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Posting Notes

JAMES AND I ARE ON A PLANE, returning home from our week-long Caribbean vacation. James reads a medical journal and has taken off his glasses as he always does when reading. In his left hand, he grips a pen. Although he will never mark the page, it helps him concentrate. His leather sandals are neatly tucked under his chair, and he stretches his long legs into the corridor between us. His hair is still dirty-blond and wavy, and his eyes bright hazel with flecks of yellow. To frame his narrow, oval face, he has grown short fashionable sideburns. On the bridge of his nose there is a ridge from a childhood sporting accident. He still plays racket sports regularly—tennis with me and the girls, squash with faculty members at the university gym. Handsome is not the word to describe him, but he is strong, groomed, confident, healthy, clean. Even from a few feet away, I can identify his smell: woody, crisp, and natural. It is the smell of autumn. In the beginning, I used to think it was soap or aftershave, but now I know it is the scent of his skin.

The girls are staying with my parents, who dote on them, indulge them. Despite missing them like crazy, I am secretly thrilled about the concentrated injection of Indian culture they are getting. For one week, they will live as I did growing up: with two parents from India, speaking Hindi to each other, eating fresh-cooked Indian food with their hands every night and waking up to the blaring Indian entertainment program on TV Sunday morning, which my mother follows religiously.



When we were together, more than a decade ago now, Manvir and I continued these traditions from our childhoods without much thought. He would bring *chai* to bed, and we would cuddle in bathrobes, watching

the Sunday program as the sun warmed the morning sky. On occasion, we would recall a joke, a funny line from the show, and repeat these Hindi phrases to each other over the following weeks. Sometimes we shared them with our families, who would chuckle at the recollection. We would eat in Little India often, ordering from the non-English menu, drinking from stainless steel glasses and compartmentalized plates. Our fingers would stain yellow from the turmeric. Reaching across the table, we would dip our *roti* in each other's food. Our families joined us now and then and we would talk animatedly, laughing throughout the meal.

Nobody would turn back to look at our table, startled by blond hair amongst a sea of black, as happens the rare times James and I eat there. Spices trouble James's stomach. He drinks his tea black without cloves, cinnamon, ginger, sugar, milk. Salads, lighter fare for dinner, is what he prefers. When he does eat Indian cuisine, he punctures and severs the food with fork and knife. I know better than to blare the TV Sunday morning, when James prefers to quietly flip through *The Economist*.



Casually, I glance at the airline magazine. And then I see it: an article on Manvir, a tribute to his research. Not only is there an article but a half page black-and-white photo of him and his wife with the caption: *Recipient of this year's prestigious international Simon L. Miller Award for Aviation Research: Dr. Manvir Sethi, standing with his wife at the gala awards ceremony.*

Alarm grips me. This was not expected. His presence flung into my trip, invading my life after all these years. What is he doing in this magazine? What is he doing winning an award? When did he become significant, his work, his life, *without me*? I did not know he had married. The words of the article blur before my eyes; they are nonsensical. I cannot read them. I will never read them.

Frantically, I look over at James, but he is buried in his journal and I know he will not engage in long conversation. To my right is a woman with a deep tan that must have taken her a couple of weeks to build. Her hair is dyed a russet-brown and she has squared-off artificial nails and bright tropical-orange nail polish on her toes. She opens her make-up pouch, a white *Louis Vuitton* with the colourful summer print, and pulls out a tube of lip gloss. She returns her pouch to a large matching purse under the seat in front of her. Nudging James, I point out her accessories. James nods his approval and turns back to his article. He likes finely crafted things.

“Nice purse,” I offer, desperate for a distraction to take my mind off Manvir.

“Thanks,” she beams. “See, I told you nobody would know,” she says to her husband. He shrugs his shoulders and stares out the window. The woman leans over to me and says, “They’re fake. Got them on the island.”

Overhearing this, James straightens his back, offended. This revelation affronts his sense of right. The woman pulls out the pouch again, shows me the zipper with the logo and proudly points out the label stitched inside, an indistinguishable replica. “I brought a real LV with me, and they are identical. Absolutely identical.”

I nod, intrigued despite myself. Manvir would have also been interested, a status symbol purchased at a discount. Knock-offs did not bother him; he was accustomed to their proliferation. In India, vendors hawk poor imitations at street corners or better ones in boutique shops in five star hotels.

“Want one?” she asks.

“What?” I am startled by her offer.

“Bought lots. Purses, wallets, luggage even. You name it. I pretty much got the entire summer collection for peanuts.”

She tells me about the man on the Island, who has a convenience shop on Back Street with a false wall concealing a closet-sized room filled with designer knock-offs.

“And you will sell them in Toronto?”

“Mmm,” she confirms.

“How much?”

I look over at James, who is frowning. He does not approve. He is fiercely protective of intellectual property; he punishes his students severely for plagiarism. In his academic world, there can be no greater wrong. For a moment I imagine myself strutting down Bloor Street, *Louis Vuitton* purse in hand. Would I appear more fashionable, younger, stylish? Perhaps it would induce me to wear my long hair loose, straight and swinging down my back, as opposed to my usual sensible braided ponytail. Perhaps I would shed my school-teacher flat shoes and ski jacket for heels and a trench with a fur-lined collar.

From James’s expression, I can tell he is disgusted by my interest. Putting on his glasses, he stands up and heads toward the washroom. The woman and I talk further. We settle on a price. Before James returns, I squeeze my new purse into my tote bag.

"If I tell you something, promise to keep it a secret?" the woman asks in a conspiring whisper.

I nod my assurance, seeking the continued distraction, anything to erase the image of Manvir and his wife blazing in my head.

"Holt's can't tell the difference."

I shake my head in confusion.

She sighs and then continues, "If you wanted to, you could buy a real LV at Holt Renfrew and use the receipt to return the fake one later."

Patting my hand, she winks at me and adds, "But that would be illegal."

The scheme leaves me reeling. I could never have concocted it. It is unfathomable. James is rifling through our carry-ons in the overhead compartment. He has not heard what the woman has said and for that I am grateful and relieved.



The first time Manvir confessed he loved me was through a yellow post-it note stuck squarely in the middle of the bathroom mirror. *I love you*, the words printed in block, manly, impersonal letters. Manvir was like that, not willing to take the emotional risk of telling me to my face. He would not wish to create an awkward moment, especially one that could compromise him, leave him exposed. I should have expected the dichotomy: the gravity of the message counterbalanced by the casualness of form. He would never first whisper this while we were holding hands, or picnicking on a Saturday afternoon, or during a candlelight dinner. None of these options would have been appropriate for Manvir. If I did not reciprocate, he could simply flush the yellow paper away. He could save face. We could pretend it never happened.

But I ran from the bathroom to the couch where he was sitting and flung my arms around him, kissed his hair, neck, cheek. I told him that I loved him too. He turned off the TV, tossed me over his shoulder and twirled me around. The ground spun below me in deliriously happy circles. Then Manvir put on music sung in a slow sexy baritone. Gathering me in his arms, we swayed gently as he murmured my name over and over again.

After that day, he gushed over me like a lover in a Bollywood film, particularly on special occasions. On our second anniversary, he took me up north to an abandoned field, where we picnicked. For later that afternoon, Manvir had arranged for a giant hot air balloon to land in our midst. We got on board and floated in the sky drinking champagne and watching the sun set.

To celebrate our six-year anniversary, Manvir blew up seventy-two red balloons, one for each month we were together. Manvir watched with delight as I spent hours in the bedroom popping them. Inside each balloon, he had slipped a note with a reason why he loved me: *because your hair smells like Alfonso mangos; because you laugh at my jokes; because you have deep brown eyes that make me melt; because you cook a wicked butter chicken; because you sing ghazals in the shower; because you are you.* One of the notes was the original post-it that he had saved from when he first told me he loved me.



James proposed to me over dinner at a downtown restaurant. He pulled out a professionally wrapped blue box from his pocket. Inside was a sparkling two-carat square diamond. It was all or nothing with James. He reached across the table, slipped the ring on and smiled. He did not get down on one knee or kiss my lips in public. There was no champagne or balloons. Those frills were not for James. He expressed his love tangibly: with the ring, by looking in my eyes and declaring he loved me. He was practical but solid, proper and stable.

On this trip, though, James made love to me with intensity, with abandon, with a fierceness that used to make my stomach flip when we were daring. It was these uncontained moments that had convinced me there was something to latch onto in what I had predicted would be a placid, smooth, trouble-free relationship. I feared boredom without the crazy highs and plunging lows I was accustomed to with Manvir. James's passion provided the grooves and persuaded me to accept his proposal.

When I first told my parents that James had proposed, they were flabbergasted. They had met him on occasion, but never imagined that a white man would be my husband.

"At least he is a doctor," they said to console themselves.

"Manvir was also," I reminded them.

"Hmhf," they responded. "But not a real one."

This is how they justify my marriage to their friends: a real doctor, a professor, in fact, not like that fellow she was dating before, only a PhD. In their minds, James's profession is his redeeming quality. Right before Shelly was born, my parents accompanied James, me and Anita from Toronto to James's family reunion in Edmonton. It was my parents' first trip to Alberta. They learned some of James's family history and one important fact that raised him in their estimation. His great-uncle had been premier.

Now, when they introduce James, they slip in this fact: “He is not only a doctor, but a professor of medicine. And he comes from a great family: his uncle was the premier of Alberta.”

Over the years, I believe they have come to accept him, love him even, for all the reasons I do: his generosity, his good-natured easy-going spirit, his kindness, his sharp mind, and his wit that occasionally manifests itself in an unexpected remark, that make people look at him anew, with wonder.

My parents also appreciate the way he is raising our daughters, the way he inculcates curiosity and respect for both their cultures. He places equal emphasis on their learning about India and Canada; about Christ and Vishnu; ensures that we make bi-annual trips to India, more frequently than when I was a child, when my parents could only manage to take my sisters and me every few years. Sometimes his privilege angers me: that *he* takes me and my children to learn about India, about me. If James were Indian, this would be unnecessary. The children would not need their Indian-ness reinforced by these trips; it would be inherent; it would be wholly part of them. At other times, I am ashamed of myself for having these thoughts, astounded and grateful for the vigour with which James pursues our duality, just so the girls and he can feel connected to my heritage and me.



Even two weeks after our trip, the image of Manvir and his wife haunts me. I cannot dislodge it from my memory. Not when Shelly does her first full length of front crawl at her swimming lesson; not when Anita comes home with a perfect math test; not when James sneaks a long and deep kiss when he comes home early, just before the girls return from school. I want it to fade, but it blazes bright and vivid. Perhaps I nourish it, not willing to relinquish Manvir just yet. I add colour to the picture: his bow tie is navy, her dress a pale yellow. I add sound: there is background chatter from the crowd: he is laughing while the camera clicks and whirls. She is silent. Eventually I realize I must do something to free myself of him. I decide the only way to erase Manvir from my head is to acknowledge him and his award. As I prepare to write a sophisticated, congratulatory letter, I find myself wondering about the endless cycle of ups and downs in our relationship and the multiple breakups.

But I am not sure if I can be perfectly honest; if I can accurately recall who ended our relationship the first time around. Why does it matter, anyway? Manvir and I were on a precipice. We teetered. We couldn't have lasted.

Manvir's thesis had not been going well, his research results posed stumbling blocks. His temperament became erratic and difficult. He stopped taking his anti-depressant medication. Staying up all night, he would type madly, coming to bed at dawn with eyes burning red as the sun. After sleeping until mid-afternoon, he would get up and scan what he had written the night before. His bottom lip would stick out, petulant and sulky, and he would toss sheet after sheet onto the floor. At first, I would gather the discarded papers, filing them in colour-coded files in case he later decided they would be useful. Eventually, I began ignoring the mess. Manvir began ignoring me. For weeks he would leave the papers scattered. They were trampled on and littered with crumbs. It tore my heart to watch him spiral downwards, but neither gentle coaxing nor angry threats would snap him out of it.

We began speaking only when necessary: *I am going to the store; the faucet is leaking; Dr. Calbright called about your chapter; pass the dressing.* One evening as we were eating, a mouse scampered across the floor. I screamed. Manvir laughed. In one strike, he thumped the mouse dead, but left the body atop the strewn papers. I freaked out, told him that he was living like a pig, throwing away his life, should get back on his medication. I refused to witness his self-destruction. Although I left him that evening, I hoped that our breakup would shock him to his senses. Three weeks later, he sent me a cute stuffed-cat and a card. He wrote a long apology, swore he was better and promised that the only furry creature I would find in the apartment would be the stuffed toy.

What I am uncertain about is whether this was before or after the Sunday morning when we had a fight and missed my cousin's wedding. On Saturday night Manvir wanted to work on his thesis. He promised me that he would only stay up a couple of hours. But instead he watched one TV movie and then another and another. In the morning, he was enervated, would not get dressed.

"Last night, I wondered if I am still in love with you," he said quietly, pulling up the comforter high around his face so that only his bleary eyes stared at me.

I collapsed on the floor, choking on my sobs. The phone rang a dozen times. Even though I knew it was my family frantic about my absence, I could not move, wondered if I ever would again. On the floor, I held my knees to my chest and watched the arm of the clock move past the wedding hour. Manvir fell asleep.

How we reconciled after that Sunday, I don't remember. It certainly wasn't the last time he said such things. Perhaps, I hurled evil words at him

also. The instances when he did not take his medication grew more frequent and his mind would plunge into gutters of despair. Inevitably after a few days or weeks, he would reach out to me again, apologize, make promises. Things would be wonderful for a while and then the pattern would repeat.

Our final breakup I do recollect. Fine details persist in my memory with startling, haunting clarity, even now, twelve years later. This breakup replays in my mind in slow motion: surreal, poorly scripted, something we would watch in a bad movie, snuggled together on a rainy evening. Shortly after Manvir had dropped me off at my apartment and pecked my lips in a routine, perfunctory fashion, I called him on his car phone and made my declaration. I could not go on this way. He had to get his life in order, stay on his medication or it was over. He did not respond. Only his heavy breath and the background swish-swish of wipers came through the crackling line. A large part of me believed that he would finally begin taking care of himself and we would reconcile once more; that at the very least he would call again. But he never did and I never laid eyes on him again, until I saw the article in the airline magazine.



I decide I will not type the note to Manvir. It would be too impersonal. Instead, I will write in my natural long and skinny handwriting full of flourishes and loops, full of my character. Rifling through the mahogany desk, I locate thick cream stationery. Our names are embossed at the top: Ambika and James Wellman. Sometimes it surprises me that my name is Wellman. Even after nine years, it feels foreign, borrowed, temporary. When Manvir opens my letter, will he instantly recognize that the Ambika printed across the page refers to me: the Ambika that was once his? Grabbing the pen, I sit down, compose my thoughts, begin to write, but my hand is jerky, my feelings cannot be transcribed, will not be epistolary.

A small multi-coloured pad sits on the corner of the desk. James doodles while on the phone making appointments or discussing research papers with students. I pull a sheet off the pad and print *Fuck off*. Stapling it to the magazine article, I cover Manvir's face. It is not fair. I knew him before his fame: I can see through his even-toothed grin. It was me who drove him to the dentist when he had his buck teeth sawed down, as if reducing bone would do the same for his self-consciousness. But it seems to have worked. In the paper, his smile is wide and unabashed.

When he delivers his talks on aviation psychology, shares shreds of his vast knowledge, dazzles the audience with his brilliance, does he remem-

ber to tell them that he used to go for three days without bathing; that he would lie in bed, lights off, blinds shut, without eating or talking; that he would barely move except to flick his wrist while changing channels with the remote, or to hurl a pillow at my head if I disturbed him? Does he tell them how his moods spiralled out of control? One minute a tornado of love where he would smother me with kisses while making gobbling noises, tell jokes so that we laughed until our stomachs ached. But on the next day spilled coffee or a cloudy sky could set him off and he would spew vile, offensive words, threaten to leave me, end his life.

I wonder if he is still on drugs, still fighting his serotonin levels; or if it was only I who had to suffer through his disorder? Why did I put up with that for ten years? Just because I loved him; thought he would change; couldn't imagine life without him; felt he was part of me? In the end, was it just so the woman he eventually married, the woman in the picture could be at his side as he stands proudly before the world beaming with even teeth?

I pick up the magazine again. That his wife is Indian intensifies my sense of replacement, displacement. Her Indian-ness is clear in her features: the small but sharp hooked nose, the sensuous full curve of her mouth. It transcends the photograph. She is attractive, pretty even. She is wearing a full-sleeved dress, with a shallow scoop neck to the gala. Across her chest, she has draped a chiffon scarf, reminiscent of a *dupatta* that is customarily worn with Indian suits. If I were attending the gala, I would have shown myself off in something bold: a red dress with a deep halter cut. The fabric would have hugged my trim figure, revealed my breasts that are still upright, have not yet begun to droop. My head would have reached Manvir's ear, not just his shoulder, like his wife's does. I am taller than the average Indian female. Manvir always preferred shorter women.



Hanging on the wall above the desk are two recent and framed pictures of Shelly at six and Anita at eight. Holding up the magazine between their faces, I compare the three images of my daughters and Manvir's wife, all the while knowing that this act is indecent, disloyal and a monstrous transgression of familial loyalty, of motherhood. For an instant, I speculate as to how the girls that I love with every cell of my being would look if their father had been Indian, had been Manvir. Their hair would have been darker, ebony, not chestnut like their paternal grandmother's; their skin less pale, more bronzed. Shelly's eyes would be brown, not green like

James's; she would not have freckles. Anita's nose would not be as straight; her lips would have been fuller, rounder, more like Manvir's wife's, more like mine.

I throw the magazine into the trash bin, but my eyes cannot let go. They wander back. I peer over the desk's edge. What unsettles me the most is that his wife is not looking straight ahead, into the camera like he is. Instead, she is looking at Manvir. Even from this picture I can tell she is docile. She defers to him in a way I never would. When he first told her he loved her, I suspect it was not on a post-it note. He would have felt safe, sufficiently assured by her softness, her gentle demeanour, to pronounce his affection to her face.



When I was eight months pregnant with my first daughter, we discussed names. I told James I liked Sona, for gold, because she would have golden skin, a blend of my brown and his white. James only shook his head: he never liked to verbalize his disagreement. He avoided direct confrontation. Instead, his displeasure would be signalled by his thin pink-grey mouth dropping slightly ajar, the corners down turned. For a few seconds he would think, gather rational arguments, then speak about the pros first and outweigh them with the cons. Persuasiveness was his strong suit: he should have been a businessman, a negotiator, a lawyer. It was a beautiful thought, he agreed, but she would be called 'son' in school, children would mock her, and besides, our child could not be a metal, she would be warm, vibrant, alive. I accused him of being racist, of dismissing the name because it was Indian. He kissed my forehead and told me not to be ridiculous. He said he loved me. He was proud to have me as his wife, but our children were a blend. They were Canadian, and so maybe their names could be Anglicized Indian. We can call her Sona at home, he offered: it can be her family name, her nickname. And to be fair, he always refers to our first-born as Sona and insists that his parents and brother do also. James is like that: fair, upright, honourable. But when I hear her school friends call her Anita, I feel humiliated and furious for not having stood up to James, for caving under his rationality.

"You're being colonial," I accused him, walking away, petulant and implacable. But part of me understood, part of me remembers being taunted with perverse derivatives of Ambika: a beaker; a bee; a biker. Children can be intolerant, cruel. Three days later, I left a post-it on the fridge: *Anita?* It was a compromise, a name common both in India and Canada. *All right,*

James had written back. I added *Sona Wellman* after *Anita*. He drew a tick mark.

I keep this post-it on the first page of her baby book, along with her hospital bracelet. Whenever I see it, my heart flutters a little. I cannot believe my gall in importing the post-it note tradition from my relationship with Manvir into our marriage, but it was my secret way of punishing James for winning, for being white. Perhaps it was also a token, a way to keep alive that part of my heart that still—that will always—belong to Manvir.



Shortly after my failed attempt at writing to Manvir is when it happened. I did not plan it, did not fathom I was even capable of it, but somehow I found myself asking the woman behind the *Louis Vuitton* counter at Holt's for the same model of purse I bought from the woman on the plane. Handing her my credit card, I made a purchase of hundreds of dollars. When I got home, I scrutinized the two purses. The woman on the plane was right: they were indistinguishable. The material, the stamped logos, the zipper were all identical. It took my breath away. Feeling ashamed and excited all at once, I hid the new bag along with the fake one in a drawer under my bras and panties.

Later that night, I lie in bed beside James, his back to me.

"James?" He does not answer. "James, I know you are awake."

"Ambi," he moans, the syllables drenched with sleep. A moment later he begins snoring.

"You don't snore this early." I warn him that his feigned sleep will not work, that I know his sleeping patterns, that I know him. From working half the night on his paper, he is exhausted and does not want to talk. Although I feel guilty, I persist, determined now. A sense of urgency has gotten hold of me.

"Listen," I shake his shoulders gently. When he does not respond, I squeeze my fingers tighter, past the thin padding of fat and grip his bones. They feel dense and strong and thick between my fingers. "James, get up," I order him, my tone resolute. I am shaking him firmly now, his body visibly shifting under the covers. If I do not tell him, the secret will devour me: it is vital, burning, consuming.

Reaching over him, I switch on his night lamp. The eerie glow of the soft light with the purple shade that matches the bedcover and penetrates our room. "I have something to tell you," I say, getting up and opening my underwear drawer to pull out the two purses.

In the dim lighting, I cannot tell which purse is which. My heart jumps, a thrill zips down my spine. I want to see his face contort with confusion, bewilderment. I want him, once, just once, to feel misplaced, ill at ease from being my husband, just as I, every now and then, feel a small shock, like a pin prick, when in the middle of the night I turn over and see his pale skin illuminated by the long arm of moonlight reaching through the window to our bed and realize that he is not Manvir.