

The family fortune

Neela

Neela in Italy had a job, a daughter and a home — in that order, though none of them truly belonged to her. And half a dog – Mao – which she cared for from Saturday to Monday. Neela had never liked owning things here; it made her feel as though she, too, was merely part of the geography, engaged in a mutual debt. Of the four sisters she had grown up with in Sri Lanka, she hardly had a relationship with any of them now: time had crept into every crack, carving out a distance that not even Whatsapp could bridge. The two eldest sisters had lived lives so far removed from her own that she could barely remember their names; Dammika and Priyanga lived in the farthest reaches of memory. With Pavitra, the youngest, and Himali, the third, she had shared more than mere existence. Not to mention that Internet on the island was as unreliable as it was expensive. On her last visit, she had quarrelled with the younger sisters she still spoke to. Her daughter Ayesha — always seeing the best in everyone else and the worst in her mother — had of course blamed her. Neela couldn't fault her; it was a judgment she applied to herself as well.

That morning, she'd opened her eyes just before the alarm on her phone — like every weekday morning for the past thirty years — and seen a *yakshaya* clinging to her ankles. A monstrous demon, yet to Neela it seemed harmless.

“What are you doing here?” she'd asked, then remembered he probably only spoke Sinhala. She'd translated the question into that language before adding directly in the other language, “What do you want?”

“I never left, darling,” the creature had replied, climbing her brown legs like a coconut-picker scaling a smooth, oily trunk. “At most, I took a few years off. A long vacation, you know. And you're not the only human I follow—don't think that you're special.”

“A few years?” Neela had echoed, incredulous, when she found herself face-to-face with

him. “It must be at least a decade since I last dreamed of you.”

“Dreams? Darling, there’s nothing worse than a Sri Lankan who’s gone white,” he’d mused, circling her trunk and perching on her back. “Well, maybe an immigrant turned bourgeois,” he’d finished before vanishing into her flesh like an invertebrate.

Neela shot upright, the knife of fear sunk deep between her shoulder blades and, shaking her head to clear the traces of that nightmare, she went to brew herself a tea —no sugar — accompanied by two whole-grain berry biscuits: a ritual of survival. The healthy turning point had begun ten years earlier, when the doctor had diagnosed her with her family’s illness, diabetes.

“Did Appacchi have it, too?” Ayesha had asked upon hearing the prognosis, eyes fixed on the asterisks-marked values in her blood-tests.

“He died of it,” Neela replied. Her daughter could scarcely recall her maternal grandfather —her presence on the island had been so fleeting, barely extending beyond her father’s family at the edge of Colombo. “Your aunts have it, too,” she added.

Ayesha, driven by her characteristic urge to get to the root of things and unearth the seed of original evil, had typed into Google’s search bar the keywords “diabetes, causes, Sri Lanka,” discovering that roughly one in four Sri Lankans is affected. That turned out to be the highest rate in Asia—fifteen percent of the adult population. This poisonous sweetness was linked to higher standards of living, urban housing, and increased body mass: in short, diabetes on the island was a direct consequence of a jump in social class.

“In Italy nobody dies anymore. At least not because they’re rich.” Indeed, Neela had navigated between private consults and dietary guidelines, and by the time she reached the age at which her father died, the prospect of dying had become far less alarming. It was true—you get used to everything, even to medicine that shifts from care to profit.

Had she decided to return to Sri Lanka, following that diet of lentil paste, lean organic

meat, and plant-based milk in a part of the world where people eat rice on average three times a day could have proved arduous. She had mentally noted this among the cons. On the plus side, she owned a property in a gated community—offering amenities such as a gym, a supermarket, and a swimming pool: with her savings, and later her pension, she could lead a more than comfortable—and, as far as a single woman could go, safe—life. On paper it was paradise—but one had to turn a blind eye to corruption and two to misogyny.

Her daughter would stay in Italy, on the other side of the world, but ever since—almost forty years earlier—she had left Ayesha in Sri Lanka for the first time when she was barely more than a newborn, it had always seemed that Ayesha was elsewhere, even when she was right by her side.

More than anything she felt it was time to go back. The thought, like a siren song, had carved a path through her body and entered her mind with sudden clarity when Anoma—whom everyone called Anna—the owner of the grocery store in Monza, had asked whether she intended to *gedara yanna*—to go home. For a moment, she felt deeply confused: which home?

“*Lankawatada?*” Neela had asked, to dispel any doubt. In Sanskrit, *Sri* simply means beautiful, and nearly everyone referred to the country by its diminutive *Lanka*—island—their island.

“*Nattham,*” Anima had replied.

Yes—if not there, where? In Sinhala, the curve of the question mark at the end of a sentence is unnecessary: it’s a language that holds certainty even in its questions, that knows if not home, there is no place in the world—no matter how vast—you can truly go. If not there, nowhere.

The other truth was that Ayesha had decided to keep her beauty salon open even in August, and perhaps she’d close for a few days after mid-August, but not long enough for

an intercontinental trip. Ayesha was convinced she had internalized the Brianza work ethic—and perhaps, to some extent, it wasn't an entirely wrong assumption; more than anything, the missed income had long been her excuse for not going back to Sri Lanka.

Anoma's store was crowded that day; in recent years even white customers had begun to shop there, having discovered soy, coconut milk, and ethnic foods. Sri Lankans, on the other hand, went there on weekends to stock up on food stacked around the perimeter of the tiny supermarket, which had the capacity of one aisle. Tucked behind the checkout counter, Anima also kept a couple of large Tupperware containers filled with homemade dishes prepared by a few acquaintances who, to earn extra money, dabbled in cooking on the side. Neela knew from experience that fellow citizens —who lived in rented rooms or apartments in predominately white neighbourhood— preferred to buy ready-made meal: landlords generally liked the tenants' money, but not so much the smells from their kitchens or the color of their skin, and sometimes not even the sounds of their language. Immigrants led bare existences. Of course, it depended on how their languages sounded: the r's of the French, the Spanish s's, or the gutturals of the Germans were welcomed with open arms by those who had turned grandma's, dad's, uncle's house into renovated Airbnbs with automatic padlocks on the front doors. Her sister Himali would have said that language, too, ultimately comes down to money — indeed, it was a remark she would have made back when Neela first left, when Himali's idealism was on its last legs, and life's hardships had slowly worn it down.

It was still before the new millennium the first time Neela had seen her employers, the masters. She'd worked in service for others since migrating to Milan, but always in short stints, and in any case no one would ever be more master to her than the couple she was about to meet that day. She was to care for Mariuccia, the elderly woman who was the mother of the man and the mother-in-law of the woman, and who lived with them. They had struck her as breathtakingly beautiful—so *white*. Not even her younger sister Himali,

the third of the five daughters and universally hailed as enchanting—a true colonial beauty—was as white. The woman, Rosanna, wore her hair short, a length in Sri Lanka that frames childhood before it grows into the braids and buns girls wear all the way to their coffins. Those two, like all Italians, embodied for her an alien aesthetic—though perhaps she was so enthralled because she had grown up on the myth of whiteness, fair skin as the ideal to strive for. On that first day of work, her husband Sarath accompanied her, drawing on his five years of experience in Italy. As the tram carried them away from the high-rise cityscape, Neela watched through the wooden window seat as the land parcelled itself out: alternating slabs of concrete with taut ribbons of fields, in a stiff geometry that severed any relationship between urban planning and nature.

Sarath came to an abrupt halt in front of an imposing two-storey villa. Its walls were a soft yellow, and a red decorative band with Renaissance motifs ran just below the roof's overhang; a wrought-iron balcony stretched along the street-facing facade.

"Press the intercom," he told her, gesturing at the buttons on the wall, but then he pressed the buzzer himself. Before then, Neela had never seen an intercom—she didn't even have a word for it in her own language. On the island, only the wealthy had private homes behind gates, and even then they announced themselves with a simple doorbell. The sandy garden where she had grown into a young woman was ringed by rice paddies open to the view of strangers.

"Who is it?" asked a voice rasping through the metal grille of the intercom.

"It's Paolo, ma'am," Sarath answered. Employers always preferred a name they could pronounce without effort; sometimes they gave you one themselves—much as they did with dogs—but if you wanted to avoid the humiliation of a mis-assigned identity, it was better to choose your own.

Sarath, an unworthy Buddhist, had decided to re-baptize himself with a Biblical name. Watching the easy, servile smile—so typically Indian—spread across his face at the sight of the madam approaching, Neela wondered whether it was worth living two continents

away from her own life for such a fickle man—always ready to disappear into one last drink, on another plane, with another woman. Love can make you do things you'd never imagine you could, and marrying Sarath had been one of those things. At the time she didn't know about Paolo—but the warning signs had already been there.

“Morning, ma'am,” Neela mumbled, even though winter's darkness was already falling. She didn't look at the man, Gino, because he frightened her: before she left for Italy, her mother had called her once a day from the village shop's telephone to describe the latest torture endured by the servants in Saudi Arabia—she said her friends, who had gone to drink tea and chew betel that afternoon, had told her all about it. At the other end of the line, Neela imagined them seated on the veranda in mango-wood and wicker armchairs, their teeth stained red from bulath. They must have slipped off their black rubber slippers—at least the two among them who were wearing those—before brushing the sand from their soles against the coconut-fiber doormat. Amma must have already arranged the tray with all the ingredients: betel leaves fanned out, areca nuts and dried tobacco in the center, and a small dish of white calcium-hydroxide powder. The one time Neela, as a girl, had tried bulath, she'd tasted a root-like flavor on her tongue and felt a texture that produced more saliva than she could swallow. She'd instantly felt sharper; the claws of hunger had retracted—but when her mother caught her with vermilion stains on her teeth, she'd slapped her. In that single blow, her curiosity for any substance that might alter the way life curved around the body vanished: she'd been taught that there were stars, spirits, and deities—and that only prayers and rituals could enlist their will to shape a benevolent reality.

Her friends had told her mother about that poor woman whose employers, to “welcome” her, had confiscated her documents and burned her hand; then there was the other one—“I heard this on the radio yesterday morning,” one of them began as she rose to spit the reddish saliva their chewing had produced, toward the rice paddies—“the poor thing,

once back on the island, showed everyone the X-rays of the nails her employers had driven into her arms.”

“Those people are monsters,” Neela had tried to reassure her, the whitish plastic handset wedged between her shoulder and ear. “In Italy, it’s different.” Yet, standing before that man—almost six and a half feet tall, broad, burly, with a beard—she felt the terror of those atrocities lodge itself in her very bones. For weeks afterward, each night she checked to make sure her passport—and with it her mistrust—were still where she’d hidden them that morning, tucked at the back of the sweater drawer. Perhaps it really was different in Italy, but masters were the same everywhere.

After the pleasantries, Sarath had left her there, in the hands of two strangers whose only identifiers were their names—Rosanna and Gino—rendered mute by a language she didn’t know, alone in a place she understood nothing of, her first suitcase at her feet. She had no money but a marked tram ticket and the remaining five thousand lire the newsstand keeper had given her. Hope lodged in her throat as she winced at the dying clack of the only person she knew in that country. Then she lifted her trolley herself—before her employer could—and stumbled uncertainly behind the resolute steps of the two masters.

Had Paolo glanced back, he would have seen the Fiammettis’ new maid trailing her employers through the gate. You can know a person’s spirit intimately, their skin can feel as familiar as your own flesh—and yet, one day, suddenly, they withdraw from you like the tide, hurrying back into the ocean. Some people leave behind only damp sand and microplastics. If Sarath had turned around, he would have seen the woman he married seven years earlier in a small Colombo hotel, squeezed into an ’80s jacket too old even to count as vintage, lifting stubbornly the single suitcase that contained all she owned. She was so light.

Sarath would return, Neela told herself—but Paolo was already striding toward another match, another whisky, another life—and with him drifted away all of Neela's youth, though she was not yet thirty.

Neela had bought that suitcase at the Maharagama market, when Ayesha was barely four. Her mother-in-law, Kumudu Amma, had spotted one priced at five thousand rupees in a little shop a couple of streets before her own stall. Kumudu Amma had been a seamstress her whole life, and she'd continued selling her own designs of nightgowns, panties, and camisoles even after her sons had set up a textile factory right under her nose. Everyone had tried to dissuade her from going every Saturday morning to lay out a pair of *paduru* mats along the Pamunuwa Railway Road, atop which she displayed everything she'd sewn during the week. But Kumudu Amma loved the rhythm of her life, her market neighbors, and—above all—her independence. Her sons thought they could buy her everything she needed, but that was precisely the point—that what she needed was something those two, who had swapped sarongs for jeans and Buddhism for the Communist Party, could never understand.

Her constant pilgrimages to the village *kattadiya* were the very reason Sarath and Buddika had pulled off the mad venture of that factory. She'd fasted, performed every sort of vow, and prayed to the gods the old healer had told her to pray to, handing over half her market earnings at each consultation. For months she was forbidden to touch meat; some weeks she survived on fruit alone, others on nothing but spicy food. Sometimes she left the healer's house clutching a bag of herbs to mix with her tea leaves three times a day. Neela had caught her preparing the most nauseating concoctions, eating red-chili pods to punish a "weak will." What Sarath and Buddika never understood was that their mother still worked as a seamstress not to cheat old age or stave off time, but to mend her fortune.

That's what women did then: they measured, cut, and stitched together scraps of cloth to

earn a little money—no matter whether they worked on verandas or under the roof of an employer. From childhood, Neela had learned that tending her own clothes and her younger sisters' was the kind of knowledge that spares you from begging men for help. She'd always known the sensation of a needle breaking the ridges of her fingerprints, and one day, watching from the veranda the group of Tamil girls working for her husband's family, she'd wondered whether that touch of metal on skin gave them the same feeling of having outwitted fate.

Kumudu Amma would never have admitted the futility of all that bodily mortification—even when old age, ill luck, and hunger struck her at once. They found her in bed, frail and almost translucent from stomach cancer, having outlived one son and endured the misfortune of the other. By then Neela had already laid aside needle and thread, resigned to the idea that no patch can save you from an adverse destiny when you're born under an unlucky star.

Five thousand rupees was truly a lot, especially given how few lire her husband sent home. A few months earlier she had been checking the orders when her brother-in-law Buddhika, Sarath's younger brother, came in. He was still young then, with thick curly hair cropped short at the nape, but he was already developing a bit of a belly, and he went around always wearing dark dress trousers and a light short-sleeved shirt, cinched at the waist with a black belt. Over time he would cultivate that self-made-man image more deliberately—investing in status and social capital; that was the sort of person he was. After marrying in, Neelakanthi had been promoted from seamstress and had begun handling that back-office side of things, away from the money—because she wasn't truly “one of the family.” Buddhika settled himself in the room that had once belonged to her husband and now served as an office. In some of the island's older houses, the first room off the entrance, set back under the veranda, was reserved for the firstborn son. That room would, in time, belong to her husband, her brother-in-law, then her nephew.

“We don’t know what Sarath is up to down there,” he told her. “You have to insist on going yourself. *Minissu ekaeka ewa kiyan yanawa*”.

He was right—people always have something to say, especially when the gossip was about someone who... well, in Sinhala they say *rata giya* — “one who’s gone abroad,” as if it didn’t matter where, only that one had escaped this misery to some Western country. Along the Arawwala Road the houses of those who had managed to reach Italy were clustered together. And everyone spoke poorly of her husband. A wife is expected to be respectable, and to look after the respectability of the men in her life.

“And Ayesha?” she asked, her gaze drifting to a gecko that had slipped in through one of the high vents designed to keep the humid air flowing. Her brother-in-law had already thought of that, too: the family would contribute to her trip and take care of the little girl for as long as she was away. Ayesha was four; the last time she’d seen her father she couldn’t even say *Tattha*.

“I’ll talk to Sarath, I’ll think about it,” she negotiated. Buddhika rose as though it were already settled and the rest merely a matter of semantics.

It had taken fourteen months for the day of departure to arrive. More or less around the years when Sri Lanka won its second Asia Cup in cricket and Colombo’s World Trade Center was blown up—Neela wore a burgundy Punjabi suit, its trousers brushing a simple pair of black low-heeled sandals, and the tiny covered buttons fastening the tunic that fell over her legs. She’d smoothed a thin layer of coconut oil over her damp hair before braiding it into a long plait, and at her ears hung the small gold pendants her parents had given her for the wedding. She stood in the bedroom she had shared with her husband, her bare feet touching the cold terrazzo tiles. They had been apart so long, and she felt for him a longing that made her feel vulnerable—a longing their brief marriage had never had time to explore.

That house, which had granted them the privilege of an exclusive, single-family space, had been built in the shade of a jackfruit tree. They'd added to it little by little: a traditional kitchen, a spacious living room, an en-suite bathroom, and three bedrooms—in anticipation of at least one more child. Yet nothing in that home truly belonged to her; every gift came with someone else's claim on her life. Even Ayesha—who at that moment laid on the bed, watching her mother with curious eyes—seemed a piece of herself that Sarath's family was already laying claim to. The mirror in front of which she was getting ready reflected back an ambiguous image: her heart pounded beneath her left ring finger, under the wedding band, to the rhythm of the hours left before she would see Sarath again; that same organ sank deep in her chest at the thought of leaving her daughter. She was excited for herself and for all the possibilities that emigration might bring. For her—who had never felt poverty so stitched to her body as on her wedding day—in Sarath's family's eyes — *rata yanna* sounded like redemption. What she didn't know was that mirrors lie—and so do hopes.

Today, three decades on from that journey, she faced the tangible collapse of those illusions. On the little kitchen table lay the crumbs of breakfast alongside the pros and cons Neela had scribbled on a scrap of paper. Everything in that two-room flat had remained unchanged since Gino, her mother Mariuccia, and Rosanna had died: the same antique paintings on the walls, the same chestnut-wood cupboard, the same old dark-wood kitchen. Ayesha—accustomed to soft-close doors and drawers—made an almighty racket whenever she came for Sunday lunch. The shadows of the slender poplar leaves outside the window were scattered across the placemat. Neela had wiped everything clean with a cloth and then torn up the list, tossing any pretence of rationality into the recycling bin: when she'd left, she'd made her decision thoughtfully—yes, with her heart, but with reason. It seemed she'd paid for it through much of the thirty-five years she'd spent in Italy. Now, at the prospect of returning, she felt her weary body choosing

for her, moving by instinct, guiding her—if not home—then toward the harbor, much like the old ships of certain sailors.

She had to be at work by nine. So she slid into a pair of lightweight polyester palazzo pants and, to shelter herself somewhat from the late-July heat, put on a sleeveless 100 percent linen blouse—one she'd paid more for than she'd ever have felt comfortable spending: it seemed to her that poverty was less about how much you have and more about the habit of endlessly counting money, the thought of stashing aside small change to meet one's obligations. It was true that money had ceased to be a daily source of anguish, but saving had become more than necessary—it had become a habit.

Before leaving, she still had one task. Neela wasn't the sort of woman who circled around a fixed idea; she went straight to the point—which, in this case, sat atop the bedroom wardrobe like a warning. She hauled down the enormous suitcase—her only one—which was so large because her sole journeys always took her to the same place: three weeks with her parents, roughly every four years. Once it lay open at her feet, she looked around, uncertain that it could hold thirty years of her life. It didn't seem so big, after all, but that bulky, recycled-plastic, eco-friendly, shock-proof case held the answer to her daughter's big words — short-term or long-term migration, voluntary or family migration, seasonal or lifelong migration. That suitcase knew what others did not know: that, in the end, you always come back, to reclaim your piece of land. Otherwise, what's the point of dying as you were born, without purpose and without place? You return to make sure that in the plants, the creatures, the people, something of you remains—a trace proving you existed even when, elsewhere, you were busy not existing.

My mother's money

Ayesha

When my mother started the call with “Ay, if I want to go back to Sri Lanka...,” I was scooping the avocado from its shell of such dark green it almost looked black. Seeing it in the fruit bowl made me feel guilty, so I made sure to buy it from Anoma only until September, when it’s in season back in Sri Lanka—though I’d read in a National Geographic article that climate change was turning Sicily’s green hills tropical, with mango and papaya groves sprouting.

Whenever she saw me holding an exotic fruit, my mother would remark that the very same one grew in Achchiamma’s garden. I thought she said it just to sharpen my guilt—because the only thing I remembered of my grandmother were those two colossal mango trees, under which legend said every child of our line was either born or conceived.

“Where does this Christian guilt of yours come from?” Priya—one of the London gallery curators who represented me—would often ask as she sat across from me unveiling a new work, munching on some emblematic toast that stood in for the British housing crisis. She marveled that guilt could breed beauty. I had no answer for her—but that question burrowed new tunnels in the weary furniture, and one day that rot on the floorboards yielded a self-portrait, Colonial Guilt. When I showed it to Priya, she burst out laughing, recognizing the reference—and I’d grown fond of her frankness. She always dressed so elegantly, with a dash of eccentricity piled atop a nose ring, rusty-red hair patched around a legion of elastics and bobby pins, or a fabric embroidered in Indian motifs.

“It seems a bit much to drag in Albert Memmi just to prove I’m wrong,” she’d commented, and I’d accepted the rebuke. Memmi, the Franco-Tunisian sociologist, held that the colonizer was doomed to suffer his own privilege as both a right and a shame—and both feelings sprang from his mediocrity—whereas the oppressed endured a narcissistic

depression: stripped of language, culture, and history, we were ashamed of everything, especially ourselves. Our sadness was formless and senseless. Yet Tunisia had ceased to be a French colony, and I'd spent almost my entire life in Italy—so on which side of the border did that psychological portrait place me?

"Surely on the over-thinkers' side," Priya concluded before sinking her teeth into the toast.

"I mean, Ay, how much damn time have you lived in Europe?" She swallowed a mouthful, and so did I.

"All that's missing is that I was born here."

"Then why is all your art—the art I represent—about 'elsewhere'?" Her frustration was plain: she'd been hired, of course, because only a Black agent could handle BIPOC artists.

"I don't know, Pry. Fanon said that..." I started. We were perched on a bench overlooking the placid, pool-like currents of the Lea, not far from the flat Priya shared with two flatmates.

"Don't hit me with theory, Ay—I studied it too." The light rippled the shadows of the willows that smoothed the muddy bank. "Don't get me wrong: what you create is exactly what the market wants right now. And they decide what sells and what doesn't." She swept her hand in a broad, abstract gesture that included women in bikinis on plastic loungers and children splashing in the shallow end. "Not me." She wiped a smear of vegan mayo from the corner of her mouth. "But—you'll never heal, got it? If you keep poking your fingers into open wounds, digging at raw flesh."

I envied her certainty, craved her clarity. She seemed able to look in the mirror and say, Here I am. I'd run out of arguments, so I simply ate my pastrami.

When I first met Priya, it was clear which side she was on—because among artists with migratory backgrounds there are two camps: those who want to don the oppressor's

clothes, and those who wish to excavate their own suffering. I never judged either; each to their own path.

“The Beardsleys are the aristocracy of London art. My goal is to reach their level. I want to matter,” my future agent told me then. Grandpa Beardsley had founded a prestigious art magazine; his granddaughter now ran it, shaping the whole sector. When the family’s net worth rose even further as power passed from one gender to the next—before ever moving from one generation to the next—they had become the epitome of success. Priya bore no thorns in her heart; she sailed calmer waters than mine, and that was why I liked her—because life needn’t be so complicated for everyone, or at least not in the same way. The orography of my guilt transcended catechisms and maybe even atlases; it came from far away, from the rustle of two shadowed trees that echoed even in the innocent act of shelling this green gold.

According to Freud, the superego is responsible for guilt: an entity that regulates desires, drives, inner oppression. My conscience was stained, but I didn’t know why.

An avocado is a deceiving fruit: you squeeze it daily to gauge its softness, then suddenly it gives under your fingers—ripe at last—and you open it, only to find it’s already rotten. From my mother’s call I gathered her thought was no unripe hypothesis; on the other end, it had ripened. After we hung up, I mashed the pulp into a white ceramic bowl and dressed it with a wedge of lemon juice—on the island they use lime and heap on spoonfuls of sugar—but the diabetes coursing through my mother’s veins, through all her sisters’, their parents’, and our ancestors’, held me back. As I drew the teaspoon from the cutlery drawer, I thought the first hands that fed me were not mine but my mother’s; watching her spoon-feed her elderly employers, I imagined the last hands to feed her would be mine.

At my mother's announcement I answered with the pragmatism honed by decades spent handling every administrative aspect of her life—translating her wishes into this country's language and bureaucracy. I logged in to the INPS website to check the amount of social contributions I'd paid on her behalf, dutifully listening to her complaints about how much she had to shell out each year.

"Let's hope at least for a good pension," she'd always say before confirming the payment. She would have one—given Sri Lanka's cost of living. She'd worked in Italy since she was twenty-eight—and somewhere there should be another ten years' contributions my father paid. Perhaps they were transferable. A good chunk of her work had been off the books, especially in the first decade, but she'd been far-sighted enough to secure at least one formal contract a year, in case her residence permit ever became an issue. No respectable family wants to pay its cleaning lady more than strictly necessary, and certainly not anything beyond the thirty-two euros left on the table for four hours of cleaning a week.

I'd always hidden my mother's line of work: she was a housewife; she didn't work; she worked for the Sri Lankan community, for the embassy, for the government; she was a spy; she was wealthy. The more I grew up, the more incredible the roles I added to her résumé became.

"I saw you leave that building behind us," a classmate, Vittoria, almost accused me one morning at our high-school gate. It was a former ecclesiastical complex, its entrance adorned with a massive marble plaque commemorating some Head of State who had studied beneath those vaulted arches. The list of notable alumni was bolstered by their offspring following in their footsteps.

"That's my mother's accountant's office—she asked me to bring some documents," I replied, though it was 7:30 a.m. and that very palazzo housed the Vimercati family, who—

like most of my mother's early clients—were snobbish and wealthy (a pairing that always goes together).

Vittoria and I were waiting for the bell to ring. I didn't know her parents' professions, but Vittoria was one of those students who showed up in UGG boots, painted leggings, and a shoulder bag costing 125 euros—bought in a boutique at the end of Corso Trieste. My mother, who was paid eight and a half euros an hour at best, would need to work thirteen hours to buy it for me—a calculation I only made years later; at the time I simply relished freeing myself from my tattered middle-school backpack. Owning that bag felt almost worse than not owning it: when a costly object sits in the hands of some people—less affluent, non-white—it demands justification; spending money on a frivolity seemed improper and implied you merited that poverty, and in any case, a bag doesn't free you from certain grips. I found the aesthetics of poverty oppressive; as a child I tried to hide that stain. I despised rented textbooks, market clothes, not having a home, never going on vacation—everything I longed for had already passed through someone else's hands. Sometimes Neela would come home with huge plastic bags of nearly new clothes a lady had left on her table along with a few bills.

By the end of high school, Vittoria had switched handbags—she showed up with a brown-and-black checkered one worth more than all the houses my mother could've cleaned to afford it. The truth behind the little lie I'd told my classmate was that the Vimercati had asked my mother—who only cleaned for them—to stand in for their Polish caregiver who'd taken a day off; they said Olga had to see the breast specialist. My mother didn't refuse—she firmly believed you never said no to work—and I was forced to stay home too. Work, work always: riding the bike when the car broke down; lunch cooked at dawn, eaten alone in the car; cleaning shutters in winter, standing on her little ladder with latex gloves, watching others live.

I held my mother responsible for never mothering me. A few months later, the Polish caregiver would go home to die (it happens when you fall ill but the time to notice is swallowed by a job that consumes you day and night), and everyone would be distraught: “Now what do we do? You try finding another good one overnight.” But my mother endured them with a coldness I mistook for a lack of dignity. Those low-paid jobs allowed me to attend university, yet they also drove a great gulf between us—our inability to communicate. They say immigrant children study to compensate for their parents’ inadequacy, but I didn’t study for my mother, I studied in her place. As if I’d lived her life for her: her life, mine—what difference could it make?

At the start of her Italian chapter, when she did care work under a “co-residency” arrangement (a euphemism for living in with and caring for someone day and night), she had an open-ended contract. Rosanna and Gino—her employers—kept saying she was “like family.” That phrase, beyond sending me into therapy years later, may explain why they only formally contracted half her hours—the rest was off the books and, above all, without taxes. Years later, Rosanna would tell me that after Mariuccia went to bed, my mother had little else to do; she could even watch TV from the next room.

“In fact, she spent whole afternoons watching *Beautiful*,” she’d say with a mix of tenderness and mockery—mockery I feared to detect, because I too was “like family,” a phrase that had by then lost its modal force. Mariuccia—her blonde perm, the rollers Neela had learned to set in her hair, the compression stockings she wore even in summer for better circulation, the tailored knee-length skirts—we all called her “Grandma” ever since I arrived in Italy. She, who lamented never having grandchildren, gained one when Alzheimer’s robbed her even of that sorrow. Rosanna and Gino, who’d invented that eccentric genealogy, occupied the branches of aunt and uncle before settling into the roles of putative grandparents.

Out of nowhere, with no ceremony, a family was born. Yet I knew my mother couldn’t

leave the house—she was responsible for an elder’s safety—so she was a prisoner in her workplace, though no one ever treated it like real work. I knew that left-wing bourgeoisie decries right-wing propaganda’s inhumane treatment of migrants but then boasts about even paying their taxes—and still I found it hard to defend my mother from someone I’d thought shared my DNA: if they were family, how could they exploit Neela? Their love had been sincere and generous—but also convenient and functional: for us, to feel less alone; for them, to feel less like masters.

Theoretically she had Saturdays at night and all day Sunday off, but we didn’t know what to do with that free time—we had nowhere else to sleep but that house—so we ended up working weekends too. When spring’s first sun lightened Brianza’s damp chill, and my Italian finally lifted the fog of untranslatability between my mother and society, we took to walking—mostly after lunch, since eating out felt a luxury beyond our reach—toward the tram station on Via Garibaldi, stopping for tickets at the newsstand in the square, and an international calling card at the Internet point on Via Madonnina. Phone cards used to cost ten thousand lire at first, and then five euros; there were two kinds: those for payphones—back when Grandma Mariuccia’s landline couldn’t yet make international calls—and those for domestic lines, which I collected. One in particular bore a globe crowned with the word *Welcome*.

My mother would scratch off the code on the back and once a month dial Kumudu—Sarath’s mother, my Achchi.

“Go on, speak,” she’d urge, handing me the white plastic receiver.

“Mata baha,” I’d refuse, only to relent when I saw Neela’s patience thinning and knew I risked a slap: she was so gentle and understanding with Gino, Rosanna, and Mariuccia—but with me, she had no indulgence left. I spoke in monosyllables to my paternal grandmother, while we rarely called Neela’s mother at all, since she had no home line and

the village booth was often cut off by the armed conflict.

“Theruwā sarāni, Devī pihitai, Budu sarānai,” Kumudu Achchi would offer blessings by invoking the Triple Gem to protect me, fearing the credit might run out before she could repeat them—though a robotic voice warned of remaining minutes midway through the call.

“Have you seen Sarath? Did Tattha come to visit you?” was another recurring question from my grandmother. Our communications with Sri Lanka thinned out—we had nothing new or exciting to share, no different answers to give. My silence stretched so long it deformed and then finally severed our biological ties.

Some Sundays we’d spend an hour hopping through hinterland towns—Desio, Nova Milanese, Paderno Dugnano, Cusano Milanino, Cormano, Bresso—seated in a half-empty tram car, then wander Milan all day, aimlessly, doing nothing special. After all, we had no family or friends there, not even an acquaintance to visit. Once we stumbled into a cinema by chance—it was my first time, and I had no clue how to read the marquee or know what films were playing. Neela still wore her hair in a thick braid down to her hips, echoing her spine, while my bowl cut was typical of any Sri Lankan girl. I stood before the screen for an eternity before mustering the courage to ask the cashier if there was a cartoon we could watch, while my mother—spotless, neat, utterly out of place—stood a step behind, bestowing upon me the power to speak. Her voice or mine—what difference did it make?

She wore beige cigarette pants under a dark knee-length coat; we still hadn’t acclimated, and each time we stepped outside we shivered. “The animated film,” as the cashier had corrected me, was awful—but the shame of being people unable to interact with the world, unable to grasp even basic social rules, stuck with me far longer. We lacked not only language or money but the natural confidence others had to occupy space, to claim origin from here or there, to leave knowing exactly where to return. Our roaming was a

symptom of a malady that left vine-like scars around my mother's ankles. She said she'd tripped as a child into a vat of boiling coconut oil in my grandmother's sandy garden, where an aunt was frying kevum for the New Year. "Baila," Aunt Himali would say.

More often than not we ended up on Viale Zara, and that day I begged her to buy me a roll: my uprooting was still recent, and my palate still craved the food I'd been weaned on. It felt as if my childhood—the very heart of memory—could be reduced to taste buds alone. She gave in, only to regret it the moment we faced the man behind the counter in the tea shop.

"You're Sarath's duwa, right?" he asked my mother—after all, I bore my father's face and couldn't escape being his daughter. She feigned not to hear, ordered a fried vegetable roll, paid for it, and marched out.

"What a stink," she sniffed, "That uncle was a friend of Tattha's." To my mother, my father would forever remain a figure she couldn't name in any language but Sinhala. I would always think of him as an anonymous third-person pronoun: not a noun or proper name, at best a spring poem I wrote in March on blue cardstock when the other children composed rhymes for their fathers.

"He and your uncle lent so much salli to his family to come here."

We found ourselves in one of those city districts lined with Sri Lankan shops: groceries, money-transfer offices, travel agencies—an ethnic economy built on word of mouth and that sense of community that leads those already here to lend money to those still there so they can afford the journey. In that world, any transfer of money bound people together in chains that traded favors in the name of friendship.

"We're not like them," she concluded when I asked why we never visited them, though we knew them. My mother chose the most pitiful solitude over any kind of dependency—the exact antithesis of the man she'd married.

The last time I remember seeing my father I was in eighth grade. He'd rung the intercom soon after seven one morning; I was still having breakfast—milk and biscuits at the kitchen table. My mother opened the living-room shutters—I recall the scraping sound of the poorly oiled mechanism—and must've been stunned: as far as I know, she hadn't seen her ex-husband in years. He'd shown up a handful of times at that same villa he had left her as soon as she arrived in Italy, sometimes bearing a gift for me. He then vanished from our radar for good when Rosanna and Gino helped my mother with the divorce.

She's a resolute woman; no surprise caught her unprepared for long. She ushered him quickly into the room where my unmade sofa-bed waited. Like a coward, the moment I guessed who he was, I melted away to the bathroom—anxious at the thought of seeing him, afraid I'd have nothing to say. I heard them whisper through the door: he asked for money, she made him feel the weight of owing it—same old class games between my parents, between my families. I dressed gloomily, hoisted my backpack from under the desk, and crept through the door linking the living room to the bedroom my mother shared with the elder she cared for. That flat had no thresholds—no doors to shut out the world; no borders between affection and duty, between the sacred day and the workday. More a labyrinth than a home—almost a trap.

Meanwhile she'd handed him a handful of bills; with Sarath, Neela always gave in. "Tawa tikak denna nadda?" he'd asked for more—he always tried. Our eyes met in my attempt to keep the serpent from devouring its tail: through the double glass doors between my sofa-bed and the kitchen I stared at him, dazed, until my mother's voice broke the contact.

"Wait until the little girl's off to school. Imagine what people will think if they see you coming out of here."

"Ha," he breathed in a single monosyllable that felt like an agony following me beyond the gate, into the car waiting outside—and it sat beside me for the rest of my life.

From that last visit onward, my mother instilled in me a terror of others' judgment. Always well dressed, orderly, polite—no loud behavior, no swear words—keeping up one's image to better endure the shame of being one's parents' child. My father's gaunt face resurfaced in the guilt that struck me years later when I first encountered the word AIDS. Sarath had fallen prey to the vices many Sri Lankans, many immigrants, feared the West might corrupt their children's innocence. They'd ship them back to the island, entrust them to grandparents or relatives, or place them in a boarding school. Since arriving in Italy, Sarath chased anything—or anyone—that gave him a high; Kumudu Amma believed it was an yakshaya riding his head, as only malevolent deities do. Each to their own path. I was in Barcelona when he died the following year. Returning from a school trip to explore Catalan modernism, my mother told me as one recounts long-awaited news: my father's death had been pending long before I was born, before they'd married, before he'd been born. It was the preordained fate of an irresolute man always caught unawares.

We didn't attend the funeral, but I confided in a classmate. "My dad died," I wrote her on MSN to explain my absence the next day. "He had a tumor," I recited as my mother had taught me, to spare us the ignominy of an unnameable disease. The next day my Italian teacher brought home twenty-five messages from my classmates on a stack of A4 sheets: I hadn't had a father's affection, but at least I could revel in the attention his death drew.

The essential stop on our pilgrimages at least once a month was the money transfer office—we sent money to both my grandmothers: with Achchiamma I'd incurred a debt at birth; with Kumudu Achchi so my mother could emigrate. With the money earned feeding the elderly child-proxies of strangers, cleaning other people's bathrooms, washing and ironing clothes of children not her own, my mother supported her entire family. The power imbalances she endured to earn that wage built my own debt to her—and not even the

slow time of the monsoon season could ever repay it.

Nearly two decades later, at Rosanna's funeral, her niece Maria Carmen would describe my mother as "the family's caregiver." In truth, she had long since given up that profession and was the proud owner of a small business. The problem is that people delude themselves into thinking poverty is transient—that you can excise it with a sudden change of fate, with unshakeable will, with that absurd notion called merit—as if it were a sponge on a stain. Poverty latches onto your ankles, strangles your mind and, cruelest of all, grows in the womb so it can perpetuate itself from generation to generation—it's an invasive weed that won't be uprooted. My mother would always remain "Neela the caregiver," "the cleaning lady," "the domestic": no matter how she cleansed that image, poverty would define her even when she had the money to escape it. Our poverty was different from that of some of my classmates, different even from the family back in Sri Lanka.

I'd taken a long look at my mother's finances before peeking into the office where my partner Fabiano was trying to bill his company twenty percent more revenue than the year before. He spent his days handling sums so large they'd lost all substance—amounts so abstract they had become mere numbers again.

"You know my mother wants to go back to Sri Lanka?" I interrupted him, half in the doorway, uncertain whether to enter or back out. I occupied the domestic space like a sphinx—half lion, half woman.

"But who, Neela?" he asked, face illuminated by his computer screen—stalling to think what to say next, without ever pausing his Excel work. But my subconscious pointed at my tangled family constellation—impossible for anyone who didn't know the exact arrangement of the stars above us. Grasping the biography of someone like me demands a certain subtlety of reading.

“Well, it’s home for her. Anyway, not now, Ay—I’m in a meeting in thirty seconds.”

I closed the door on the hope that Fabiano might react differently to my mother’s impending departure—or perhaps I just wanted him to tell me that parents never really leave. When, a decade earlier, I’d switched from a cognitive-behavioral therapist to a Gestalt one, the doctor asked me to recall my childhood on the island.

“They were the happiest years of my life,” I replied instantly. “I hardly wanted to talk to my mother on the phone, because I needed to get back to playing in the street.”

“Curious,” she countered, “that’s a typical response from children of emigrants: like you, they reject contact with the parent because they abandoned them to go elsewhere. So the child abandons the mother in turn.”

You’re no longer a child, I told myself—I was nearly forty, well past the thirty-five threshold. I cowered deeper into the couch; the air conditioner’s cold breeze stirred a few hairs on my shoulders. Outside, the summer heat had emptied the town, and Fabiano and I were awaiting our annual vacation slots. I wanted to go to bed and sleep under the covers until this tide washed over me. Instead, I leaned off the couch to grab my phone and call my mother: she had the green light to return, and I would behave like a grown-up—settled, resolved—avoiding reducing Neela to merely a mother figure, as if every choice she made revolved around me.

“Mom, yes, in theory you can move back—you’ll have your pension once you reach the age requirement,” I explained. “But I don’t understand why you want to go—are you sick? Did something happen? Are you dying?” The barrage of questions tumbled out unfiltered by my knowledge that nothing enrages aging parents of adult children more than condescension.

In my research for my latest art project I’d read about the deep bond between an Australian Aborigine—or, by extension, anyone born into a clan—and their tribal

homeland: one might correctly say the land owns them, and they cannot stay away indefinitely; in any case, they return to die in the land of spirits, so as not to lose themselves when they depart their bodies. That homeland, for Neela, lay in a garden of the Hesperides—sandy, shaded by two giant mango trees where spirits had flown and walked among men, where spirit and flesh were not yet distinguished.

In the silence that followed, I heard impatience rising on the other end. “But no!” she’d cried, in the same tone that once uttered *tu quoque, Brute*. “You’re a grown-up, you work, you have no children, you don’t marry. What else do I have to do?” She listed my failures as if they were her own—and perhaps they genuinely overlapped. Maybe asking myself to be resolved would always be too much.

“What do you think I should make of someone who always said she’d never return to Sri Lanka, then one day wakes up and tells me she wants to move to Colombo?” My family’s women were born under the evil eye. Perhaps on this side of the world one would call them simply unlucky—but it was something more than a familial predisposition to ill fortune. The West had spawned an epistemology of blindness, and thus the spirits haunting the Balasinghes bore different names: gods, demons, myths, ghosts; they were dubbed possessed, obsessed, infected, ill. They are one and the same in different forms—in ancient prayers and new beliefs.

Everything was in order, though—my mother was in order. What I’d labeled as illness seemed to have resurfaced, and already I felt it would shake the rest of our lives.