home, and he built the tiny temple, the honeycombed shed to house the gods, in its front yard. Lalbahadur was a strict Hindu. His legacy to his eight children—aside from the house he made of greenheart wood—was a traditional morality as tough as that impervious timber. By all accounts, he had a strong hand, unafraid to make its raw force felt when needed.

The story of his birth, possibly out of wedlock, intrigued me. I used to think that we inherited our conservatism about sex and relationships—that the generations had handed it down to us as who they were and who we ought, also, to be. Hadn't my own shut-in immigrant upbringing provided ample proof of that? But at the departure gate in Newark, I was learning things about our family history that, rather than answering my questions about identity, only raised more. Even if I didn't know precisely where I belonged, or how Guyanese I was or could ever be, I did believe that I knew, at the very least, what it meant to be Guyanese. Even before we had stepped onto the plane, this homeland journey had started to shake that belief.

We were visiting Guyana at a historic time, a few months after the death of its president, Cheddi Jagan, the independence leader who was a hero and father figure

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to Indians in the country, as well as a symbol of how they had been wronged. He had spent more than three decades in the political wilderness because the CIA, paranoid at the thought of yet another Caribbean Marxist right in Castro's geopolitical neighborhood, pushed him out and paved the way for Linden Forbes Burnham, the dictator who banned flour. Listening to grown-ups in my world, I had formed an image of Burnham as bogeyman. He seemed spectral, superhuman. When he died, his body was embalmed and displayed in a purple glass coffin in the Botanical Gardens. This was according to his instructions and on the model of Lenin's tomb. He was not, as it turned out, the curb against Soviet-style socialism that the United States had hoped. Seven years after Burnham died, Jagan finally ascended to the presidency. And in his own death, he ascended to a status approaching sainthood. His wife, Janet, would be elected to succeed him before the year was out.

During our visit, the air was still charged with mourning. I bought a children's book called "When Grandpa Cheddi Was a Boy" and a tape of folk songs canonizing him. The country—or at least half of it—was engaged in a months-long eulogy that by its nature reopened racial wounds. For these Indians long out of India, the sense of being Indian was fierce and instinctual, born in great part out of a century-and-a-half old competition with the half of the country that wasn't Indian. But I did not see myself in this fight. I did not want to find myself there. I was the product of a multicultural education in post-Civil Rights Act America. I had grown up a minority in a city of minorities, subject to racism that connected me to black skins, rather than pitting me against them. How then could I locate myself in my homeland's history of hate? For answers to my questions about identity, I had to look elsewhere, in the personal rather than the political.

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When we reached the house where we would be staying, deep in the countryside, our host showed my father and me to our room. Twisted into a tight knot, mosquito netting hung from square frames above two tiny beds. Against the wall was a shelf with garlanded pictures of a plump Indian man, wearing what looked like an Afro and decked out in saffron Hare Krishna robes. I asked who he was. Our host fixed me with disbelieving eyes. "That's Sai Baba," she said. "You don't know who Sai Baba is?" I didn't, but I did know the look she was giving me. I'd seen it on more than one face since arriving in Guyana. It was a look that took me in slowly—first, the short skirts and the boy's haircut; then my careful English, calibrated to books with many clauses and precise pauses; and finally the endless questions about things I should have known. It was a look reserved for clueless foreigners.

Kavita was in her early twenties, like me. She had a warm, pretty face. One perfectly plaited braid reached all the way down to her waist. She was married to my Bhauji's* brother. They ran a rice mill, and their Bottom House was stacked with

* This is a term of respect for elder brother's wife; but literally, she is my cousin's wife.

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burlap sacks containing paddy. Her husband had lived in the United States for a while. An accident in a factory had cut that stay short, but he seemed to be doing much better in Guyana anyway. He was polite and hard-working, and I liked him. They had two little girls.

“How did the two of you meet?” I asked. Kavita smiled. She gave me the look again, gently, forgivingly, almost as though she knew that not so very long ago, in a Bottom House in Cumberland, I used to rehearse my own sari-clad wedding. Kavita’s marriage had been arranged. I should have known not to ask. I met many women my age—and younger—in Guyana whose lives were already settled, by forces or people outside themselves. The circumstances varied, of course; and the happiness or the hope for it also varied.

I met an eighteen-year-old, recently married to a Guyanese man from the Bronx. He was over thirty, and they didn’t know each other before the wedding. The groom had returned to New York after their honeymoon; she was waiting for her visa to join him. Her family was struggling, even by Guyanese standards, and I wondered what exigencies might have driven the match. What were those words provided by Hindi films, like a mantra for our futures? *Pyar, zindagi, shahdi, mushkil, akela*. Which progression, exactly, suited reality in Guyana’s sugar belt? Was it love, then life, then a wedding? Or did love come after marriage? Did trouble and loneliness also follow? Or was it more common for troubles to come before and, indeed, precipitate a wedding?

It wasn’t only economics or the lust for a First World passport that led to marriages arranged across the continents. In the week I stayed near my childhood home, I also got to know a twenty-four-year old woman named Mala, the daughter of a timber mill owner in a village which sits on Canje Creek, next to ours. Mala watched *Seinfeld* on the television set in her grandparents’ house. The house, near their mill, was framed by heaps of sawdust. Her grandparents spent the winters in Guyana and the summers in a suburb of Toronto. When we went for a ride along the river in one of their speedboats, Mala wore a T-shirt with “Waiting for Mr Right” emblazoned across the front. She showed me pictures of a beaming Canadian fiancée, posing in front of a shiny silver Toyota Avalon. They had exchanged letters and spoken on the phone. Although they were, in a sense, courting long-distance, this too was an arranged match. When my mother married at eighteen, it was a “love” marriage. This meant that my parents had liked each other when they spoke in the hallways of Corentyne High School, where they both taught. They did not date. My mother’s family had been approached, inquiries into suitability made, a collective decision arrived at. That was in 1974. Mores had not stood completely still in a quarter of a century. After all, there was the shock of *Seinfeld* in a house along the Berbice River. Yet, for most Indians in Guyana, arranged marriages were not only a social fact; they were still the norm at the time of our visit.

My trip to Guyana, from the minute I saw its criss-cross of canals from the plane, was profoundly strange. The deepest alienation came from the unspoken rules about what women should not and could not do. I kept making impolite demands to be

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let into the circle of men talking politics over El Dorado Rum. I wanted to go with my father and Kavita's husband to see his rice mill. When that was denied, I sulked like someone left behind, although I knew it was rude, although Kavita was a kind host, although her baby daughter had made me her *Pua*, or aunt. While I enjoyed the intimate places set aside for women in Guyana, the kitchens where stories were told, I also wanted access to the places reserved for men. I could never be content segregated and confined, just tending to children and a home.

Although I knew I couldn't be Kavita, I didn't know it righteously, the way you might expect an American feminist to know it. Her life had a seductive order to it that I was nowhere near achieving in my own. Concretely, she knew what her impact was. She was a mother and a wife. She hadn't fallen in love with her husband, but hadn't she also avoided the vagaries of falling in love? If I had a right to judge her, then she had a right to judge me. She had already started with the look, and I wondered what she would find, if she turned her full gaze on me. Would she ever see me as more than a foreigner? Could she guess how like a pilgrimage it was for me to return to the Bottom House of my childhood, where a grandfather I never knew had raised pillars of greenheart wood? Could she sense the primal, raw, sacred places inside this opened up? Could she tell how thrilling it was to be in a place where, outside and inside, Creolese lived, Hindi film music scorched the air and Kumar Gaurav didn't have to be explained? How would she make sense of the fact that this ecstasy of union, of wholeness, existed side by side with an unnerving feeling of dislocation? Would she realize that, mostly, this had to do with being a woman?

I had a similar experience when, five years later, I went to India for the first time. I wasn't there to track down any ancestors. At the time, I wouldn't even have known where to begin. Officially, I was there to visit a university friend who lived in Bombay, but I knew—and he knew—that the objective was far deeper than that. This was more than a vacation in an ancient, clamoring, multitudinous country where I happened to know someone who could serve as local informant. I wanted to experience what it felt like to be in the matrix of the culture that had shaped me from a distance, through Hindu gods and Hindi love songs. When my plane landed, I almost couldn't get out of my seat. I was frozen on the threshold, like the tears in my eyes, which were suspended on the very edge of becoming.

I did manage to disembark, however, and spent the weeks ahead roaming Bombay and Goa and Kerala, following a travel agent's itinerary. My friend was working, and I was by myself, which seemed to send the wrong signal entirely to hotel busboys and restaurant waiters and one very forward hill station guide. I was travelling alone through the country my great-grandmother had left, also travelling alone, and the circumstance seemed to raise questions about my character much as it did about hers. Perhaps this preset my vision so that I saw, everywhere, evidence of the separate and restricted lives of women. I noticed the "Ladies Compartments" on Bombay's trains, set aside as a barrier against the aggressive gazes of men. I was struck by the fat concrete benches along its most romantic promenade; custom-made for chastity by the city's conservative ruling party, they seated only one. Atop a hill with a wrap-around

COOLIE WOMAN

view of tea gardens, what made an impression was the mosque whose threshold adult women cannot cross. I knew that India was still a place burdened with many rules for women, despite changes in social attitudes that had come at high speed in the 1990s, especially to big cities, but I wasn't prepared for the alienating force of those rules once I had to abide by them. I wasn't prepared for how I would feel when travelling solo sparked gossip and encouraged advances. I wasn't prepared to be told not to go to the cinema by myself at night if I didn't want to be groped. And I wasn't ready to check my American-bred sense that I could do what I wanted, when I wanted—within reason, and with respect, of course. I didn't wander around in short skirts or tight clothes. I dressed conservatively, trying to pass, in kurtas with loose jeans or in salwar-kamizes.

Indeed, my ability to pass seemed to be part of the problem. Because I looked Indian, I was expected to act Indian. I was held to a different standard than other Americans. In Kerala, where I spent most of my time on that first trip to India, I sat alone on the beach for hours, reading and staring at the Viking-like fishing boats skimming the Arabian Sea. For some reason, this attracted an audience: a group of men who gathered around me, standing and staring. I wasn't wearing a swimsuit. I was dressed in an orange paisley churidar: pants tapered at the ankles, a loose tunic that flowed down to my shins and a long scarf pulled over my head. At that point, my rickshaw driver Ashok emerged from the wings to shoo the men. He had stayed close while I was reading on the beach, although I had arranged with him to return for me in three hours. Ashok had appointed himself my protector because, he later explained, "You look just like a regular Kerala girl." Regular Kerala girls, he said, do not sit by themselves on the beach, just staring into the sea, unless they've had problems at home and are perhaps contemplating suicide.

I wanted to pass as an Indian, to transcend the role of tourist, to connect in meaningful ways with the people around me. India was more than a commodity to me, and I wanted to be more to it than just another American consumer, but I also wanted to be seen as an American when it suited me—when, for instance, I thought it might explain my behavior or make me seem less odd to others. I felt this from my first hour in India, when the immigration officer reviewing my visa demanded to know why I had been talking so warmly to the man in line ahead of me, a tabla player from New York. The official's rebuke was as crisp as his khaki. He upbraided me for being open and informal with a strange man. In reply, I didn't ask the immigration agent what business it was of his. I didn't assert my right to speak to whom-ever I pleased, as warmly as I pleased. Instead, I just said: "I am an American."

I admit there may have been some bristle, indeed some swagger in the declaration, given his accusing tone. And I know that it was gratuitous, given the fact that he had proof of my US citizenship in his tight grip. My response was, nonetheless, mostly just an explanation. I felt the need to put my brown skin in context for him. In the process, I seem to have affirmed my identity more simply, and with greater confidence, than I had ever done in America itself—and I did this at the very gates of the country that I thought had made me, from a distance of generations and

THE MAGICIAN'S BOX

thousands of miles. Was it possible that the magician's box of emigration had set me free as well as cut me in half? Had leaving Guyana liberated me, because I am a woman? And was it possible that leaving India had done the same for my great-grandmother a century earlier?