

"I wasn't going to ask."

"You don't like them," I pouted. I was already a little drunk.

"They're nice clothes," he said. "I just don't like Western girls in Indian clothes, but I'm perhaps behind the times."

"Why?"

Arun paused. "Because clothes mean something here. Historically. And when you wear them it's for romance, glamour—you don't mean anything."

I stared at the patterns on my hands. Suddenly, it seemed as if Gita's sisters had played a practical joke on me, like dressing up a cat or a dog.

"I've offended you," Arun said sadly.

"No, you haven't."

"I'm always offending women. I don't know how to behave around them."

"Making fun of their clothes isn't the best strategy," I told him.

Arun rewarded me with a smile. "Have another drink. Prove we're still friends."

"I think I'm extremely drunk already," I said.

Arun seemed to consider this. "You're extremely pretty," he said. "Even in Indian clothes. And since we don't want anything to happen to you, maybe I should take you back down to the party."

To this day, I remember that as the most thrilling thing anyone has ever said to me.

I am not extremely pretty, a fact that Mrs. Chawla noticed right away. The second time she visited, I was sitting in my studio, in front of a canvas, staring out the window at Puja's children, who were playing hide-and-seek, running in and out between the rows of hanging laundry. The studio was a prefabricated one-room structure that Arun and I had assembled because the rooms in the house were too dark. There was a single bed where I used to sleep if I was working late. Now I slept here all the time.

Mrs. Chawla must have rung the doorbell and, not finding anyone, walked around to the back. Or maybe she was accustomed to coming in through the garden. I looked up and there she was, directly in front of me, peering in the window. It took me a few seconds to realize that she couldn't see through the screen at this time of day. I was wearing my painting shorts again.

"Just a minute," I called, and then

STILL-LIFE, MIDDLE HADDAM ROAD

My midget home among the trees,
is it still there? Halfhearted

tulips bending in the last of spring,
a hazy incantation over everything.

Isinglass memory spins in the window.
The meadow in the mornings was

a map of my longevity, topography
of seasonal despair and gratitude.

How deep, when I arrived, the medallion-leaved
trees drove into my heart—the oblong

pond with all its multitudes contained.
I loved the pitted driveway

leading to the house, the toppling
stones that bound the land to its parcel.

Then time went belly up. You have
mistaken the quality of light and air

as your own, it said. It said
look how easily, when you rest,

you can see the shadow sliding down
the opposite side of the cottage roof,

how clear the path to the bottom becomes.
Look how useless the solo rowboat—

robin's-egg blue—by the water's
edge appears to you now.

—Melanie Rehak

changed my mind. I had no reason to pretend.

Mrs. Chawla was dressed in moss green, and her hair was braided down her back like a girl's. She looked at the paints spread out on the table, at the straw mats on the floor, and the bed with a mosquito net, a foreigner's thing. Then she looked up at the fan, which was dusty, with a black layer of grease on one side of the blades. She sighed, and sat down at my table. "You're not sleeping here, are you?"

"Sometimes. I like it out here."

Mrs. Chawla looked shocked. "But he never slept here?"

"Mrs. Chawla—" I began. I could hear the milkman calling from his bicycle.

"I mean, I could see why you would want to sleep here now, if the two of you used to—if that was the bed where you slept, as it were."

"It's not really any of your business," I said.

Mrs. Chawla ignored me. "What I do not understand"—she paused, as if we were thinking aloud together, collaborating on a difficult puzzle—"is how he could stand to stay somewhere so dirty. He was always so particular, and his house—the house where he lived, I mean—was immaculate."

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