

Ammol, Pasha, and the Ghost

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“So you like ghosts?”

Anmol is fourteen. She lives with Nani, her mother’s mother, in a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a ramshackle bay-and-gable house. The house is wedged between brick housing co-ops that shed flakes of paint like feathers off an evening gown. There’s a small lawn in front of the house with two overgrown crabapple trees. On Sundays, Anmol and Nani cover their heads with chiffon *chunnis* and ride a bus to the *gurdwara*, the Sikh temple north of Toronto. There, they pray among women in bright *salwaar kameezes* and turbaned men and dozens of rowdy children.

Anmol wears her mother’s old dance costumes to school. Nani makes her cut off the tiny silver bells sewn at the cuffs and hemlines, but Anmol leaves the sequins and embroidery. She isn’t teased for the way she dresses. Rather, she inspires the girls in her class to scour their mother and grandmother’s closets for vintage clothing.

Pasha has been in Anmol’s class since kindergarten. His real name is Tristan. He thinks of himself as two people. He’s named his secret self Pasha after Pasha Antipov, his favorite character in the movie *Doctor Zhivago*. Like most of the kids at his school, Pasha lives in a large mock-Tudor house, only his backs up to a crowded, twisted woods.

Once, he used to play in the woods every day, and even built a makeshift tree fort behind his house. Lately though, at night, Pasha sees strange lights through his bedroom window that seem to hover in the trees. Green and blue spheres that look like swollen radioactive fruit. He tells his mom, and she says the lights are just fireflies. Tristan agrees, but Pasha, his true self, is spooked.

Tristan is a decent midfielder. He wears a Cristiano Ronaldo jersey and plays for the school soccer team. Pasha is indifferent to sports, except maybe ice climbing. He spends his free time watching Coen Brothers films and BBC programs like *Peaky Blinders* on Netflix.

Tristan makes a big show of liking Daria Hu, the cutest girl in his class, but Anmol is perpetually on Pasha's radar. In grade seven, Tristan teases Anmol for living in Toronto's worst slum. She floors him when she asks, quizzically, why he'd make fun of something she can't help. In grade eight, Tristan follows Anmol home one day and pelts snowballs at her. He misses and accidentally hits a bunch of kids smoking hash in front of a co-op. A boy with a tattooed face pulls out a knife and promises he'll fuck him up if he sees him again. Tristan laughs, but Pasha nearly pisses his pants.

Now that Pasha is in grade nine, and more mature and worldly, he tries a different angle. Early in the school year, he finds Anmol sitting on the school steps at lunchtime. She's eating spinach *roti* and a pot of *raita* and reading a bulky paperback. She shrugs when he asks if he can join her. He sits across from her and chatters to fill the aching space between them. He talks about how he hasn't studied for their math test on Thursday and how he wants to quit the soccer team. She doesn't tell him to shut up, though in fairness, she doesn't acknowledge him either. He talks about his house and the miniature forest in his backyard. She flips a page of her book, and he spots a ghoulish, shadowy figure on the cover.

"So you like ghosts?"

"Sure. They're more interesting than people."

"Well, ghosts are people, technically," Pasha says. Anmol shrugs again. "Sometimes I see things in my backyard," he blurts out, before he can stop himself. Blood rushes to his cheeks. "I'm pretty sure the forest is haunted."

She marks her place in her book and carefully puts it in her knapsack. "Haunted by a ghost?"

"Yeah." He's quiet for a moment. "It might be a dybbuk, like in the movie *A Serious Man*." She looks confused. She doesn't have a Netflix account. "A dybbuk's a Yiddish spirit. They usually haunt people. But I bet they haunt forests, too."

"Why do you think it's a dybbuk?"

"My family's Jewish and it's on our property. If we were your

religion..." He snaps his fingers.

"Sikh," Anmol says patiently.

"Sikh, yeah. Then it would be a Sikh spirit. Just like how only Catholics are haunted in exorcism movies."

"I don't think ghosts work that way." She swallows a spoonful of *raita* and looks at him levelly. "I want to see it."

He nearly falls off the steps. "You believe me?"

"Why wouldn't I? Today, after class."

"I've got soccer practice," he says, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"How about now?"

He pulls out his iPhone and checks the time with shaking hands. Class is about to start. He'll forge a note from his dad. "Yeah, whatever you want."

She brushes crumbs from her magenta skirt and rises, nearly tripping on her sagging hem. He grabs her elbow. They walk down the school laneway, past jeering boys smoking on the greenbelt. Pasha can't help lapsing into Tristan mode. He affects a deep, lazy voice and orders the boys to fuck off. Anmol ignores them. They walk beneath trees molting golden leaves and shriveled pin cherries. She picks up two cherries and crushes them between her palms. Her hand bumps against Pasha's, leaving scarlet smears on his fingers.

They reach his house and he asks if she wants to come inside for Coke and chips. She politely refuses. They pass through a gate into his backyard and he follows Anmol into the forest. She doesn't stop walking until she reaches its dense heart. Amidst pine trees are low, feathery sumac shrubs. Maple and ash trees with greyish bark that rise higher than Pasha's house. Pale light filters through branches, tattooing their faces with shadows.

The air briefly darkens and takes on a smoky tinge.

Pasha's hackles rise. But Anmol smiles and breathes the forest's essence. Damp leaves, crumbly soil, resin. When she tilts her head back, she sees no skyscrapers or condominiums, only the leafy tops of trees stenciled against silver-white sky.

“It’s nice here.”

“Yeah.” Pasha says, still on edge. He glances at a heap of fallen planks, the remainder of his tree fort. The edges of the wood are blackened, as though singed. “The ghost, dybbuk, whatever it is. It might not show up for a while.”

“I’ve got time.”

They sit on the sopping ground. She shivers—she’s only wearing a thin jacket—and leans against him without thinking. His arm slips around her. To his surprise, she rests her head on his shoulder. Here, in the forest, it feels right. She smells like cinnamon and Herbal Essence shampoo. Tendrils of heat rise from their skin, settling in the branches of a nearby evergreen. It twitches, as though pricking its ears.

“Did you know that I liked you?” he asks, forgetting that the forest is haunted.

“You’re pretty obvious about it.”

He has to laugh. “Do you ... can I kiss you?”

Anmol has never kissed anyone before. And before today, she’d have never have considered kissing him. Nevertheless, she raises her face and presses her lips against his. His mouth is clean and firm. She smooths the straight hair on his forehead and pushes her tongue past his teeth. He inhales sharply and her arms encircle him.

“I want you to be my girlfriend,” Pasha says. He’s only kissed a girl once before. Daria, at a party last month. Her mouth had felt strange, all contours and corners. Kissing Anmol is way better, almost unbearably so. He hopes he’s doing it right. He bends his head and kisses her neck, hard enough to leave a strawberry-colored stain.

A wind smelling of oranges blows past. Twittering birds and squirrels fall silent. Anmol pulls away. “Tristan,” she whispers. Her skin is pale, her pupils enormous.

He’s on the verge of telling her his secret name when he looks up. His voice shrivels in his throat.

There are two blue and green lights hovering about ten meters away, one of each color, both the size of a stop sign. They emit whining

noises.

“This isn’t real,” he says, trembling. Anmol slips her hand into his. The wind blows harder and the lights merge into a vaguely humanoid form—it is a ghost after all. “What should we do?” He tries to remember how ghosts are ward off in horror movies. Holy water? The sign of the cross? Maybe he could mark the Star of David in the air.

She chants in a language he doesn’t understand. It takes him a moment to realize that she’s praying. The ghost pulses and swells in tandem with the uneven cadence of her voice. In the distance, he hears dogs barking. Her voice falters. Not knowing what else to do, he recites prayers of his own. His Hebrew is terrible. He hasn’t practiced in ages. The ghost doubles in size and begins to scream.

Abruptly, the air dims and cools.

For a few minutes, Anmol and Pasha sit with their arms around each other, not moving. “Is it gone?”

“Yes,” says Anmol, “but it will be back.” He knows she’s right. The air around them is thick, electric with expectancy. She combs her tangled hair with her fingers. “It’s really mad about something. I think us praying made it feel better.”

“No.” He’s equal parts dazed from Anmol’s kisses and seeing an actual ghost in the flesh. “I’m pretty sure we made it angrier. You saw how it got bigger.”

Anmol thinks for a moment. “We’ll have to come back.”

“No way.”

“It reached out to us for a reason. We have to figure out why.” She puts her hands in his pocket and extracts his iPhone, checks the time. “I should go.”

“Wait.” His mouth finds hers. They forget about the ghost and everything else until the air smells of oranges again and a warm gust testily careens through their hair. Only then do they leave.

When Anmol arrives home, Nani is in the living room crocheting a striped blanket for her niece’s new baby. When she asks Anmol why she’s home early, she lies that there was a fire alarm at school.

Nani nods, even though the school secretary left a message saying that Anmol didn't show up for her afternoon classes. She tells Anmol that there's a letter from her mother and father from India on the kitchen counter. Ordinarily, Anmol would tear it open and read it right away. She lives to hear from her parents. But today she stares at the unopened letter and runs a finger along its many dog-eared stamps. The closest thing to hugging her mother and father, who left her with Nani years ago, when she was a small girl. It's nothing, she reluctantly thinks, like Pasha's arms around her in the forest that day. She puts the letter in a shortbread cookie tin that she keeps under the foldout couch in their living room that's also her bed, with the rest of her letters. Nani reminds Anmol that her mother and father will be competing on the dance show *Naach! Naach!* next week and that they'll call as soon as they can afford a long distance plan. Anmol makes a face. They've been saying that for years.

Dinner is leftover *dahl* with rice and cucumber and mint salad. Nani notes Anmol's pallor and dilated pupils and Pasha's kiss beneath her chin. Twenty years ago, Nani had slapped Anmol's mother when she came home with a similar mark on her neck. But Nani folds her lips and tells Anmol to eat more rice. She's too skinny, she says. She needs to stay healthy or she'll miss classes and fall behind in her studies, after Nani went to so much trouble to enroll her in a good school. Anmol nods and draws patterns in her rice with her fork. She asks Nani if Sikh ghosts exist.

She shakes her head. "We don't concern ourselves with these things," she says, in Punjabi. "You shouldn't even talk about them. It's a bad omen."

Too late, thinks Anmol.

The next day at school, Anmol Googles "Sikh ghosts" at the library. All in all, the internet isn't much more helpful than Nani. An image search for "dybbuk" yields pen-and-ink drawings of fiendish crones that look nothing like the ghost in Pasha's forest. She reads on Wikipedia that dybbuks are often vengeful and will leave their living

hosts after being helped.

Two hands rest on her shoulders. She tenses, easing when she smells deodorant and cool leather. “Hey,” she says to Pasha, a little shyly.

“Hey, bae.” She cringes. He rests his chin on her head. “What are you up to?” He glances at the computer screen. “Find anything interesting?”

“Sort of. A couple things.”

“Coming over today.” It’s not a question.

“I have an idea how we can help your ghost.”

“It’s not mine,” he says, a little shortly. “Did you think about what I said, about being my girlfriend?”

“I think something must have happened to it when it was alive,” she says, ignoring him. His face falls. “Something bad. It needs peace. I think we can help it open some kind of door, so it can enter the afterlife.”

“You mean the after-afterlife. It’s already dead.” He looks bored. “How are we going to do that?”

“We’ll have to figure it out.”

“This isn’t working.”

For the past hour, Pasha and Anmol have been praying in his forest. This time, they’re seated on lawn chairs. Anticipating cold weather, she’s wearing a cable-knit sweater of Nani’s that she borrowed without asking. It smells like Nani, of cardamom and bay leaves.

The ghost appears, winking and growling, blasting hot marmalade wind in their faces. Its brilliant lights coalesce into the shape of a child. Anmol and Pasha pray in Punjabi and Hebrew, respectively. They beg it to speak, to tell them how they can help. But the ghost just roars louder.

“Look, it doesn’t want to talk,” says Pasha. “Can we go inside? Maybe if we leave, it will go away on its own.”

“Shh,” Anmol says. She tries praying once more. “*Waheguru ji*

ka Khalsa. Waheguru ji ki Fateh.” Finally, the ghost quiets down and fades into nothingness.

About fucking time, Pasha thinks. He knows better than to say it out loud.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” says Anmol, as they drag the chairs back into his garage. “It looked like it was expecting us. We might have to come every day.”

They enter his house. The kitchen is cool and open, all metal appliances and blond wood. Across the kitchen is a den with cream leather chairs and sofas and a deep carpet. On every surface are glass vases filled with pussy willows and sparkling beads.

Pasha’s mother is at the kitchen counter, engrossed in a Mac-Book Air. She’s tall, with frizzy red hair and rounded shoulders, her plump figure wrapped in a graphic print dress. She looks askance at Anmol’s raggle-taggle clothing and sees how Pasha’s eyes follow her every movement. She asks Anmol if she’d like to stay for dinner. They’re ordering Swiss Chalet. But Anmol says no, she’ll be heading home soon. Pasha takes Anmol by the hand and leads her upstairs, to his room.

It’s smaller than Anmol expected, with a dark walnut desk and chair that look like they were bought at a garage sale. The shelves are laden with books, DVDs, and peeling gilt trophies decorated with plastic soccer balls.

“Mom makes me keep them out,” Pasha says, embarrassed.

On the desk are a large flat screen monitor and an Xbox console. The walls are covered with movie posters. *Diner*, *Raising Arizona*, *Repo Man*, *Withnail and I*. The largest is of a man with friendly eyes and a pompadour, wearing a dark suit.

“David Lynch,” says Pasha. “A director. He used to be a painter. I think you’d like his movies. I can show you on Netflix.”

But Anmol wants to talk about the ghost. “I was thinking we could make an offering. I could give away all my savings when I go to the *gurdwara* this Sunday.”

“The what?”

"Sikh temple. You're supposed to give money when you visit. I don't have much, but maybe it will convince God to give the ghost peace."

"Does God make bargains?" Pasha says. He's not sure why he's asking. He doesn't even believe in God.

"I may as well try."

He pulls her into his arms. "Can we talk about something else?"

"This is kind of important," Anmol says. But they lie back on his bed and she coils her body around his. When he kisses her, she glances at his door.

"Don't worry," he says. "My parents are cool." In response, she presses against him and feels his beating heart, his breath quickening. Their fingers twine and he pushes his body against hers, hard.

A knock at the door. Forgetting that his parents are supposed to be cool, Pasha springs away, disentangles himself and straightens his clothing. Pasha's mother enters and puts a few takeout containers on Pasha's desk, along with plastic cutlery, cans of juice and pop, and brownies wrapped in cellophane. She brought food for Anmol anyway. Anmol has never eaten takeout food before, or even drunk pop. It's too rich, salty and sweet all at once. But she eats everything, down to the last brownie crumbs.

"I want to go with you to the temple," Pasha says.

"I don't know." Anmol licks her fingers. "It might be weird."

He's insulted. "Why would it be weird?"

"You might not like it. And..." She pauses.

"Why wouldn't I?"

Later that night, when she's home in her sofa bed, she uses the light from Nani's ancient cellphone to read her mother and father's latest letter. They're excited about appearing on *Naach! Naach!* They miss Anmol dearly, but she's to listen to Nani and not give her a hard time. The letter ends with them promising they'll visit soon. When Anmol finishes reading, she notices, for the first time, that her mother and father's handwriting is tidy. Too tidy. Elegant and spidery—a bygone style favored by Indians born during the British

occupation. She wonders if Baba, her father's father in Chandigarh, has been writing her all this time, pretending to be her mother and father. Anmol knows she should be angry. But she's feels a queer, almost languorous, emptiness. After she puts the letter in the tin under her bed, she stays awake until the black sky outside pales to pinkish grey and the alarm on Nani's phone beeps to signal morning.

On Sunday morning, Anmol and Nani dress in traditional Indian garb and walk to the bus stop near their apartment. It's an unusually sunny day. Anmol luxuriates in the warmth, but Nani remarks how she can't grow accustomed to Canadian weather—freezing one day, muggy the next.

Pasha is waiting for them at the bus stop. He's wearing a white button-down shirt beneath his rugby jacket and gleaming square-toed loafers. Nani frowns when Anmol greets him with a hug, but she holds her tongue. During the bus ride to the *gurdwara*, Nani doesn't look at Pasha. She snaps at Anmol to sit up straight and stop picking at her lips. He pretends to play Cube on his iPhone.

They arrive at the *gurdwara* at ten. It's gold and marble and several stories high, a gilded pearl in an industrial landscape of grey-brown factories and strip malls. The three of them enter the foyer and remove their shoes amidst crowds of visitors. Nani frets in Punjabi that "the boy's" shoes are too nice, and makes Anmol hide Pasha's behind a shelf in the cloak room so that they won't get stolen. There are scarves in a bin for people who aren't wearing turbans or head coverings. Anmol selects a green satin handkerchief and knots it around Pasha's temple, tucking the points behind his head.

The main prayer room is furnished with sheer white curtains and patterned carpets covered with muslin sheets. An aisle bisects the space, terminating in a raised stage with carved gold pillars. On the stage is a low pedestal holding what Pasha assumes is a holy book. Anmol gives Pasha a toonie from her tiny purse; he copies Anmol and approaches the book, throws the coin in front of the pedestal and kneels until his forehead touches the ground.

They sit on opposite sides of the room, Pasha on the right with the other boys and men, and chubby toddlers running in circles. A turbaned man reads aloud from the holy book, in Punjabi. Pasha watches Anmol as she bows her head and fiddles with her now-empty purse. He knows she's praying for the ghost. He feels gawky and hulking in this room, with its fancy textiles and incense smell. He wishes he were back home watching movies in bed, the familiar scent of fabric softener wafting over him.

After the service, a man carrying a plastic bucket presses a napkin and a handful of pale, oily meal into Pasha's cupped palms. "You don't have to eat it all," the man says, smiling. "Just a little, to show respect."

Pasha eats it all. It's delicious. Warm and sweet and oddly familiar. Anmol, he notices, only eats a small bite of hers and throws the rest away, despite Nani's scowls. He feels a bit better.

The three of them reconvene downstairs in the temple cafeteria, where Pasha accepts a tin cup of water and a plate of rice pudding from an old man. There's no furniture, except for a few seats for the elderly and disabled. They sit on the ground. While they eat, Nani relaxes and asks Pasha if he enjoyed the prayer. She smiles when he truthfully answers that it was peaceful.

During the bus ride home, Nani leans her hennaed head against the window and drowses. After a long week working double shifts at the dollar store, she's exhausted. Afternoon sunlight streams into the bus, making her skin look papery.

Anmol puts her hand on Pasha's knee and takes his hand. "I have a good feeling about what we did today. I think it helped the ghost."

"Yeah?" He turns on his iPhone. It buzzes with a slew of messages. "Shit."

"What's going on?"

"Shit, shit, shit." He listens to his voicemail. "I gotta go. Like, now. My mom and dad need me home. I'm going to jump off and take an Uber home."

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you later. Can’t talk now,” he says, rising.

Her stomach drops. Whatever’s going on must be tied to the ghost. What else could it be? “Let me come with you.”

“What about your grandmother?”

“She’s fine.” They glance at Nani, crumpled and frail in her seat. Pasha gives Anmol a funny look. She averts her eyes. “She travels around the city on her own all the time.”

“My mom’s freaking out. She doesn’t need any distractions right now.”

“Will you just tell me what happened?”

“I will tomorrow, at school.”

But Anmol won’t give up easily. “You shouldn’t ride Uber alone. It’s not safe. Just let me come”

As Pasha stares at her, she feels her cheeks growing warm. He makes sure that Nani is still sleeping and gives her a brief kiss. “I’ll see you in class.”

He gets off. She watches him through the window as the bus ambles away. He’s slouched over his phone, eyes narrowed, forehead creased. She closes her eyes and prays for the ghost once more.

Once Anmol is home, she changes into jeans and an old flannel shirt of Nani’s. While Nani is preparing dinner, she slips out of the apartment and sprints the eight blocks to Pasha’s house.

Two—no, three—shrieking fire trucks are parked on his street in a bright zigzag, blocking his house from view. There are police cars, too, even an ambulance. Maneuvering her way through the crowd, Anmol sees wisps of black smoke lazily rise from Pasha’s backyard into the sky. The smoke has a faint, almost imperceptible greenish tinge and smells like an orange grove gone up in flames. Briefly, the smoke takes on the shape of a face. Feminine features, narrow eyes, thick, upswept eyebrows.

The ghost. Anmol shrinks at its fury.

Firefighters and police officers are grouped on Pasha's lawn. Anmol spots Pasha at the foot of his driveway. His shirt is untucked and unbuttoned at the collar. Strands of hair fall in his face. Close by, his mother barks questions at a police officer. She's a mess. Pasha and a tall man in a tan windbreaker, who must be Pasha's father, tug at the sleeve of her soot-smearred bathrobe. The naked worry on their faces as they flutter around his mother. It occurs to Anmol that her parents have never looked at her that way.

At that moment, Pasha turns and sees Anmol. The crease in his forehead deepens. He mumbles something to his father and rushes over.

"What are you doing here?" he says. He steers her away from the crowd. "I said I'd see you tomorrow."

"I saw her. I saw the ghost, her face, floating over your house. She's doing this. We have to talk to her. We need to calm her down."

"Who gives a shit? Look, you need to go. Things are really messed up right now."

Anmol notices that Pasha's mother's hands are clumsily bandaged. "Is your mother okay?"

"Not really, no. She was in the house eating lunch when the fire started. She ran out and—"

"The ghost is probably mad because we didn't visit today," Anmol interrupts. "We have to talk to it and explain why we didn't come. That we were trying to help."

"Don't you care?"

Anmol is confused. "About what?"

"Anything. My mom, my house. Your grandmother. Me. Only that fucking ghost."

"I'm trying to help you!"

"Help?" Pasha's voice rises. "This is all your fault!"

"How?"

"The ghost didn't do anything until you came along. It was your idea to pray, to talk to it, go to the temple. And now look."

“Me?” Anmol’s mouth drops open. “You asked me if I wanted to see it.” She steps back. “It doesn’t matter. We have to stop it. What if it hurts you, too?”

“The fuck do you care?”

“Tristan!” But he walks away.

She steps backward until her feet find the street curb. She sits and watches as Pasha and his father coax his mother into the waiting ambulance. In the fading light of the evening sun, crowds disperse and the fire trucks and police cars skitter away, though the halo of smoke over Pasha’s house remains.

After everyone is gone, Anmol feels the ghost’s electricity prick at her skin reproachfully. “I’m sorry we didn’t come today,” she says. “You didn’t have to do all this.” It responds with a blast of sooty air in her face. Coughing, she whispers a few passages from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book. Her words ring hollow. She’s painfully aware of the space next to her, of Pasha missing by her side.

Later that week, Anmol and Nani visit a family on the second floor of their house: Siv, who’s from Sri Lanka; his wife, Mira; and Kaj, their toddler son. Anmol and Nani stream the latest episode of *Naach! Naach!* on Siv’s laptop. They skim past the opening song-and-dance numbers to Anmol’s parents’ act. Her mother and father perform a rollicking *bhangra* routine and the audience claps along. Kaj, seated at Anmol’s feet, claps, too. He hugs Anmol’s legs and leaves drooly marks on her skirt. When Mira orders him to leave Anmol alone, Anmol picks him up and plops him on her lap.

The laptop screen is cracked, so that Anmol’s mother and father look slightly aslant. Her mother is in a periwinkle silk costume that exposes her taut midriff. Her arms, ankles, and rounded throat twinkle with silver. A diamond winks on her left nostril. She’s contoured her cheeks and nose with cream blush and bronzer, full lips limned with dark pink lipstick. When Mira sniffs at her painted face and bare stomach, Nani gives her a black look.

Anmol's father is in emerald silk with a rhinestone aigrette pinned to his turban. He leaps through the air, a verdant lick of flame. Her mother circles him and bends her arms and fingers. With each cheer from the audience, her father soars higher and higher and her mother's contortions grow more intricate. One last leap and they cease, panting and bowing as earsplitting applause crashes all around them. As the camera closes in on their faces, Anmol sees faint lines around her mother's eyes and across her forehead. Her father's eyes are lined with dark circles that are visible beneath a sticky layer of concealer. Their skin is greyish, almost withered.

The audience claps and claps despite the judges chiding that they need to get on with the show. It's pure nectar for Anmol's mother and father; as the audience cheers, the seams disappear from their faces. In Anmol's eyes, their skin loses its sickly cast and grows incandescent. They're lit by an invisible sun. They seem to grow a head taller.

Tears fill Anmol's eyes. They're gone. Forever. Not that she ever had them. She'll never be able to compete with the adulation of a packed television studio, of millions of fans glued to television screens. Then and there, she realizes that her mother and father are never coming home. She hugs Kaj tight, soothed by his baby powder smell.

Her mother and father agree to perform an encore. One judge, a Bollywood star with blown-out chestnut hair and a throaty voice, asks in Hindi if they'd like to dedicate their dance to anyone special.

"Our daughter in Canada," Anmol's mother says. She laughs when the judge coos that she looks too young to be a mum. It's true. Anmol slams the laptop shut.

"Don't you want to see if they win?" Nani asks.

Anmol silently transfers Kaj to Mira's arms and clomps upstairs, to the apartment. Once inside, she yanks her mother's dance costumes from her drawers and packs them into a plastic garbage bag. She unzips her fuchsia satin smock and kicks it into the bag, too. As an afterthought, she adds her tin of letters. She yanks the

bag through the living room window and steps onto the fire escape. A sharp wind leaves goosebumps on her bare skin. She stays put, even when she hears catcalls from the adjacent alley. With a heave, she dangles the bag over the railing. A rusted dumpster quietly waits below, its open mouth gaping. And then she has an idea.

She drags the bag back inside the apartment. Nani has left her cellphone on the kitchen counter. Anmol picks it up and dials Pasha's number. The call goes straight to his voicemail.

"Hey, it's me. I'm sorry for acting like a jerk." She takes a deep breath. "I need your help."

They meet in front of his house at midnight. The sky is dark and matte, save the odd winking satellite. The air still smells like singed fruit.

He disembarks from his bike. "Sorry I'm so late. I came all the way from Vaughan. We're staying with my aunt until the police finish up here."

"You didn't have to come. It means a lot."

He shrugs, looking away. "I guess I'm sorry, too. For what I said—"

"Don't worry about it. How's your mother?"

"Not good. The cops think the fire was a freak accident. But she's not stupid. She thinks someone started it on purpose. It's driving her crazy."

"I hope she'll be okay. She's nice."

"Yeah." He glances at her garbage bag. "What's that?"

"All my clothes. Well, all the ones my mother gave me. I'm making another offering to the ghost."

"That's not fair," says Pasha, feeling a little selfish. He can't imagine Anmol not wearing her costumes. "Why does the ghost get everything? Anyway, the last time you tried, it went crazy."

"This is different from money. Something I need to do."

He's about to ask why when he sees the look on her face. "Whatever you want."

They hold hands and walk into his backyard. It's encircled with yellow police tape. The forest is scorched, trees divested of branches rising smooth and shiny like pokers from soft piles of ash. Anmol is reminded of an old woodcut she once saw at the museum, of Balkan peasants and soldiers impaled on sharpened stakes. As they approach the forest, the air takes on a greenish shimmer. The ghost.

"Careful," Pasha says.

"Do you think we should pray?"

"Dunno. I'm just following you."

"All right." She bows her head and murmurs a few words in Punjabi. The air stops glimmering. With a jerk of her arm, the garbage bag soars towards the trees. It hits a stump. Bright swaths of fabric scatter on the forest floor.

Nothing happens. They wait five minutes, then ten.

"I guess that's it."

Her shoulders slump. "There has to be something else we can do."

"Maybe it worked. Who knows?" They turn to leave.

The ghost blocks their path.

A woman. Well over six feet tall, mushroom-pale skin streaked with rot, long seaweed hair cascading over naked breasts and thighs, like Lady Godiva. Palms outstretched in a halting gesture, lips parted, breath reeking of lemons gone off. It exhales, enveloping them with stinking wind. Anmol stifles a scream.

But Pasha stares into the ghost's bottomless black eyes. It meets his gaze, twitching with rage. "You want something from me, too," he hears himself say. "An offering."

The ghost opens its mouth in a wordless shriek. Yes.

"I don't have anything to give."

"What are you talking about?" Anmol says. She's still holding his hand. He feels the squeezing pressure of her fingers. It's purely reflexive. Her skin is icy. There's nothing behind the gesture.

Something resembling a smirk appears on the ghost's face.

"I know," Pasha says. "I guess I've always known. But I had to try with her."

“Tristan!”

Pasha ignores Anmol. “Just like you tried with us. Whatever’s bothering you, we can’t help. It’s for you to figure out.”

“Stop it! You’ll make her mad!”

It’s too late. The ghost screeches and looms over them. Anmol pulls Pasha to the ground. They shield their faces, bracing for the worst. And then a bright rectangular light appears, obliterating all else.

Silence and then darkness. The sound of cars driving past, wind blowing.

They open their eyes. The air feels flat. Burnt and stale, bereft.

“She’s gone,” Anmol says sadly.

“For real this time?” Pasha says. He tries to stand and his legs buckle. She props him up.

They scan the trees. The plastic garbage bag is in tatters. Anmol’s clothing has disappeared. Not a scrap remains, though shreds of torn paper fleck the forest floor.

“For real. I can feel it.”

He absently picks up a piece of paper, brushing away a few flecks of ash. It’s decorated with delicate loops and swirls, a foreign language. He puts it in his pocket.

The streets are empty as Pasha walks Anmol home. No drug dealers, no drunken patrons staggering out of pubs. All is quiet. “I hope you you’re not in trouble for being out so late,” Pasha says.

“I’ll be fine,” she says. “I hope the ghost will be okay, wherever it went. I’ll miss her.”

I won’t, Pasha thinks.

“What did you mean back there, when you said you had to try?”

“Nothing. I promise.”

“Okay.” They keep walking. “Maybe I could come over some time,” she offers, as they approach her house. “After things calm down, when your mother’s better. We could watch a movie. That director you like.”

“You don’t have to,” he says.

“I want to.” They hug, awkwardly. “Bye, Tristan.”

“Goodbye, Anmol.” He looks at her, then hops on his bike and pedals away.

She enters the house and tiptoes upstairs to her apartment. Without bothering to change into pajamas, she removes the pillow she’d stuffed under the covers of her bed, earlier that night, after Nani went to bed. She lies down and the springs loudly protest.

“Anmol?” Nani calls from her room.

“I’m just getting some water,” Anmol responds in Punjabi. “Go back to sleep.”

A few seconds and Nani’s snoring resumes. Anmol pulls her blankets under her chin. She can’t sleep. She’s jittery and subdued all at once. She wonders what her mother and father are doing. They’re likely on the road again, maybe auditioning for another show. She feels sorry for them. Sheathing themselves in gaudy clothing and stage makeup. Living paycheck to paycheck. Forever chasing elusive scraps of fame.

She closes her eyes. Smiling slightly, she remembers green and blue lights in an altar of trees. Tristan leaving his mark on her neck, the smell of citrus and pine. And the ghost’s watchful eye.