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Pittsburgh's Voices

Susheela Devi stands in a corner of the living room, beaming serenely. Her son Sanjiv sits with the men clustered around the plasma TV, watching football. Susheela pays them no heed; their talk is always of taxes and cars. In the kitchen, her daughter-in-law Rachna gossips with the young wives over Bollywood fashion. Later the sofas will be pushed aside and everyone will dance to the latest *Bhangra* tunes, including Sanjiv and Rachna - the perfect Shiv-Parvati *jodi*. The young ones have built a good life in America, and Susheela is content. She is here for the children - Aryan, her nine-month-old grandson, and Sonia, the quick-tongued third-grader who speaks American English effortlessly. Everyone exclaims over how happy they look in their Christmas card photograph. Susheela is surprised by their surprise. Happy families are meant to look picture-postcard perfect and welded together for life. Yet sometimes the joints in the welding show. When the dutiful son drinks alone in the dark, watching porn in his bedroom. When the obedient daughter-in-law bangs pots in the kitchen in silent anger. When the sunny third-grader demands gummy bears for breakfast. When the benevolent grandmother grills guests about the zeros on their paychecks. But that too is life. Not a show for the faint-hearted. If it leaves a bitter after-taste, one looks away and watches a TV soap instead.

Back in Amritsar, Satya Bhabhi rules with an iron hand. She decides everything, from the day's menu to the bedsheets in her daughter-in-law's room. A home with warring women is a bitter place. Susheela thanks her stars she shares a cordial relationship with Rachna. They joke together, and on weekends Rachna drives them down to the mall. On Saturday evenings, when lights flash red and blue on the signboards, and all around her women laugh and whisper into their phones, Susheela almost believes she is not lonely in Pittsburgh. The weekdays feel long. Aryan is a restless baby, always demanding his sunlit freedom.

It was Rachna's idea that Susheela spend some time each day at the city library, taking Aryan in his stroller. Her first day on a Pittsburgh bus was filled with strange terrors. Aryan's stroller would not fold, she could not figure out the coin slot, and the driver rolled his eyes exasperatedly. She thought her heart would stop when a large black woman came toward her.

But Mariam Akbar had come to help. She deftly folded the stroller and led Susheela to a seat. In the days that followed, they mapped each other's lives, weaving a seamless pattern through Susheela's halting English and Mariam's soft African-American burr.

"Your good name please?" "Mariam Akbar Martin. Dis mah baby Malcolm Ali, dis mah daughter Shakila. And yoh self?" "Myself Susheela Devi. In stroller my grandson Aryan. Mariam Akbar? Means Mussalmaan, no?" "Dat's right. Allah. And yoh Boodha?" "No, no. Hindu. My place Amritsar, India."

The warmth of Pittsburgh's summer seeped into their bones, melting barriers. Susheela learned of Mariam's husband Karim, his janitor's job,

their prayers after September 11th, the small mosque on Wylie Avenue, and their oldest son's brush with drugs. In turn, Mariam could picture the narrow alleys of Guru Bazaar, the red and green linoleum pattern and marble steps of the family mansion, the heavy scent of ghee at the Durgiana temple, and the gay kites endlessly crisscrossing Amritsar's skies.

Joshua Ebenezer Allen watched from across the aisle as the Black Sister spoke to the little Brown Lady. He knew all the regulars on this route but he kept away from the religious folks, the Moslems and the Pentecostals. Dadda used to say a man's religion was like his shirttails, nice to warm his britches in winter but best kept hidden. Dadda had come by steamboat from the South. Brought in as a strikebreaker by the mill bosses in the late twenties. He went into the mill and came out only for his last journey to Tunie's mortuary. Back then everything was separate - schools, churches, bars, even graveyards. Even after the rules changed, Joshua kept to the old ways. He had never stepped into Chiodo's on Eighth Avenue, though these days he often brooded over it.

His Mamma said he was born in 1936. A good year. All the babies born that year in Homestead survived. Joshua was fourteen when he went to work, wearing wooden shoes inside the furnace, removing bricks with iron tongs. Sometimes his shoes got so hot he could see black smoke rising from their tips. He was drafted, got back, joined the union, and rose from roll hand to craneman. He was there on the last shift that heavy July day in 1986 when Homestead Works finally shut down. The bosses let them off early. There was no point finishing the shift.

The other men crossed the tracks in their pickups and went into a bar on Amity street. Joshua climbed to the top of the hill to think about the strangeness of it all. His life lay spread below him. The black furnaces, rusted sheds, the guard shacks, the dock on the grey river, the railroad tracks. They said the Native Americans had lived here before the mills. When the buildings and workers were gone, perhaps the Old People would return and take back their land.

After he stopped working, Joshua did not sleep well. The demolition crews came with torches, tearing the mills down. His cousin Eddie offered to fix him up with the city's road repair crew, but Joshua refused. The silence of the furnaces bothered him. From his window he could see pinpoints of fire flickering along the mill yard and the river at night, where thieves prowled for brass and copper, like grave robbers of old. He remembered old stories. Like Big Jack Magyar, melted by a burst of molten hot steel. They said the bosses used the presses to roll Magyar into a sheet. He was part of a Pittsburgh bridge somewhere, trucks passing over him every day.

Joshua began spending long hours at the Carnegie library. They said Mr. Carnegie built it for his workers, but he made them work so hard, they never had the time to read the books. Now Joshua was reading the books, though he went real slow, a few pages each day. The Brown Lady on the bus reminded him of his Amalie, dead these thirty years. All who knew her were gone and so was her grave, buried under landfill. When he died, his memories of her would vanish too, and no one would know that she once was alive and had lived in Homestead. He began listening to the two women on the bus, sometimes interrupting with a joke or a story.

Mariam was part of a drug trial at the University of Pittsburgh for women over forty-five who had recently given birth. They paid her two hundred dollars and bus fare. She left Malcolm Ali and Shakila in Susheela's care. Susheela was happy. It was an old dream, to sit in the sun with children around her, tumbling in the grass like puppies. Yentl was an unlikely addition to their group, yet none of them could remember when she had not been a part of their days. Susheela had first noticed her wandering through Squirrel Hill, muttering in Yiddish, asking the way to Grodno, searching the faces of strangers for kindness.

Suddenly the blaze of Fall colors faded. Leaves dropped away, leaving the trees bare and black. Winter came. The snow delighted Susheela, and she spent long evenings by her window, like a snow-woman sealed in a glass paperweight. Under the street lamps, the air glowed gold, snowflakes drifting softly down. By morning the snow lay thick on rooftops and driveways, white as cream in a *handi* of *lassi*. One wintry morning Aryan took his first steps. One moment he rocked on his chubby haunches, the next he stood and staggered toward her rocking-chair, before tumbling down in a surprised, breathless heap. He was intensely amused, calling out "*Dubaya, Dubaya*", every time he tottered and fell. She thought her heart might burst with happiness.

She worried whether Mariam's heating would last the winter, whether Yentl had bread in her cupboard. She was knitting a man's sweater in green wool, with white snowflakes. Rachna had brought the wool, she probably thought it was for Sanjiv. He never wore hand-knits, and Susheela wondered if he would notice if she gave it to someone else. She did not finish the thought.

By early March the weather turned milder and the talk turned to war. Of America's war against Iraq. Mariam felt torn, Moslem and American. She worried about her older sons. If they were drafted, where would that leave her? In the dust, Joshua said dryly. Because men war and women weep. It was rich against poor, blood for oil - the way it always had been. He was going to a protest on Flagstaff Hill in Schenley Park. Perhaps they could all go, Pittsburgh's voices against the coming terror.

It was noon. Susheela had never seen such wide green lawns or a fountain so grand. People milled everywhere, English hissing around her in quick sibilant bursts. She felt slightly suffocated and wondered, for the first time, if Mariam ever felt out of place in her voluminous dresses and black headscarf, in a city where even old women wore shorts and sleeveless Tshirts, lifting their skinny arms to the sun. Chidren dotted the hill in strollers and baby slings, and people waved placards "*No War on Iraq, Don't Shed the Blood of Innocents, Not in my Name*". Susheela felt a little exposed in her maroon sari and black cardigan. She moved closer to Mariam and Joshua. Yentl twittered around the edges, a nondescript gray tone to offset their conspicuous blackness. The four of them were an island of sombre darkness in a shining white sea. Strangers nodded warmly at them. Susheela watched Joshua Ebenezer and followed his lead - nodding stiffly, letting her gaze graze past the speaker's shoulder.

To their embarrassment, they had come empty-handed to the Picnic for Peace. Mariam felt it most, as people leaned across to hand Shakila bits of donut and halves of sandwiches. Yentl ate whatever was offered, avidly

picking crumbs off her blouse like a beady-eyed sparrow. Then the leaders made their speeches. Joshua straightened up to listen, nodding gravely. Susheela could not follow the accents but it seemed a fine speech and the people clapped and cheered. "*No War in Iraq*" they chanted. "*No Blood for Oil*." Suddenly her own voice rose above the rumble. "*No War in Iraq*. *No Any War*", she cried, feeling her words echo through her blood. A young man in a black Tshirt and chains, beamed at her and flashed the peace sign.

Aryan was crying in earnest now, his screams rising sharply. Susheela rocked him, offering her finger, the corner of her sari, but nothing worked. It would take too long to push through the crowd. "Daughter will you feed him" she called to Mariam but the wind carried her words away. She leaned closer, pointing to Aryan, to her breast. Mariam nodded and held out her arms, quickly unbuttoning her blouse. At first Aryan resisted, thrashing, turning his face away. The smell of warm milk calmed him. He burrowed into Mariam's breast, sucking furiously. He fell asleep magically, turning in a moment from angry demon-child to angelic baby, with milk dribbling down his chin.

Sanjiv was pacing in the driveway when Susheela reached home, Aryan asleep in the stroller. Joshua had walked with her as far as Forbes and Beechwood, but she did not want him coming to the door. She didn't think she could cope with the tension - inviting him in for tea, hoping he would refuse, and praying her son would not choose that moment to be rude.

The storm began as soon as she sank onto the sofa. "*Mataji*, where were you? Rachna was stuck in traffic because of some stupid anti-war rally. We were frantic with worry about Aryan, wondering if we should call the police. And you just sit here, saying nothing," Sanjiv leaned close, shouting.

For a moment his mouth froze when she told him where she had been. Then he began again. "I could be deported. They could jail you too *Mataji*. Have you gone mad. What do you know of this country or this war? They say Saddam has weapons of mass destruction. We are working hard for a good life. Soon we'll shift to the suburbs, and send the children to better schools. Do you want to destroy everything? After all we have done for you. *Pitaji* would be ashamed, if he were here".

"I am not ashamed," Susheela said quietly. "A peaceful protest it was, at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919. The British shot dead everyone gathered there. Your grandfather's brother was among them. You forget. I remember". That silenced him and Susheela should have stopped there.

She went on, driven by his venom and her bitterness. "And for what should I be grateful? For bringing me here to care for your children while you and *Bahu* go to work and earn lots of money? For that one month each year you come to Amritsar, when the days fly past like wind ruffling the pages of a calendar? Time you never had, to sit with your *Pitaji* and talk, to tell him about your American life. Hurt he was, very hurt, that his surgery you did not do here. Your money he did not want, only you, his doctor-son. Your reasons, health-insurance, wealth-insurance. Just words those are to hide behind. Even come to India you did not, to the hospital. But complain he did not. Grateful he was, till the end, for your daily calls, for the air-conditioned room you arranged".

Susheela could have bitten off her tongue at the stricken look on Sanjiv's face. The same face of the little boy who used to run up to her for coins to buy lemon drops, glass marbles, paper kites. Always in a pleading hurry, always a little afraid his older brothers would teasingly snatch the kites away or his stern father would fling those lurid sweets into the gutter. She was grateful when Rachna stepped in. "*Mataji* please let it go. We were only worried for your safety. It is time for Aryan's feed, but he is sleeping so soundly. I hope you did not give him too much formula - you know how cranky he gets at night."

She should have remained silent then as well. Bottled milk, buffalo milk, another mother's milk - what did it matter so long as the child did not go hungry. But she was too tired to contain her bottled-up resentment. And then it was Rachna's turn to get red-faced, screaming about AIDS and black women. The baby refused his formula that night, and the next day screamed with colic till dinner. That too was Susheela's fault, though no one said so.

Silence settled thick upon the house on Beechwood Boulevard. Sometimes cold, when people hid behind newspapers or flipped through muted TV channels. Sometimes hot and stifling, when the air throbbed with mental conversations. When it was broken, only the children were rebuked. "Sonia, don't disturb your *Daadi*. She has no time to tell you stories. Clean your toy closet or you won't sleep at Pippi's tomorrow".

It was cold and clear when Susheela's plane left Pittsburgh. Sanjiv was on emergency duty, sparing her the bitter pangs of farewell. Rachna drove her to the airport, Aryan strapped behind. The night before she had brought several packages. Handbags, lipsticks, Tshirts, a video camera. For the relatives in Amritsar, all neatly wrapped and labeled in her practical handwriting.

The air hostess finished her safety routine and the captain announced departure. Voices faded to murmurs. Susheela stared at the blank sky. The airplane shrieked its fear as it gathered speed, ready to take off into the dull skies above. Somewhere within that fading roar, she thought she could still hear voices, Mariam, Joshua, the crowd on the hill. Until even they dissolved into the vast grey expanse.

Glossary

Jodi: couple (Hindi/Punjabi)

Handi: clay pot (Hindi/Punjabi)

Lassi: yogurt smoothie (Hindi/Punjabi)

Bahu: daughter-in-law (Hindi/Punjabi)

Mataji: mother (Hindi/Punjabi)

Pitaji: father (Hindi/Punjabi)

Daadi: paternal grandmother (Hindi/Punjabi)