

THE VISIT

I stared at the two skirts on the bed. I had pulled them out of the back of my closet, where they had been relegated years ago through lack of use. They were there for emergencies, when I had to play the role. There was the ankle-length one with the flower print and the knee-length one with black stripes. Unable to make up my mind, I bundled them both and stuck them back into the closet. I pulled on a pair of black slacks. Really, what difference would it make?

The phone rang as I was about to take my luggage down to the taxi, which was now honking. I looked out the window. The impatient turbaned driver had opened up the trunk of the car and was now leaning against the back door, stroking his beard, waiting.

I picked up the phone. “Yes?” I said, a bit impatiently. There was silence on the other end. “Hello?” I repeated. I was about to hang up when she answered.

“Hello, Sita.”

I felt the blood rush to my head and my heartbeat pounded in my ears. I felt a little dizzy.

“Cindy?” I said, then paused.

“Yes,” she answered, pausing herself.

“Hello.” I knew she could hear it in my voice. All of it – the nervousness, the sadness and the lonely longing. Even the regret.

She continued, “I wanted to let you know that I finally got a truck so I can take the couch this weekend.” I knew she wished that the answering machine had picked up.

“Okay.” I steadied my voice and held the receiver close to my face. “I’ll leave the key at the desk. I’ll be out of town for a couple of weeks, but you can still pick it up.”

“Oh. I can wait until you get back if you want,” she replied.

A quiver of hope ran through me. Maybe she wanted to see me one more time. Before I let that spontaneous self-deluded thought take me any further, she reconsidered.

“Actually,” she said, “the truck might not be available then. I’ll get it this weekend if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure. That’s fine. Whatever works for you,” I answered too hurriedly. Everything else that I wanted to say at that moment got stuck somewhere between my heart and my lips, all the words she had already heard and all the words that already meant nothing to her.

Before I had the chance to find words again, she ended the conversation. “Well, have a good trip, Sita.”

“Thank you, Cindy. Bye.” It was all I could say. She hung up and I did not put the receiver down until I heard the honking again. When I did, I knew that she had gone out of my life forever.

As the plane lifted off I felt my body and mind slipping back into that world I left a lifetime ago, a small Caribbean island, a mere insignificant dot in the sea. There was nowhere else to go now except back to my old skin. For a while, at least. I didn’t even know if it would have me. I slept throughout the flight and I dreamt of her laughter and her touch. When I landed at the airport, I scarcely knew where I was. All I knew was that she was not with me and that I was once more alone.

I hailed a taxi and was soon on my way home for the Hindu prayers that my father had every year. Over the past weeks, my mother had been filling me in on all the excitement and

frenzied arrangements. In our conversations over the weeks she asked me many times if something was wrong. She could tell that there was, from the tone of my voice, even though I tried to be as upbeat as I could, but I could not yet talk about it. In some ways, I was glad that she did hear it. Maybe I was trying to make her hear it. Why else was I really going home? It would definitely be easier if she already guessed that something was wrong. However, whenever she asked, I very cowardly steered the conversation to the preparations for the prayers.

During our many phone calls over the past few weeks she complained again and again how all the preparations had fallen upon her while my father would definitely take the credit for a wonderful week of prayers. I was the only one she could have complained to. She spent hours ordering the vegetables, hiring the cooks, arranging for them to be picked up and dropped back home each night, and bought the many little strange odds and ends for the religious ceremonies, things that I never learned the names of, or remembered—the little purple leaves, the mango leaves, the funny-looking nuts, the sandalwood pastes, the assortment of brass containers, and the little flags. And he got all the praise for how smoothly everything was running.

The village was invited through an announcement blasting from loudspeakers, fitted on top of the old Mazda 626 my father let me use in college. I could not believe they still had it. As I spoke to her hundreds of miles away, I could see it all—the car navigating potholes, stray dogs, chickens, and people as it drove through the side streets of my old neighborhood. My mother had composed the announcement herself, trying out different versions with me over the phone. She did it every year and could write it in her sleep. But she needed me to hear it and say it was okay. Few things really changed in this world I was re-entering, not even the fact that my mother had no friends to invite. I was the only one she waited for.

When I arrived, dinner was being served. The sermons were done, the incense burnt, the singing, music, and hypnotism were over. In keeping with the ancient laws, whose origins were either conveniently unknown, or conveniently lost, the officiating pundit and his group had eaten before the rest of the gathering. Their Brahmin hunger needed to be satiated at an uncontaminated table. Or maybe they were just hungrier than everyone else. Large, green leaves were been laid out on long, makeshift tables with plastic tablecloths. Servings of curried vegetables, rice, roti, and chutney were placed on the leaves in small, separate piles. Everyone was eating with his fingers, two knuckles-deep in curry, mixing the rice, or roti with their vegetable of choice. As a girl, my father had taught me how to do that without getting wrist-deep in food as I was wont to do.

I wandered by the vacated platforms where the pundit had preached. Thankfully, I remained unnoticed by anyone who mattered. In silence and privacy, I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of sandalwood incense and fixed the images of flowers, statues, colored rice, and multicolored flags in my mind, images that had, for many years, soothed me in a place far from there, on cold, dark days of musing.

I had deliberately arrived late. The fewer people I saw, the less I had to hide and the fewer people I had to hide from. One of the few people I did look forward to seeing was my father's sister. Although I was already a reputable and accomplished family lawyer at thirty, I was unmarried and living on my own. In her eyes, on many levels, I was a failure. She pitied me.

I saw her across the yard, talking to my mother, and I went up to them. "Hello Mummy." They were in the makeshift kitchen in the back yard, a fifteen-foot square room of plywood, galvanized sheets and plastic. Cauldrons of steaming food surrounded them—curried chickpeas

and potato, curried eggplant, chataigne, bodi—food that I found only at home, and a huge basin overflowing with mango anchar. Steam curled from the pots of boiling rice, and the aroma of curry clung to everything.

My mother was dressed in a green, sequined shalwar, the richly embroidered blouse falling to her knees and the cuffs of the pants rimmed with brilliant moss-green embroidery. She was a dignified-looking woman, a dignity I had never quite been able to capture for myself.

She turned to me as I walked up to her. “Sita.” She opened her arms to me. “Darling, you so late? You called from the airport so long ago.” I hugged her with my whole body. I had been waiting to do that for a long time. I rested in her arms and felt my body and my soul relax. I pulled away from her slightly to look at her face. I saw the smile that had healed many wounds throughout my life. Could it heal me now?

“A lot of traffic on the way. Some accident on Uriah Butler Highway.” She immediately started the universal fussing by mothers over how much weight I had lost and how much shorter my hair was now. “Mummy, let me say hello to Tanti.” I turned to my aunt who had been smiling at our reunion and patently waiting on her turn.

“Tanti, so long I haven't seen you. How you feeling?” I went over and hugged her as warmly as I remember her hugs to be.

“Well, child, the leg still hurting a little bit, but I okay. Your mother right, how you looking so skinny? And where all your hair gone? I remember the last time I see you, you had long-long hair. So pretty. And you still living away? When you going to come back home?”

“Well, I come home for a visit now.”

"I sure it is a short one. Your mother always telling me you working too, too hard. All hours of the night you coming home. You will get old before your time if you're not careful. Just now you old like me." She laughed. Then she asked the real question. "But you looking so good girl, no good boy yet?"

No one knew. There was no reason to, and what would my parents say anyway? "By the way, our daughter, Sita, you remember her right? Well, as beautiful and educated as she is, she has shamed us all and destroyed her life because she is now, I can't even say it, you know, "on the other side". My mother had not yet been able to bring herself to say *lesbian*.

"No, Tanti. Can't seem to find that special one."

"You could wait a long time for that special one, Sita. Look at your uncle and me. He marry me when I was thirteen, and I never saw him before my wedding day. He was an old man, too. Twenty years older than me. He knew everything." She blushed at this, obviously remembering the benefits of his being older.

We talked for a short while, and then she left to go eat. My mother turned to talk to one of the servers. "Okay Maniram, look some more people sitting down to eat. Start getting the leaves out. Make sure we have enough rice. We almost ran out last night. You know how Seegobin will go crazy if that happen."

I knew my mother wanted to talk more, but we could not now. I was tired and she was in charge. She reluctantly let me go into the house and rest while she took care of her guests. She would be in soon enough, she said. I turned to go.

"Sita?"

I turned around to face her, and for no apparent reason I felt like crying. "Yes, Mummy?"

“Is really good to have you home.”

I smiled, hugged her again, and then walked into the house.

I sat in the living room, too exhausted to go upstairs. I closed my eyes and lay my head back.

Twenty years before this night, also on the last night of prayers, I was awakened by the sounds of crashing glass, shouts, and sobbing. I was ten. It was after midnight. I ran into the kitchen.

"Who the hell you think you are? I shame to call you my wife! Those are my guests and you will be respectful to them. Men, women and children, they are all my guests. I invite them. I go through all this trouble, plan this big-big prayers, only to be embarrassed by my own wife. I am not standing for this."

My parents were in the kitchen. My mother's hair was disheveled, a lock of it hanging down the side of her face. My father stormed off to the bedroom and started packing his clothes, ripping them off the hangers.

I started crying, softly at first and then, when no one heard me, more loudly. My mother went after him, oblivious of me. I followed them into the bedroom.

"Seegobin, calm down. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause shame. I don't know what happen. Just calm down. Put down that. Come on, Seego." My mother pleaded and tried to grab the clothes from his hands. When my father spun around with a clenched fist, I screamed. That

did not stop him. He smashed his fist into my mother's temple. She fell to the floor, and I ran over to her. My father ignored us and kept on packing.

"Mummy, Mummy?" I tried to cradle her head in my incapable arms. She was conscious but bleeding. She struggled to her feet.

"Seego, don't leave."

I was invisible.

"Look woman," he screamed at her, "if you come near me, I will kill you here tonight. Shame me? Shame Pundit Seegobin?"

"I didn't tell her to leave or anything like that. I didn't tell her to leave. Is not my place. All I said was...I didn't mean anything, Seego."

"Like hell you didn't mean anything. Look woman, get out of my way." He pushed her down again as he flew past her. I tried to get between her and the table she was about to hit her head against. I cushioned some of her fall as I fell against the pointed corner of the table.

"Seego, don't go."

We followed him to the car and got outside just in time to see the smoke from the racing tires.

I opened my eyes and sat up. How grateful I was that that had been the last night of prayers, and we did not have to face anyone the next day. I shook my head and tried to empty out the pain.

Later on, when everyone had eaten and most had left, I went back outside and sat around with the family members who remained—cousins, uncles, some of whom I knew only by face.

My father had left on some errand before I arrived, so he was not with us. I wished I had seen him. He knew I was coming tonight.

After the update on my far-away life, discussions turned to more important things. The voices droned on about who was still married and whose child really let the family's name down, who was sick, and how it was time for an Indian government in Trinidad, how the prayers went well, and if it were not for these prayers they would never see each other. I tried to listen, but I could not. There were ghosts everywhere, the ones I had come to see. I feared them, but somehow needed them as well.

When I was a child, every evening at six, my father and I would go to the small Hindu temple in the yard and offer prayers. We did that every day of my life. He would pray, and I would pour the water over the black plaster-of-Paris deity. As he prayed I would close my eyes and think of him, how good he smelled, and how handsome he was. I thought about how safe I felt with him. Even though my mother's life was lived in constant fear of him, I believed he would never hurt me.

Squatting next to him, in front of the murtis of Ram and Sita, garlanded with flowers, his voice would resonate with emotion: "*Katham vidyam aham yogims, tvam sada paricintayan, kesu kesu ca bhavesu, cintyo 'si bhagavan maya.'*"

I would pray, so very silently, not even moving my tongue, afraid that my father would hear my very thoughts, "Please God, don't let Daddy hit Mummy anymore."

The late-night chatting went on until, one by one, the family decided the night was over. They trickled away to their homes. My mother and I were finally left alone. I talked about work,

my friends, my clients, and my life. I yearned to tell her everything, to breathe fully for the first time in months, to shake off the darkness that had descended upon my heart, to cry in her arms. But I couldn't yet. She hadn't even known what the word meant when I first told her five years ago. Then she had cried when I explained. The depth of her longing for a different life for me must have matched the pain of my longing to talk to her. My mother suggested we go to bed too.

"Shouldn't we wait up for him? I would like to see him tonight."

"If you want you can, but I am tired and I don't know when he will come back from dropping the cooks home. Tonight is last night, remember. I am going to bed darling. Come on up, too."

I lay down next to her and tried to stay awake. The last numbers I saw on the clock were 1:26. When I awoke the next morning my father had already left for the day.

My mother was down in the kitchen. "Morning, Sita. Your father said he will see you this evening. He wanted you to sleep. He is doing Chanderpaul's prayers today. It is the six days for his baby. They are burying the navel string and putting kohl."

Disappointed, I went back to my room and took a shower of icy rain-water flowing from an aluminum collection tank on a concrete platform above the house. I promised myself I would heat some water for my next shower. Steaming fried tomatoes and roti were laid out for me on the kitchen table. Except for having missed my father again, it was a good start to the day. My mother was humming and doing the dishes as I dipped the flatbread into the tomatoes.

"How are you doing, Sita?" I knew she really wanted to know the cause of the sadness she had heard in my voice, and was now seeing in my eyes.

“I’m doing okay enough. Things are a little stressed between Cindy and me right now. I don’t really know how to talk about it or if you really want to hear about it. I know it must be hard for you and Daddy.”

“I knew something was wrong.” She wiped her hands and came over to me. “I could even hear it over the phone when you called. It is hard, but I have thought about it a lot Sita. No matter what I will always be your mother. No matter what.”

I looked into her eyes and wondered, had my love for women grown from the love I felt for her, the deep need I felt all my life to protect her? Had it grown from the conviction that a dignified, amazingly beautiful, good woman like her deserved better than this man, than any man? I didn’t know. I would never know.

“I know, Mummy, I know. Thank you for saying that.” I ate, not saying anything. She went back to the sink and continued washing up. I said, “I think I will go out for a while. I told some friends I would come by and see them. We’ll talk when I get back.” I saw her disappointment. She started saying something, then hesitated, as if she was weighing her right to say it. As I got up from the table and scraped the wooden chair on the concrete floor, it came out.

“Sita, did you break up?”

I paused. I was surprised that she had figured it out. “Something like that,” I said. I still could not admit failure. “It is a long story. And even so, there is not much to talk about. The pain is the same, no matter who it is.” She quickly dried her hands and came over and hugged me.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. This is your home, and you can take all the time that you need. There is always healing waiting for you.” The sadness in her voice brought a lump to my throat. Why did I have to put her through this now? I, too, had thought it was forever.

"I'll see you when I get back, Mummy. We'll talk then."

I took my father's old car and left. I had no intentions of seeing anyone. I wanted to drive to the old places that were still in my soul and were still the landscape of my dreams. I drove out of our little village in the valley, past the old sugar cane fields that had been worked by my ancestors. Brought from India to the little British island and treated only slightly better than slaves, my father took great pride in not being descended from one of them, but from one of the Brahmins brought to service the religious needs of the masses. I kept driving North, at first not knowing where I was heading, then very sure as I turned onto the familiar route that would take me to the university.

As I roamed my old campus aimlessly, I remembered it had been difficult for my father to let me stay away from home that first year. He had never even wanted me to go to college. Though he would never admit it, he thought that it would make me less marketable for a man, a Brahmin man. But I had had my father's stubbornness. I went to college and then on to graduate school. It was then, I guessed, that he started letting go, and that the cord that connected our souls began to break.

He came to the campus one day to see me.

"Daddy, what you doing here?" I met him as I was leaving my sociology lecture room.

"I came to say prayers for Rajandaye. She building a new house up here and was ready to lay the first post. Dr. Chandra told me where I could find you."

He must have felt awkward dressed in his traditional pundit clothes, a white shirt and dhoti, smelling of incense and still having the ceremonial white dot of sandalwood paste on his forehead.

Or maybe it was I who had felt awkward.

He had a speck of a white petal still in his hair, and I gently removed it for him. He had never been on campus. He had a poor opinion of intellectuals. "No common sense," he would shake his head and say, "and they always poor. With so much education how could they still be so poor?"

A group of my friends had sauntered by, and I introduced them. They were very interested in meeting him, for I spoke of him incessantly. When they left, my father turned to me and said, almost in a whisper, "Sita, you don't have any Indian friends?" I guess my group of afro-white-chinese-mixed friends did not suffice.

As he drove away that day, all I could see was the man who had pushed me along on my first two-wheel bicycle with me shouting wildly, "Don't let go, Daddy. Don't let me fall," long after he had already let go, and I was riding on my own.

I drove back home but did not see his car in the yard. I passed the house and kept on going. I was growing restless. I finally decided to go by the house where he was supposed to be saying prayers. My mother had said it was at Chanderpaul's. I vaguely remembered the family.

I drove to the house, but whatever ceremony had taken place there that day was all done. I saw a young Indian woman sweeping up. I sat in my car and looked at her for a long while, a very long while, before coming out. She had an air of serenity about her. She hummed an old

Indian song as she swept. She was graceful, slender, with long black hair. She was beautiful in the way that only those who do not think themselves beautiful are. I came out of the car and called to her. She stopped sweeping and looked up. I smiled.

"Hello, sorry to bother you, but is Pundit Seegobin here?" She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, smiled, and came to the gate.

"No, the prayers are over, and he left about an hour ago. He said he was going down to Shivnarine's house to drop something off." Her voice was melodious and clear.

"That is just down this street, right?"

"Yes, just a mile more once you get over the hill." A flicker of recognition passed over her face. I had recognized her from the moment she had come to the gate. "You live around here? I feel as if I know you." Her eyes looked straight into me. She was even more beautiful up close. I remembered those eyes in a ten-year old face I once knew. I had been transfixed then too, but, unlike now, I had not known why.

Then, as I looked at her, beginning to be lost again, something stirred in me that had been asleep since the day that Cindy moved out. I felt my blood quicken, and I felt myself blushing. I turned my eyes away.

"No, no. Just visiting." I cleared my throat. "I used to live around here, but have been gone for a very long time. But thanks for the information. Have a good day." I walked away. I forced myself to leave and not say anything more to her. She was still at the gate with a broom in one hand when I looked back at her. She waved again, and so did I.

I calmed myself down as I drove down the street through the old neighborhood. In my dreams it was all different. Larger. Taller. Cleaner. It was several years since I had come back

here, and it was as if everything had shrunk and gotten dingy. I stopped at a blue, wooden house. I parked on the side of the road and walked up to the gate. "Hello, anybody home?" I called at the gate.

"Yes. Who there?" I heard a voice from inside. Footsteps approached along the wooden floorboards. A woman came out, dressed in a brown house dress with prints of bright red hibiscus flowers splashed all over it. She was barefoot and chewing as if she had been interrupted from a meal.

"Sorry to disturb you, but I am looking for Pundit Seegobin. I was told he came here to drop something off."

"Who are you?" she asked, as if she had a right to. She looked at me from head to toe. I felt a familiar, nauseating twist in my stomach.

"Tell him it is his daughter, Sita."

The woman stopped chewing, and swallowed. "Pundit Seegobin left already. He gone home."

I looked around as if I did not believe her, looking for some sign that he was there. Old instincts kicked in, and I began to remember and feel the same old dull pain again. When I looked up at the woman again it was with new eyes. We stared at each other. I turned away slowly, and almost inaudibly thanked her. I got into the car and drove home.

As I pulled into the yard, I saw my father. Inexplicably, my heart skipped a beat. His face was the same strong face I had grown up peering into, smiling at, and trusting. I got out of the car and ran up to him. "Daddy." I hugged him. He hugged back with the hug of an Indian man

hugging his grown daughter, just brief and tight enough to show love, but not too long and not too close. It was not what I needed, but at least what I expected. I held on to his hand.

"Sita. You look good. How are things? I let you sleep today because I was sure you were tired after that long trip. Was it okay?" He let his hand slip out of mine, and I did not hold on.

"Yes. It was a good flight. We only stopped in Puerto Rico for a few hours. I didn't even bother to leave the airport. The prayers went well?"

"Yes, yes, with God's blessings. Your mother and I are very pleased."

"I went looking for you just now, at Chanderpaul's house. I was so anxious to see you. They told me there that you went to Shivnarine's house, so I went there." I was speaking quickly. "I think it was his wife who came out and told me you had left already."

"So you know where Chanderpaul lives?"

"Yes, his daughter and I were in primary school together. And remember Shivnarine was my math's teacher. I think it was Shivnarine's wife who came out, too old to be his daughter. "

His eyes followed a car passing by on the road behind us. "Did she ask who you were?" Before I could answer him, my mother emerged from the house. She came up to us.

"Seego, you forgot the kohl for the baby. What you end up using?"

"They had some made up already. I blessed it and used that."

"So everything went well? You took longer than usual."

"Yes, yes. Everything went well. Is a cute, cute baby. It nice to see people keeping up the tradition. Pundits alone can't do it. Right, Sita?" He looked at me.

I wanted to say something to my father, something that would cause him to allay my old fears, but this was not the time.

"So Sita," she turned to me, "you saw your friends today?"

"Yes. Yes. I did. But I came back some time now, and I went looking for Daddy. I just missed him leaving Shivnarine's house." My mother's eyes darted to my father. Before my very eyes her eyes were transformed into dark-brown, glistening pools of hurt. Her mood changed.

"Seego, so long your daughter come and you only now see her? You spent the whole morning going all over the place, seeing every Tom, Dick, and Harry and your daughter is here, waiting to see you." My mother looked down and turned around to go back inside.

He turned to me. "Sorry, Sita, but a job is a job. God's work is never done. But your mother only talking. You understand, Sita. Right?"

I nodded yes.

Inside, we ate and talked under the kind, dead eyes of the miniature gods and goddesses who were supposed to watch over us. Indian songs played softly on the radio in the background, and my mother served us as she had done all my life. I was home again. And it felt as it always had.

The next day, around six o'clock, my father came home and quickly went to shower before his evening prayers. I sat outside in the dusk and watched the fireflies light up the tropical night. Some dogs barked in the distance, and some others answered.

My father came outside to the small temple in the courtyard, but did not see me on the bench near the fence. He squatted slowly, with the most effort and care I had ever seen him use. He lit the incense, clasped his hands, and prayed.

I listened to the strange words roll off his tongue. I had never learned what they meant. Maybe the meaning of those words would have allowed me to understand that my father was

reaching toward something that he would never actually attain, that maybe no one could ever attain.

He offered the water, slowly pouring it over the lingam. If I had been sitting next to him tonight my prayer would have been the same as it was twenty years ago. I had seen the pain in my mother's eyes. He continued to strike her, her heart, her love, and her soul. He squatted and prayed to his God, and I sat on the bench in the darkness and prayed to mine. I hoped one of them would hear and finally answer.

After he left and as I sat in the cool night, feeling its cold fingers on my bare arms, I found the answer to the question I had brought with me. I could not stay here. I could not make this island my home once more. If I stayed I would begin to remember the pain. I knew that my heart would break once more with anger and love, with empathy, and confusion and questions, until, again, I would see no reason to get out of bed. I knew that I would never decide whether it was strength, or fear, that kept my mother with my father. I knew that, in addition to visiting places that I was forgetting, my memory would visit events that I wished I could rip out of my head. My parents had found that tolerable compromise: my mother no longer questioned, and my father no longer explained. They were happy in their own way, a way I could not, and would not ever understand.

I saw other reasons too. If I stayed here, women in house dresses would torment my hot, tropical days; beautiful sweepers, who looked deep into me, would haunt my warm, tropical nights. I would not be able to do anything about either without throwing my parents' world into turmoil.

As I watched my father walk back into the house, I knew that I was no longer home.

They would understand if I left before the week was up.