spring 2022

the Southern Review

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY AT LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

ABHIJITH RAVINUTALA

The Aunties of Cambridge Street

Sarita aunty was the first to make a home on Cambridge Street. When the aunties noticed the Phase II build of Lennox Homes in Alpharetta named all the streets after Ivy League towns, they bought houses there to keep their dreams close, as they all had high hopes for their children. Being as variegated in color, tone, and history as the saris in their closets, the aunties shared little else, apart from the desire to have at least one good friend in the new world.

Sarita's husband, Gopal, secured a job with NCR and uprooted her from the life she'd known. Her existence until then had spanned a five-mile radius of her birthplace in Vizag. In her suburb outside Atlanta, she made tea for Gopal and milk with Boost chocolate powder for Nitin, their son. When they left the house to be Americans for the day, Sarita took her time pressing down a strong coffee with chicory, using a South Indian filter, and, until Chetna moved to the neighborhood, she passed the days alone.

Before flying to America, her upstairs neighbors had warned her of the clothing—they were the building's authorities on America because their son lived in a place they called "Tall-aa-see," which they spoke of with great reverence. Sarita, eager to impress her American-employed beau, journeyed to the local Levi's. Gopal frowned at the Ts and jeans she packed for the flight. He complained of his wife looking like the women at his office.

After her coffee and a shower, Sarita donned her American clothes each day between Gopal's departure and his arrival home. She brushed her hand against the denim, rougher than her saris but tight and comforting around her skin. She went around eyeing herself in different mirrors to feel the house was full, taking naps in unused guest rooms, and performing the household chores that maids used to complete for her. She often resented her previous upstairs neighbors for not mentioning the housework in America, but after all, those neighbors had a son, and sons never did housework. Often, she would use the calling cards stuffed in the nightstand drawer to speak to her parents and best friends in Vizag. This was not easy with Gopal in the house as he noted the minutes and expenses on yellow sticky

notes. From the same nightstand, stashed behind the calling cards and tattered novels, Gopal would retrieve condoms on weekend nights, and though he threw his body at her like a teenager, the moments after sex when he would just lie there, breathing on her neck, were the least alone she felt.

The first fits of regret led Sarita to phone her mother and beg for a return to India. Her mother told her another baby would stem her ennui. But Nitin was already in second grade, and she had no desire to return to ABCs and diaper wipes. So, her mother told Sarita it was time for religion. After her next visit home, Sarita's suitcase held ten pounds of prayer books to memorize. It was part of a woman's life, her mother had said, the homebound solitude to be filled by God. That was why the best devotional poets were women, like Andal, she said. It was inappropriate to appeal the matter further.

Her mother was not wrong, in any case. Sarita started with the easy hymns and then proceeded to longer stanzas, in rapid Sanskrit, until her prayers could erase up to two hours on the days she thought of running.

It was better when Chetna arrived. She lived five doors down on the plot of tall grass. Sarita saw her one day when she went out for mail. She wondered, at first, if she'd had company all along but God had withheld the information. She was already attributing her life's miseries to God's mysteries by then. She just about sprinted over to Chetna, who was staring at the neighbor's flowers.

"Hello."

"Hi."

"Myself Sarita."

"Chetna." A light bow of the head, acknowledging Sarita as her elder.

"Where from?"

"Guntur."

"Hamma," Sarita sighed, and switched to Telugu. "Seeing a Telugu person makes me so happy. Will you have coffee?"

"I very much like coffee."

Chetna was fair in the way all Indians pray for their daughters to be. She had completed her engineering degree and learned to make biryani by the age of nineteen, so she was told she was ready for marriage. Hundreds of proposals arrived, some leaving lavish gifts at her doorstep, including a new Honda Hero motorbike in the green shade her father liked. Her parents settled on a U.S. proposal, even though

they couldn't meet him in person. The groom's parents were factory owners in Guntur, and after the economy opened up in '91, they produced some of the first Old Navy T-shirts made in India—this made them low-level celebrities. After pouting through their ceremony, Rajesh rushed back to America without a honeymoon, claiming he couldn't take her along yet. It was seven years later when she finally flew to Atlanta with him. She watched the snow outside the plane as it fluttered over the German countryside. By then, their daughters, conceived during Rajesh's vacations in India, were five and three, and Rajesh had developed a belly and a sloping chin. Chetna was still optimistic.

Once, when both their husbands were out of town and their kids were put to bed, Chetna surfaced Rajesh's hidden bottles and split a large whiskey with Sarita. They spilled it on their polos and jean shorts. Chetna brought out Rajesh's dress shirts and imitated him, using a sofa pillow as a belly and her own long hair as a moustache. Sarita did her impression of Gopal eating a banana like it was the end of time, burping after every bite. This had them rolling on the carpet with joy, when Sarita noticed the bruise on Chetna's neck.

"How did that happen?"

"It's nothing." Chetna adjusted the collar of Rajesh's dress shirt.

"Was he drunk?"

"Mmm. Do you want anything to eat?"

Saritha drew close, kissed her own two fingers, and placed them on Chetna's neck. A brief Atlanta rain peppered the windows above them. Drops on the glass sounded the same no matter where they were in the world. They embraced until a whole village appeared in each other's arms.

The next morning, Sarita made strong coffees and told Chetna to join her in religious chanting whenever she could. Chetna agreed. Their daily routine molded to accept this addition, and even their husbands seemed pleased with the ladies' virtue. From time to time, when Chetna came to chant and had another bruise, they would lock the door to the prayer room to speak, and this, too, became routine.

It was the two of them for several years until Anjali arrived. When she did, it wasn't from India but from a place called "Cleve-Land," as Sarita heard. Anjali was London-educated but had lived in Mumbai. She never wore saris, as she liked to be ready at any moment to go for a run, which was not feasible under yards of fabric. In Cleve-Land, she'd jogged around enough neighborhoods to become well-known, so she ran for City Council, too, and won. This was no shock: she'd been

involved in politics in her college days, attending symposiums with her college flatmates and making faces at local officials. But in Georgia, she stuck to home, fussing over her younger son Viren and his frequent bouts of undiagnosed sickness, replete with shivers and hunger. Anjali endured her own disease, too, which turned splashes of her dark brown skin into white. Her face was almost fully converted, which was a source of back-and-forth debate for Sarita and Chetna, who had seen her move in but couldn't decide if she was Indian. They pretended to walk around the block for a better look at Anjali getting the mail, Anjali trimming the hedges six houses down. Chetna was the one who finally asked if she was Indian, and the latter's smile was such a relief that they were all invited to afternoon coffee at Sarita's house. This was not without further stress, as Anjali revealed herself to be a widow, having moved to Atlanta only with her two sons. Chetna and Sarita had never associated with a widow before, as their mothers had deemed it inauspicious for married women.

"So sorry," Sarita said, responding after some pause to Anjali.

"Did you love him?" Chetna asked.

"Chetna!" Sarita snapped.

"It's OK," Anjali started, her distinguished accent charming the other aunties, "he was the love of my life. We met in Mumbai. We did everything together, except singing. I can't carry a tune, but his voice would make my cheeks flush. I miss that."

After a few sips in silence, it was clear the topic never deserved another mention. On Cambridge Street, the aunties no longer sought out their differences.

"Do you want to join our religious group?" Sarita blurted out. "Ma'am," she added.

"Well, perhaps it is time for that phase in my life."

Gopal entered and grunted his greetings to the women. He promptly sank into the couch a few feet away and turned on the five o'clock news. Chetna leaned in close. "When no husbands around, we, too, wear American clothes like you." She pointed at Anjali's blue button-down and flicked her eyebrows up twice. The three of them laughed.

"Hmm? What's funny?" Gopal raised his voice.

"Nothing," Sarita replied, stifling a further laugh.

He looked back, above the seat, at the aunties seated at the dinner table. "Aren't you hearing this news?" The TV reporter recounted the latest string of drug violence and deaths in downtown Atlanta. "City government is useless."

Anjali clicked her tongue at the gruesome images onscreen. "Downtown is a world away." She paused for a second, picking crumbs off the tablecloth. "Nothing to worry about," she said in Hindi. Gopal had already turned back around.

"Oh, you speak Hindi, Anjali?" Sarita inquired.

"Hindi, little bit of Marathi, about ten words in French, and Telugu."

"Telugu!" Sarita yelped. They'd assumed Anjali was north Indian because of her fair skin, but this was jubilant news. The aunties felt their personalities suffered in English. They could read and write, but English was not the soundtrack to their memories, or the timbre of their thoughts. It was a language for reading books and buying groceries, and such was its limit.

Pooja arrived last, at the turning of the millennium. Her Telugu coexisted with many English words spoken with an "-u" at the end, to make them flow with the "oo" sounds of her mother tongue. "Lunch-u, car-u" were the words Sarita, Chetna, and Anjali heard when they took a walk past Pooja's house, down the block at the corner of New Haven Avenue. Pooja went to work every day with her husband at the same company, just as they'd met by attending the same computer science classes at Georgia Tech. They'd brought a maid from India to move into the house, so she could cook and clean and leave Pooja to make money, which she did better than most. She often hung a purse over her left hand, parked sunglasses above her widow's peak, and spoke for hours on end in her yard, a mobile phone pressed to her ear.

Pooja tried and failed on a few occasions to bake pies for her white neighbors, who invited neither Pooja nor the pie inside. She began to make eye contact with the other aunties of Cambridge Street, and one day brought one of her pies over to Chetna's house, where the ladies poked at it with suspicion. They looked askance as Pooja asked them to call her "Pooj" and rambled on about an upcoming promotion she hoped to snatch from the jaws of another senior programmer named Tom.

"Have you tried praying for it?" Sarita asked.

"Oh no, of course not." Pooja laughed with a hand covering her mouth. Eyeing the downcast faces around her, she cleared her throat and fidgeted. "So you got the Jack Juicer, Chetna? Does the juice-u come properly?"

"When Chetna here prays for something, it usually works out. Just last week, my boy Viren was all sorts of nervous about his Physics exam, and Chetna told him to relax, she'd pray for him. He came home beaming about scoring a ninety-four.

Perhaps you could give it a try, hmm?" Anjali reached across and placed a heavy, whitened hand on Pooja's light fingers.

"Yes, yes. Actually," Pooja said, "I believe in astrology, also," and admitted to frequent consultations to intuit her chances of conceiving.

Hesitations tossed aside, the ladies scarfed pie with more gusto and traded comments on how some Indian flavors could add taste, maybe even give Pooja a better chance of winning over the other neighbors.

"Pooja," Chetna called out.

"Pooj," she replied.

"Pooja," Chetna insisted.

"Yes."

"The juice comes very nicely."

After Pooja secured her promotion, none of them ever missed a Thursday evening prayer, unless they'd gone to India or begrudgingly hauled their children on a road trip to Disney World. Much of their discussion revolved around food, children, over-the-phone foibles with in-laws, setbacks in their life plans, and the God who was supposed to address such setbacks. When Chetna showed up at a meeting with fear on her brow, or Pooja looked longingly at the others' children, they would remind each other that brighter days were around the bend, hidden but always possible.

The only hurdles to their unity were the uncles of Cambridge Street, their three husbands who resorted to snide remarks about the ladies' absences from home. One evening, Chetna's husband followed her to Sarita's house and discovered the other husband to be tolerable, opinionated, and in possession of a well-stocked liquor cabinet, which met all three criteria required for a bond between uncles. They retreated to the back patio with a bottle of Chivas and a heaping of bhel puri. Eventually, Sharad, Pooja's husband, joined them on the patio, and Viren, still entranced by dinosaurs at seventeen, babysat the younger children with repeated viewings of *Jurassic Park*. Sarita made another batch of tangy chaat, and the aunties no longer faced resistance. In the ensuing years, more Indians moved into the bordering New Haven and Princeton Avenues, and the white families started to mingle with them, feeling there were too many to ignore. Sarita began to spend a few summer evenings with Patty and Drew, or Anjali with Fred and Mary, but the aunties of Cambridge Street, even as they made other friends, knew they'd found each other at a time when no one opened their patios to them for peach tea.

* * *

On an August day, Anjali hosted their prayer group and spoke highly of her elder son's success in his first year at Vanderbilt. "He's joined an Indian Students Council and a volunteer group already—can you believe it?"

"How will he have time-u to focus on studies?" Pooja insisted.

Chetna giggled. "Oh, he'll do great. Such a smart boy. And now your little Viren is applying to Stanford!"

"God willing," Anjali replied. Despite his fits of illness becoming more frequent, Viren's grades had blossomed since moving to Cambridge Street. A phone rang downstairs and Anjali excused herself.

"What is Indian Students Council?" Sarita wondered aloud.

"Maybe they read Tagore like we did in school," Chetna offered.

"No, no." Pooja shook her head. "I heard they just sell samosas to raise money for talent shows."

"What talents?"

"Dance-u, songs, acting."

"Why?" Sarita asked.

"That's how they find dates. You know," she drew close to a whisper distance, "they're all having sex-u in college now."

"Ayooo," Chetna gasped.

"Chi, chi," Sarita demurred, lightly tapping her cheeks with the right hand to ask forgiveness in the prayer room. The others mimicked her.

A scream filled the house, emanating from below. The aunties scurried downstairs, taking care with the ends of their saris, to find Anjali on the ground, sobbing into the telephone. She yelled his name. Viren, Viren.

Chetna kept asking for definitions. Heroin. Overdose. She couldn't keep them in her head after hearing the answers. She tried to hold down Anjali's hands as they banged against the carpet, but she wasn't strong enough. Anjali moaned about letting him out of her sight. Chetna wailed with her, as if Viren's fate had become a possibility for her own children. Pooja and Sarita sat, too, their bodies and faces shaking together as colorful saris and mascara tears spilled over the carpet.

Sarita was old enough to have seen many occasions for grief in her hometown. Even as she held Anjali's sobs against her blouse, ran her fingers through the unkempt curls of Anjali's hair, Sarita knew preparations were her responsibility. She walked across the street and made phone calls to priests and funeral homes. Her

son walked into the room behind Sarita and poked at her while she negotiated banquet prices. She swatted his hand away once or twice, called for her husband, but then turned to face Nitin's searching eyes.

"I'm hungry, Amma," he said. Ten years old now, he was growing out of his clothes, and the outline of his stomach pressed against his Pokémon T-shirt.

She banged the phone onto its receiver.

"What's wrong, Amma?"

She held him tight to her chest as he struggled against her kisses on his forehead.

"Amma! Eww!"

"You're my mountain of gold, you know that? You know that?"

By late September, the multitudes of trees in Alpharetta were pale. The greens were not so green, and yellows had encroached upon every home. Gopal was griping about having to rake leaves one day when the aunties came over for prayer. Navaratri, a festival of nine nights for nine goddesses, was fast approaching. The aunties had taken up the task of memorizing a long and auspicious mantra. They'd planned outfits and babysitters for the nine nights of the festival they'd spend at the temple. Each of them knew this was dedicated to Anjali. But that day, Anjali showed up late for prayers, carrying a binder of papers.

There was heat about her. Anjali huffed and hesitated. She dabbed at her temples with a turquoise scarf, ran a finger along the yellow plastic of the binder. Since Viren's passing, she stopped in the middle of sentences at times, or didn't know how to start. It was like the words she wanted were clogged up inside her and she couldn't clear her throat. She became fussy. After working late, she went for runs on the nearby trail and other parents who knew murmured about what a poor soul she was. She cleaned and recleaned her living room at nights and called her elder son almost daily, until he suggested she find an outlet for her grief. She found a worthy cause.

"They won't accept it." She dropped her papers.

"Who? What?" Chetna's eyes brightened, anticipating a secret.

"A heroin awareness training. For the high schoolers. So they'll know what it is, what to do if—" They hadn't found any evidence of who dealt the drugs or took the heroin with Viren, and like the local news, the school moved on when there were no answers.

"Great idea," Sarita declared, shifting beside Anjali. "Why they said no?"

"They said the PTA would never allow it, because it's too vulgar. You know what else? They said 'sorry about your son, we just feel awful, but that kind of behavior wouldn't happen with any of our hometown kids.'"

"So you go to the PTA and make a speech! You are good at that, no?" Pooja insisted.

"I'm no longer eligible to attend without a student." Anjali bunched her fists together. Her mouth opened but no sound escaped.

"Oh, stupid PTA. Did I tell you about that Sally who has the cubicle next to the—"

"Yes," the other aunties interjected.

Pooja pursed her lips. "Sorry." The aunties nodded. They knew Pooja brought up work whenever they discussed children.

Chetna spoke up. "My neighbor, Mallory, her house is on Lebanon Avenue. She's a PTA officer." Chetna clapped. "She said there's a big baking event happening for the PTA. Maybe we can find a way to speak there. I will offer her fruits over the fence and get details. Right, Anjali?"

"Let's pray," Anjali said, to their surprise. They practiced the mantras for what felt like the thousandth time.

The aunties regrouped over the weekend while their kids watched *Jurassic Park*. Chetna had both good news and bad news. They all looked at Anjali.

"Good news first," Anjali said.

"The whole town comes! And they will have a stage there, and if you are winner in baking, you can even use the microphone. I already signed up for PTA."

"Bad news?"

"This is like Diwali for the ladies here. They dress up, wear ribbons, do lots of baking practice. Some man will yell auctions. Very tough to get noticed, it seems."

Sarita put a hand on Chetna's shoulder to slow her down. "How can we do this?"

Pooja perked up. "You know, on my office floor we had a desserts contest and the person who won brought Kaju Katli."

"Your office is eighty percent Indian, isn't it?" Anjali raised an eyebrow.

"Matters how?"

Anjali smacked her own forehead.

"Wait! I can do a pie! Easy, easy." Pooja raised her chest, looking triumphant.

"We will do it together," Sarita declared.

"Oh, one more bad news!" Chetna raised a calloused index finger. "The bake sale is same night as Dusshera."

A groan stifled the ladies' fervor. The final night of Navaratri is the holiest, when effigies of evil are burned and the powers of the goddess peak.

"We have to go to temple," Sarita said.

"We have to go to the bake sale! It's our best chance!" Anjali replied.

The matter was shelved. Anjali and Pooja walked back to their houses with heavy chins, frowning about the impasse. Sarita lingered by the door. She asked Chetna to draw close and slipped off her right tank top strap. There was a bruise underneath.

"I thought so," she muttered.

Chetna pushed it back. "I'll be fine."

"There are organizations, Chetu. In the city."

"I'm not a charity case."

"Listen, Chetu," Sarita said.

But Chetna went back to the kitchen and started putting away dishes. Sarita could hear the clanging of steel tumblers and saucers. She stepped into the arch separating the kitchen from the foyer and watched, with folded arms, Chetna carry out her chores. Duty had become their Band-Aid over many cuts of domestic life. Religious duty, household duty, marital duty—they covered over scrapes and bleeding desires. Sarita picked up a rag and started wiping back and forth on the table, pushing cake crumbs into her cupped palm. She needed lotion. Her hands were cracked from scrubbing dishes, bathtubs, blinds, Nitin's ears. She fetched some from a cabinet and rubbed her palms. Approaching Chetna from behind, Sarita applied it on her bruise, knowing it would soothe her. Chetna turned, and Sarita grabbed her cheeks. She kissed her forehead.

"I saw something on a church board, Chetu."

"What?"

"'This too shall pass.' That's all it said."

"So?"

"Goddess tells us the same. Everything fades." She tapped Chetna's bruise. "This, too."

"Akka, you have to go to the bake sale. Temple will be there the next day, and next year."

"You've grown a lot since we met, you know?"

The door opened and the ladies split apart, pretending to dry dishes. Rajesh walked in, his face oily. "What is this sleeveless shirt? You live in a slum?"

"Sorry." Chetna bid good-bye to Sarita.

* * *

Pooja's pie looked the same as the last time she baked it. Sarita asked her neighbor if she would try a piece for critique. Patty came over one day before a prayer meeting, wearing a frilly yellow top and a white hat. Sarita ogled that hat. She wondered if she could look like royalty in it. Patty cut a bite with plenty of filling and made a face at the crust. She ate and gulped and dabbed at her mouth. "Darling, that's hardly blueberry pie. There are no neat lines on top, the filling is off, and the crust is tough."

"Something different, you know?"

"Y'all try again now. I'm happy to keep tasting pies." She showed her perfect white teeth and trotted out the door, mentioning suppertime.

"Dammit," Pooja winced. "What kind of name is Patty? She is a sandwich-u?"

Sarita consoled her. "We're not used to these fruits."

"They're not even that sweet," Chetna whined.

"What if we do what we joked about when we all first met. Make your pie more Indian?" Anjali suggested.

"Tomorrow evening, let's experiment," Sarita decided.

The first attempt involved cardamom and cinnamon, and Chetna, the first tester, spit out a mouthful.

The second attempt was also baked by Pooja, using apple instead of blueberry. The pie stayed in Chetna's mouth but narrowed her face. "Too sour," she gulped. Anjali spoke on the phone with her older son, laying out her plans for the bake sale. She picked at a black spot on the faded phone wire. She often spoke to him during their meetings. A word or sound would raise her from the table or prayer room and she would stand at the phone in silence, sometimes just listening to the sounds of her son doing homework, to know he was there. The others allowed this, too, into their routine.

The third attempt was baked by Chetna, after considerable research on Yahoo. She tried a graham cracker crust she read about online and added cardamom to it. Red apples were used instead of green. Chetna pried a leaky mess from the oven. Pooja patted her with the most smug face she could muster. To everyone's surprise, the pie was delicious. The aunties ate half, gobbling up leaky apple pieces with spoons and sipping on tea.

"Pretty good-u," Pooja admitted.

"We can make it even more our own," Sarita thought out loud.

"Mango!" Chetna yelped. Anjali jumped, and slid her way over to the phone.

The fourth attempt consisted of a graham cracker crust with cardamom, a can of Alphonso mango puree, and much argument. Some aunties argued for a lassi pie, including lime, while others backed the custard theory. The latter faction won, but they were short on cream. Late for their first of nine nights at the temple, Chetna rummaged through boxes of Betty Crocker products in her pantry, suspecting the American Dream was hidden somewhere therein. She finally added cream cheese, gelatin, and Cool Whip and baked it while the aunties dressed up in saris. Anjali needed help donning one after so many years. One held up her hair and posture as another draped the yards of silk around her weathered body with care, taking care to pleat and tuck and wipe silent tears along the way. They finished her look with a decorative bindi between her eyebrows and faced the mirror, eyeing her transformation. For a blink, Anjali, too, saw a woman who might've lived a different life, with more song and dance, and Sunday evenings lying on the couch in quiet togetherness with her husband.

They retrieved the pie from the oven, saw it jiggle, and decided it was a failure. The ladies rushed out the door.

At the Hindu temple forty minutes away, near the airport that welcomed Sarita to her life in Georgia, the goddess was decorated in green and orange, donning pounds of jewelry. Each of the nine nights would be dedicated to a different form of the goddess, the lead chanter explained, each form celebrating another aspect of womanhood. Nearly fifty women sat on the floor on cushioned mats, holding copies of mantras in their regional languages. Sarita looked at a faded Telugu copy, squinting at the faint lines, as the room filled with sound. The memory of millennia dropped from every word. She looked up at Pooja and Anjali sharing an English copy, her friends brought over to this moment by her dedication. She prayed. The voices in the room answered.

Chetna returned from the temple to see her husband on the couch, patting a swollen belly that threatened to peek out under his banyan.

"Did you eat?" Rajesh grunted in her direction.

"Prasadam at the temple. Kids?"

"Slept off. They were easy after the pie."

Chetna wheeled around to face him. "Pie? Was it good?"

"See for yourself."

Chetna uncovered the lid. Just one slice left. She took a bite. It was good, dammit. Really good. Rajesh burped. He was watching *Seinfeld* and had an innocent curve on his lips. Chetna felt peaceful.

The fifth attempt mimicked the fourth, with an extra sheet of gelatin to firm up the custard. The aunties gathered at Sarita's to make it together, before the third night at the temple. They nearly scarfed it down between the four of them, but Pooja had the sense to say "Patty!" They brought her over in urgency, nudging her from behind, and Patty, her hair less coiffed than usual, put a spoonful in her mouth. She tilted her head left to right. Chetna put a fist to her mouth and felt her breath roll down her knuckles.

"I dunno what to say to y'all."

Anjali sat up. "How do you mean?"

"It ain't quite pie. But I'm certain that's one of the best desserts I've ever had." She sat down for a few more bites and chatted with the aunties about baking and PTA meetings. Someone made tea. A pair of thrushes alighted on the windowsill and chirped as a quiet breeze blew onto the dining table. Sarita felt her thoughts slow to a standstill. Patty revealed the details of the bake sale judges—who had the most influence, who was moody. She used both hands to hold up the steel cup of tea and waved at her nostrils after every sip. "Ooh, that's so hot it opens my pores!" Pooja soon mimicked her manner of sipping with both hands.

Sarita glanced at the clock. "Getting late!" She clamored about heading to the temple and Patty was rushed out.

They were late as predicted, so the chanting had begun. The four of them sat on neighboring mats by the temple's left wall and threw their voices into the throng. There was comfort in melting into anonymity, calling out to a deity. Some did so as pleas, others in celebration. Some stared at their printouts like answers would rise through the text, others kept one eye on the goddess and the other on small children, liable to disappear in colorful crowds. Sarita peeked at her friends and at the mass, organized in small clusters, each a neighborhood like hers, each a cadre of survival. She thanked God for Alphonso mangoes and an innocent child.

The aunties gathered at four the next afternoon to bake. Once they deemed the contest pies' successes, the aunties sat down to enjoy the backup. They felt they'd earned a dash of confidence. Mallory dropped by to wish them luck and

was cajoled into trying a bit of gooey golden custard and dark brown crust. She smacked her lips and asked for the recipe, noting she was proud of Chetna. The aunties nodded along, as if they'd been waiting to use that word for Chetna.

Anjali spoke up. "I can't properly thank you enough. I've got a speech ready. By the by, I vote we wear saris to this, as if we were still going to temple. What say?"

"Super-u!"

The aunties dispersed to get ready, and Sarita left early for the temple. Try as they did, the others couldn't persuade Sarita to join them for the bake sale. She insisted on representing their prayers at the temple. On the final night of Navaratri, they would burn an effigy of the demon Ravana before chanting took place. Sarita walked with a cranky Nitin to the makeshift stage in the parking lot. Caricatured demon teeth and eyes were painted on a nine-foot-tall plaster cast, on ten separate heads. The priest blew from a conch shell and began his mantras. Nitin picked at the borders of his mother's sari.

Chetna indulged in a cool shower to ward off the oven heat and smells, then wore a striking yellow-and-blue chiffon sari. She tugged at the fabric in the mirror, aiming for perfection. Then, she began covering and transporting the pies to her car. Before she retrieved the last, Rajesh walked in from the patio, where the other uncles were drinking.

"Oy, where are our snacks?"

"No time. Eat that leftover pie. We have chips."

"I want you to make bhajis."

"I have to go."

"You first make us snacks. Then go. Understood?" He moved in a flash and tightened a hand around her elbow. She pleaded with him. Her left hand reached back for support and found rubber. A handle. She gripped and raised a pan in the air. He stumbled back, shocked, and told her to put it down. He checked the back door, wondering if the other men saw. Chetna let out a laugh and ordered him to back away. The next minute, she rolled out of the driveway.

Sarita had to contain a now excitable Nitin, who wanted to stay longer until the effigy burned through to ashes and crackled like sparklers. She'd seen enough, and worried about securing a prime spot by the goddess. Sarita bristled through the crowd, dragging Nitin, to find the core group of ladies seated by the goddess. As they waited for the chanting to start, they folded their hands to greet passersby

who were making their circuit of the heavens, praying at each deity's station along the temple walls. The main goddess, Lakshmi, was draped in yellow and red, like shifting flames. When the prayers began, Sarita closed her eyes and chanted from memory.

Pooja and Anjali waited outside the school gymnasium as all manner of families walked by, ogling their saris. Anjali fidgeted with her fabric, inviting admonishments from Pooja. Chetna arrived and rushed them inside as a drizzle began, leaving glints of moisture upon the bottom borders of their saris. The gym was packed with bakers, students, and grumpy grandpas in suspenders who kept asking to taste desserts before the booths were set up. Chetna's eyes searched for Mallory and found her wearing high hair and heels. She handed Chetna a booth assignment. "Hurry up, the judges are fixin' to start!"

The aunties laid out pies and spoons and kept one set aside for judging. Mallory went up on stage and drew some tepid cheers. "We've got over three dozen bakers here tonight, including some repeat winners like our own Mary Ellen. Everybody give it up for her, eighty-five years young today!" A wrinkled white lady in a red polka dot dress waved her hand. "And we've got some newcomers so let's give a warm Alpharetta welcome to my neighbor Chet-na! Ain't her dress so gorgeous?" The crowd clapped suspiciously, looking around for Chetna. The aunties smiled and whispered to each other in Telugu that Mallory was kind of nice, like Patty. Once Mallory announced, "It's time to eat," the gym was abuzz: forks hit plates, groans of appreciation rang out, and ladies yelped about missing each other so much.

There was space on their auction placard to list a cause, so Anjali grabbed a pen and wrote KEEPING ALL OUR CHILDREN SAFE. Pooja nodded approval and cut the pies into tiny squares to lay out on parchment paper. Many Franks, Joes, and Pauls with tablecloth-patterned shirts and gray hairs came by, asking about "In-jun" baking. Anjali, appointed spokesperson, introduced their cause in her colonial accent, which further confused everyone who wondered why a white-skinned lady was wearing a sari. Visitors took tentative first bites and eager second bites, even the many wives who claimed to have a more critical palate than their husbands. The table placard read MANGO PIE in a surefire sense, but no one felt the label did the pie justice. Still, people bid higher and higher on the silent auction sheet, commending the push for safer schools. The sole moment of contention came when an argument broke out between Pooja and Maria Villalobos over the merits of different mangoes.

When the judges arrived, they noted the ease of the knife's fall through the pie and the firmness of the custard once separated. The three of them tasted at once.

"Certainly unconventional."

"Oh, my. What's that?"

"Can I take another piece?"

"What you're appreciating," Anjali explained in a lilting tone, "is the play of the cardamom with the mango, the crumble of graham cracker against moist custard."

Sarita came to the end of a thousand names of the goddess Lalita. Nitin was awake. She cupped her hands around his and whispered, "Hold tight. Hold tight. Now pray hard as you can. God has to give Nitin anything he asks for today." Feeling the rolls on his fingers squeeze together, Sarita, too, closed her eyes. She asked for belonging, clenched her teeth, and felt the prayer leave her brows on behalf of all the aunties on Cambridge Street.

A roar went through the crowd when the judges announced mango pie. Anjali gasped, while Pooja and Chetna jumped up and down, knocking over a few spoons. The aunties lunged into a group embrace, their color-coordinated bangles clinking against each other's arms like wind chimes. Mallory waved them up to the stage, but Chetna and Pooja stood back, tears welling in their eyes. Anjali strolled through the parted crowd, her speech held to her bosom. The crowd stood at attention as she tapped the microphone.

"In this town, like other towns, we bake pies as a way of introduction. Me and my friends are here today to do the same: to say hello, and to hope that we can belong in this community. Because we have some ideas for making it better."

Chetna held her breath and squeezed Pooja's palm. She let go when Anjali spoke beautifully about Viren without her words getting stuck. Looking around at the silent nods of approval, her head buzzed with pride at Anjali's speech, but her legs felt heavy. Sitting without a sound, Chetna lifted the lid off their mango pie and placed a spoonful in her mouth as Anjali's address came to a crescendo, demanding change in the school's policies. Chetna felt Sarita beside her, urging her to thank the goddess for this moment. She closed her eyes, folded her hands in prayer, and listened hard to her friend's hopes coming true, affirming that it was, indeed, a holy day.