

**M. C. ALLAN**

## **Piñata**

A tinny electronic witch-cackle trickled from above the door frame as Sahana went into Balloonatics. Inside, the store smelled like latex and French fries, and Sahana walked tentatively between the figures flanking the entrance—life-size mannequins in need of dusting: a genie, a witch, a man in a green-and-red sweater with a mask of burns and knives for fingers. Sahana knew he was a murderer of children from a movie. Jimi had been sneakily watching it the week before, pretending to watch the baseball game, but every time she had passed carrying laundry, she could hear scary music until Jimi would sense her behind him and switch channels.

“Divyesh would not want you watching this?” she had said. She could not keep the question from her voice. “I watch stuff like this all the time,” he’d said, not turning to look at her, his skinny legs ending in huge sneakers stretched toward the screen. “You don’t know what I watch.”

And this was true: She did not know. She had taken the basket out of the room and finished sorting the laundry: jeans, t-shirts, men’s boxers and boy’s briefs, some printed on the waistbands with the red mask and blank eyes of Spiderman.

Party supplies, Divyesh had said. Maybe a baseball theme. More difficult than her usual chores, involving visits to new stores and conversations with strangers. But she had already found orange and black napkins, and paper plates with the Giants logo, and now there was the paper baseball in the window at Balloonatics. The girl clerk was eating fries from Wendy’s. She put two in her mouth and stared at Sahana, her pink cell phone tucked under her chin. She had a

bright red streak in her hair and a silver hoop through her eyebrow. Sahana waited politely, reading the messages on the balloons tied near the register, testing herself: Happy Birthday, Get Well. One black balloon lettered in dripping white text mystified her: Over the Hill.

“No way,” the girl said into the phone. “You have got to be shitting me.”

“Excuse me please?” Sahana finally said.

The girl raised her eyebrows. “How much is this?” Sahana asked, pointing to the baseball in the window. The girl mouthed twenty.

Sahana went to look closer. The baseball was made of white crepe paper, wrapped around an inner structure. A red ribbon of stitches was threaded into the paper itself, curling around the sphere. It rotated slowly in the dim afternoon sun. Sahana reached to lift it and was surprised by its lightness. She could see it already, the centerpiece of the table.

She went back to the register. “I will buy it,” she said to the girl, who raised her finger for Sahana to wait.

“Yeah,” the girl said into the phone. “Yeah, he’s being a giant asshole. Can you hang on?” She put her fingers over the phone. “I can give you five dollars off if you buy the candy too. But you have to buy at least two pounds. Fiv-ninety-nine a pound.”

“Candy?”

“Back there,” the girl flapped her hand toward the back of the store. “Yeah, I’m here,” she said into the phone.

Sahana gripped her purse-strap and walked towards the wall, where radiant plastic silos of candy stood gleaming. She recognized a few—squares of Ghirardelli chocolate, discs of butterscotch, the silver-foil chocolates called kisses. At the cocktail party a few months before, there had been many kinds of candy set out in bowls. Sahana had planted herself near one while Divyesh mingled, though he kept coming back to check on her, placing his hand on her shoulder to introduce her to people who worked at his company.

At first the other guests just circled around smiling, but then a man and woman came up to talk to her, asking how she liked San Francisco, was this her first time in the States, had she been to the Taj Mahal.

Later one woman slid over, clinking the ice cubes in her glass and leaning in close. She had a short haircut and her bangs had been pinched into sharp teeth across her forehead. She kept smiling at Sahana, a smile that felt like pity. She kept saying how difficult it had been for Jimi and “Div,” looking at Divyesh across the room, and Sahana, following her gaze, watched her new husband hovering over the shrimp puffs and cheese tarts. His hand hovered and pulled back, reached and stopped again, until finally it descended and plucked up a baby carrot. He ate it in a series of tiny bites.

“She was so young, you know,” the woman sighed. “So pretty and funny. I cried my eyes out. It just shows, you have to feel your boobies! All the women in my family bite the big one early.” She wiggled her shoulders as if to free herself from the thought. “Anyway, I kept telling Div he had to get back in the saddle,” she said. “That’s what I did, when my husband left. You can’t sit around and mope.” Sahana didn’t understand all her words, but she saw the way the woman looked at Divyesh, and the way Divyesh looked back. Sahana retreated to the bowl of candy: small disks of mint and dark chocolate wrapped in foil. Eating them kept her mouth full so that when others approached her to ask questions, she could point to her mouth and smile while she figured out the words to make up her reply.

There were slots at the bottoms of the silos of candy and scoops to rake them out. Sahana glanced over at the cashier, who had finally hung up. Sahana unfolded a plastic bag and scooped a few peanut cups into it.

The cashier wandered over slowly, her hands in the pockets of her store apron. “Do you need help?”

“Yes please,” said Sahana.

The girl took the bag and leaned over to scoop more peanut cups. “What else do you want?”

Sahana did not know what candies Jimi and Divyesh liked. “Have you ... I think they are named peppermint pats?”

“You mean peppermint patties? Yeah. Not York though,” the girl said, scanning the silos. It sounded like it was bad to not be York, but what was York? It sounded like yuck, which Jimi had explained the week she’d arrived, when she was looking at the cleaners under the kitchen sink. Some had stickers on them shaped like green frowning faces. Jimi said, That’s Mr. Yuck. They make those to tell retards from India not to drink the Windex.

The girl scooped silver-wrapped disks into the bag. “That’s about a pound—what else?” Her eyes were a deep, kohl-ringed green and Sahana did not want to see pity blossoming there. It was the same look Radha—with her quick hands and loud mouth—had given her when Sahana had come to the school where they taught and told her: The man I told you about wants to marry me.

“How about jellybeans?” the salesgirl suggested. “Kids love these—they have lots of weird flavors.” She reached into one of the canisters and put a small green candy in Sahana’s hand. “Here, try this.”

Sahana put the candy into her mouth. She bit down and a strong peppery flavor flooded across her tongue. She winced in surprise—she knew the flavor, but then it dissolved into a chewy sugar and vanished.

“That’s jalapeno,” said the girl, grinning. “These things are a trip. Here, try these two together.” She dropped a green and a red into Sahana’s hand, and Sahana obediently chewed them up. “That’s green apple and cinnamon together.”

“Yes, I will take some,” Sahana said, and the girl pulled out another bag and went along the canisters scooping out portions of each color—grayish green, bright green with

yellow spots, cream with brown flecks. Sahana admired the red stripe in her hair. She was kinder than she had first seemed, and something in her words made Sahana feel how easy it would be, one day, to speak English. She would not even have to think; it would be automatic, like swallowing food.

“Please,” she said suddenly, pointing to the black balloon near the register, “can you tell me, that balloon, what is the meaning?”

“Which one?” the girl asked, turning. “Oh, over the hill? It means old. People give it as a joke. It’s like saying your life is over and soon you’ll be dead.” She lifted the two bags of candy. “OK, I think that’ll do it.”

Tossed in together, the jellybeans looked like jewels. Sahana imagined them sitting in glass bowls in the back yard with the sun shining through them. The girl picked one from the bag. “Here—you gotta try this, it’s the weirdest one.” Before Sahana could protest, she had pushed a light-yellow bean into her mouth. For a moment Sahana tasted the girl’s fingers, a trace of lotion, but when she bit down her mouth flooded with popcorn. It made her think of the theater where she and Radha used to see movies, Bollywood hits and ones from America. When they were little there was one with Robert Redford where he played a baseball player shot by a crazy woman. Afterward Radha talked about how people in American movies always shot each other for no reason. But what Sahana remembered came later in the movie, when the man hit a ball so hard that it smashed the lights over the field and made sparks fall, yet the baseball just kept on going, as though it had infinite space.

Before Sahana was born, her father had gone to visit a cousin in Arizona, and many times he’d told her about the Grand Canyon, a hole in the earth big enough to hold a sea. She begged again and again to see his pictures. Every time he told her about standing on the edge with the sun coming over the stone, she felt the space pouring into her. She only asked

him to tell her the story when they were alone. If her sisters and her mother and the ladies in her uncle's shop in Chandni Chowk heard it, she knew they would get into the space and fill it up.

Many years later, when her father introduced her to Divyesh, Sahana did not really see Divyesh Singh, widower and father, his prominent eyes behind his glasses underlined with crescents of sweat. She heard that he lived in America and from there saw only the canyon, layers of light and rock in her father's photos, cleaner than the smoggy sunsets over Delhi. When her father told her that Divyesh's family wanted him to remarry, the words were like a package she had eagerly been expecting.

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But in San Francisco it rained most of the time, and the streets filled up with fog. The sunlight that came through was pale and damp, like something that lived in a cave. Divyesh was more silent than he had seemed in Delhi, his son was a terrible, cruel boy, and the English lessons she had daydreamed through had not prepared her for how it was spoken here, quickly and with mysterious inflections. The house they lived in was small and modern, so close to the next house that Jimi could climb out onto the roof and pee on the tiny herb garden that belonged to their lady neighbor. Divyesh did not know he did this, but Sahana had seen the streams arcing past the kitchen window. The lady next door, a stout Latina who worked on the city council, thought that the urine smell was due to homeless people passing through the alley. She had left a note recently, asking them to report strangers they saw.

A few weeks after Sahana arrived, Divyesh taught her to drive his little Toyota, guiding her slowly around the streets. He showed where to catch the streetcar, and the grocery store where she could buy Jimi's terrible foods—noo-

dles with orange powder, cereal shaped like letters, trays holding frozen rafts of brown meat and potatoes. Once he had provided instructions on the care and feeding of his son, Divyesh withdrew. He worked long hours at a software company and was usually not home until after nine. He seemed pleased to find a clean house when he arrived, but his expression when he saw Sahana was always mildly puzzled, as though he'd arrived to find the furniture had been moved just slightly.

In the evenings Sahana watched television in their bedroom and the boy watched television in his. Even once he got home, Divyesh would often continue working; she would feel the weight of his body sink the bed late in the night. She had been frightened about sleeping in bed with a man, about what he would do to her. But as months passed and he showed no interest in anything but sleep, she began to think he would never do anything at all.

In the mornings she would set out Jimi's cereal and make coffee. She now knew that Divyesh liked his coffee black, that he slept on his back with his hands clasped against his stomach as though it hurt him, that he did not snore. When he was home, he often stared into space; Sahana frequently had to repeat her questions about which food to purchase or how to get to the library. She came to prefer looking on the Internet; when he did not answer her, she felt as though her voice might be only in her head. The houses around them were so close, and yet no one ever came to visit. If there was a fire, if someone came to rob them and she called for help, would anyone hear?

Everywhere she moved in the house, she brushed against Divyesh's dead wife. Ambuja had been small and slim, with a cheerful face and stylish hair tinted burgundy. To Sahana, she looked impossibly American. She had cooked a turkey at Thanksgiving—there were pictures of a glistening roast in the family album—and cheered at Jimi's baseball games and attended meetings with his teachers. She

had died nearly three years ago, yet sometimes when Sahana opened doors in the house, she felt as though Ambuja might speak, a voice out of the mayonnaise jar or a giggle from one of Jimi's baseball cleats. Strands of her hair still appeared in nooks and crannies of the house. Sahana battled the hair with the snout of the vacuum cleaner, but tiny tumbleweeds returned, sliding across the hallway floor or drifting down from the top of the refrigerator when Sahana dusted.

In the hours while Divyesh was at work and Jimi was at school, Sahana took walks around the neighborhood. There was a bakery at the corner of Stockton and Filbert where she would buy raisin bread and sit in Washington Square and nibble hour by hour, reading American romance novels and writing emails to her mother and to Radha. She wrote about learning to drive and how empty the streets were but still everyone complained about the traffic. She made the mistake of mentioning Ambuja's hair to her mother, who wrote back that the wife's jealous ghost must be in the house. You must encourage your husband to offer rice; it is late but perhaps it will be accepted. The thought of suggesting this ritual to Divyesh—while he was downloading the latest security patch or reading baseball scores in the morning paper—made Sahana wish Radha were there to laugh with her. Radha would make a joke of it; she was always able to tilt a moment that teetered between bitter and sweet in the better direction. Radha would understand: It was Sahana who felt like a ghost.

Every day, Sahana walked the steep streets and alleys. She suspected she had come to know the neighborhood better than Divyesh and Jimi, who had lived there for years. She knew the large red dog with the pointed ear that stood against its fence and barked, the rundown apartments where a sign in a second-story window advertised, in blue curlicue letters, "Madame Mona, fortune/ massage/ taxes/ BILINGUAL," the yards thick with flowers and birdbaths



where she often saw green parrots splashing. They looked like parrots she'd seen around Delhi. The man at the bakery said they had escaped from a crate at the airport and made themselves at home. Sahana felt sorry for them, gaudy and freakish even in the lush little gardens. But she felt sorrier for herself: the parrots had each other, a group to chatter with. She had an empty house, the creeping hair of a dead woman, and a man and a boy living in separate worlds, too far away to help her find her way through this one.

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She had hidden the party supplies in the bedroom closet, but took them out when Divyesh got home. He needed a haircut; pieces of gray were growing in over his ears. Sahana felt the energy of her day drain from her, but she smiled deliberately as she laid out the bounty on the bed. She saved the paper baseball for last. He smiled when he saw it. "You found some great stuff," he said, lifting the baseball and tossing it upwards. "Jimi's will love the piñata."

"Pen-yatta? That is the name?" she asked.

Divyesh nodded. "They're big at kid's parties," he said. She looked at the hair over his ears and thought I could cut it. She had cut her father's hair; she had liked the feel of it in her fingers and the scissors' soft creak against each strand. Her father had made a big fuss about how much money she saved him. She knew it was just twenty rupees, but she liked that he acted like it was more. It seemed something she should offer her husband, but she said nothing. It was one thing to lie in bed as they slept, but to stand close with both of them awake, with her hands on the back of his neck—no. Even the light touch he gave her now, putting his hand on her shoulder to guide her downstairs into the kitchen, did not feel comfortable.

Jimi was staring at wrestlers on TV and drawing elaborate figures with his finger in the ketchup and mustard

that had dripped from his hot dog. “Are you looking forward to your birthday?” Divyesh asked Jimi, pulling a granola bar from the cabinet and putting a cup of water in the microwave for tea.

Jimi shrugged but didn’t take his eyes from the television. “I guess. Paul’s coming.”

“And Tina, too, right?” said Divyesh. He glanced at Sahana and his left eye made a strange motion, as though it had meant to wink conspiratorially but remembered in time who it would be winking at.

Sahana made the words in her head. “I have brought decorations for your party.”

“Bought, not brought,” Jimi said. “Besides, my dad bought them. You don’t have any money.”

At least once a day Sahana reminded herself that he had lost his mother and was to be pitied.

“Jimi,” Divyesh said, “Sahana has been out all day looking for stuff for your party.”

The shrug again. The microwave beeped and Divyesh pulled his mug out and added a bag of chamomile tea. “Well, I am happy to look forward to it,” Sahana said brightly. “I am going to prepare a very good meal.”

“That’s wonderful,” Divyesh said, his voice like a flash of mirror from a far-off hill. “What are you going to make?”

“I am going to make naan and rice and maybe pakoras and raita for the side, but for the main dish I am make something very wonderful,” she said, picturing the rolling, fragrant bubbles bursting in the orange velvety sauce, Divyesh and Jimi delighted, the other mothers envious. “It is called murgh makhani.”

Divyesh nodded. “I haven’t had that in years. There’s a restaurant near work that makes it, but it’s not very good.”

“And I am thinking now,” Sahana said, realizing with delight, “it is even orange and black, like the Giants!”

“No way,” Jimi said, shaking his head emphatically.

“I don’t want nasty Indian food. My friends’ll be grossed out.”

“Do you even know what it is?” Divyesh said, frowning.

“I know I won’t like it,” Jimi said.

Sahana saw Divyesh’s face tighten, and for a moment saw what he might have been before his wife’s death: a father who would correct his son’s rudeness. “Jimi, *murgh makhani* is chicken in tomato sauce. It’s good—you’ll like it.”

“I want pizza,” Jimi said. “We can order pizzas from Cybelle’s and it’ll be great.”

“You can have pizza any time.”

“I don’t care,” Jimi said sullenly. “That curry stuff looks like diarrhea. Deepak Napesh, his family eats that food. The kids at school talk about how he smells.”

Sahana inhaled, more surprised than hurt. Divyesh’s eyes flicked from Sahana to Jimi. “Jim, you need to go to your room.”

“Fine,” Jimi said, stomping into the kitchen, where he dropped his plate into the sink with a clatter. “Mom would’ve let me. But it’s only my birthday—why should it matter what I want?” He flew up the stairs. The ceiling above shuddered as his body landed on his bed. Divyesh sighed. “Ignore him. Make what you planned,” he said. “I’m sure it will be very good.”

He patted the table gently, like a pet, then took his tea upstairs to his office. One of the wrestlers on television hit the other with a chair and fireworks came shooting out of the corners of the mat. Sahana remembered: how her mother had always smelled of the buttery ovals of *puri* she made during the day. Her father smelled of the leather chair he sat in. Radha smelled like the children she taught—sometimes sweet, sometimes sour and milky. But if you ate foods different than everyone else, it must be different. It must get into your pores. She remembered the first time she had met

Divyesh in her father's office in Delhi. She had noticed his smell—not a bad smell, not strong, but different, as though his hair and clothes and skin had been scrubbed in strange bread and meat. Even dressed in a kurta and pants, anyone standing close would have known he did not belong there.

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The morning of the party, Sahana walked, the route familiar, the adrenaline of her nervousness carrying her to the green space below Coit Tower. The fog was light on the bay; in the distance she could see the twin peaks of the bridge rising from the mist like fins. When she returned to the house it was nearly nine-thirty; there was a note from Divyesh that he and Jimi had gone to pick up the cake and would be back before the party started.

Sahana began cooking. She minced the onions and ginger and peppers, adding garam masala she had blended, blanching tomatoes and sliding off their skins, adding the pieces of the tandoori chicken she had cooked beneath the broiler the day before. Soon she had rice pulau pillowing in the oven, dotted with cloves and peas and cashews, and dough for naan puffing up like a balloon. She minced the coriander, inhaling its soapy scent as it mixed with the sauce simmering on the stove. She stirred the simmering pot, moving the chicken around and releasing a sweet, warm wave of scent: tomatoes, ginger, butter.

She had set out plates and placed the baseball centerpiece and bowls of candy on the picnic table in the backyard when she heard the doorbell. The clock on the microwave read 11:56. She went to the radio to turn down the volume on the Giants game, then went to the door, her face moist from the steam of the kitchen.

There was a woman on the step, vaguely familiar, wearing a dress that seemed to have ties everywhere—under her breasts, at her waist, up the arms—and a silk scarf at her

throat. She was short and curvy with short slick hair and a smile full of teeth and eagerness. Sahana thought perhaps she was an Avon lady; one had come by the house a few weeks earlier. This woman had the same bright look of interest, as if she had no wish for anything but Sahana's happiness.

"Hello?" Sahana said, offering a smile.

"Hi there!" the woman said. "I'm Charlie Brennan, remember? Sahannah? We met at the office party a while back? I'm a friend of Divyesh's—my son Jason goes to school with Jimi?"

Boobies. Back in the saddle. The sharp points of hair across her forehead. Sahana remembered. "Oh—you are here for the party!" She stepped back, still confused. "You are before time."

Charlie laughed. "Early! Yes, guilty as charged. I came to help! Divyesh asked me to help. That's my son Jason." She pointed towards a minivan, where a dark-haired boy in a t-shirt was pulling a gift wrapped in blue and red paper from the back seat.

"Oh," Sahana said, stepping back to let them in. "That is kind! Come in please."

"Let me just run out and get our things," Charlie said. She patted the boy as he passed her into the house, his arms wrapped awkwardly around Jimi's present. Sahana watched as Charlie clicked down the walk to the minivan and opened the back. She stood up balancing two large plastic-wrapped platters. She came back smiling and swept into the house, the little ties on her dress fluttering. The platters, Sahana saw, held sandwiches and fried chicken.

Sahana followed her to the kitchen, her brain racing for words. "Oh, I am not—you did bring food? I made this morning food for the party?"

"That's okay," Charlie sang, bobbing her head back and forth. "Jimi mentioned that you might need some help. You can never have too many munchies for these things."

She set the platters down and went back past Sahana, smiling her dimpled smile.

Sahana went to the stove. She picked up the spoon and slowly stirred the bubbling pot of red sauce. “These are such cute decorations!” Charlie exclaimed as she came back, carrying a platter of brownies and several bags of potato chips. “I love the baseball. Shall I get it set up for you once I put the food out?” She patted Sahana’s shoulder. “I can’t believe you tried to cook! You’re too sweet! I always go to Whole Foods for parties. They make great chicken.”

Sahana saw clearly: With the platters on the table, there would be no room for the rice and plates of naan she had envisioned, the pot in the center. She would have to serve the chicken in the kitchen and bring it out plate by plate. She set the spoon down onto the stovetop. Red sauce pooled around it.

She went upstairs slowly to the bedroom, trying to control her fury. She stood at the window and watched Charlie setting the napkins and paper plates around the table. The paper baseball sat in the center. The gray light of the overcast day seemed to make the baseball glow whiter. She knew she should go get the naan into the oven, but she didn’t feel like going back downstairs to smile and nod and pull the dough into loaves.

She heard the front door open: Divyesh and Jimi returning with the cake. She listened: running feet, the sliding door opening. Then in the back yard: “Hi, Charlie!”

“Hello, birthday boy!”

“Oh yeah, you brought brownies! Hey, Jason.”

Sahana heard footsteps on the stairs. She turned her back. She heard the door open but she kept watching the backyard, blinking carefully. Jimi was peeling back plastic wrap on the brownies.

“What’s going on?” Divyesh asked.

Sahana shrugged. Why was he asking her?

“Sahana, please come speak to me,” Divyesh said.

Sahana turned to look at him. Her face made him take a step back. “When did they get here?”

“Ten minutes before,” she said.

“What did she say?”

“You ask her to come early. Jimi tells her to bring food.”

Divyesh’s eyes narrowed. “Goddammit. Jimi.” He half turned toward the bedroom door, then turned back. “Sahana, I did not ask that woman to come early. Sometimes Jimi—” Anger had sharpened his features, and with the arrival of his anger, hers vanished. Its departure made her feel almost regretful: For perhaps the first time since her arrival, she and Divyesh had been united in a feeling. “Really,” he said. “Give me five minutes—I’ll get her out of here.”

“No, no,” Sahana said, stretching her hand out to stop him. She could imagine the results: Jimi pouting as other children arrived, Charlie telling Divyesh’s colleagues how his new wife had forced him to break up a children’s party over food. “Let Jimi to have his party,” she said. “This is what he wanted.”

“But you’ve been working all morning,” Divyesh protested.

“It does not matter. You will bring it to work. It will be leftover.” They turned together to look out the window. Charlie was standing near the table, holding the paper baseball and laughing as she watched Jimi roll pieces of brownie into little balls and toss them into Jason’s mouth. “I don’t want him to get the idea that this is OK,” Divyesh said. “Or her. She is full of herself. She is a crazy woman. She once put a pair of underwear in my mailbox at work.”

Sahana giggled. The thought of Charlie leaving underwear in Divyesh’s mailbox amazed her; it was like something in a movie.

Divyesh glared. “It’s not a joke. They had kittens on them.”

“I am sorry,” Sahana said, composing her face. “But do not make her go. It will embarrass her. And Jimi hates I am here already.”

The doorbell rang but no one in the yard moved to answer. “I should get the door,” Divyesh said. He hesitated, turned towards the stairs. His hand moved to his hair and grabbed a bunch of curls, silver and black hair entwined with the tight hooks of his knuckles. “I think you are a very kind person,” he said, and turned down the stairs.

In a few seconds he reappeared in the yard below with new guests, a man and woman and a girl. He gestured them toward the candy and then stepped toward Charlie. He took her by the elbow and led her to the corner of the yard. His mouth was a straight, sharp line, barely open, as though he had a torrent of words but was releasing only a trickle. Charlie’s face cramped into a pout. Full of herself. It was a good phrase: Sahana imagined Charlie overflowing with Charlie, so full to the brim with Charlie that there was no room for anything else. But she felt ashamed. She had come here to fill herself in just such a manner, to find a space, but had found her space filled with this unhappy man and his son. Her stomach clenched and she settled herself on the bed. She could hear more people arriving—the doorbell rang and the noise from the yard grew, kids’ voices drifting up. She could hear Charlie telling people to help themselves to foods. She settled her face into the coolness of her pillow. A few minutes later she opened her eyes to see Divyesh coming in, carrying a tray of the food she had made. He set it on the rug near the bed, and sat cross-legged before it and spooned the rice onto two plates. Sahana joined silently, watching as he ladled chicken and red sauce over the rice. He spooned some raita onto his plate, and then handed her a jar. Sahana took it, surprised. She had not been able to find lime pickle.

“I picked it up after we got the cake—there’s a place on Valencia you can get all sorts of stuff,” Divyesh said. “I’ll



show you this weekend.” He speared a bite of chicken and put it in his mouth. “Wow. Good.”

“Thank you,” Sahana said.

“I’ll get the naan,” he said, moving to get to his feet, but Sahana put her hand on his knee, lightly.

“Let me get it,” she said. She went downstairs into the kitchen. In the oven, the ovals of bread had puffed up nicely and she pulled them from the rack onto a small plate. Outside the back door, kids and parents were milling about, and Jimi was talking to a girl. Something looked strange about him. She thought perhaps his hair seemed spikier, but then she realized it was the first time she had seen him around other children. His eyes and mouth were relaxed; he seemed like another boy, one she had not yet met. She felt like a spy, but there was no embarrassment in it. She was pleased to see what he’d been concealing: he was capable of happiness. Charlie and another woman were saying something, moving around the kids as though herding geese. Sahana couldn’t figure out what they were doing, but she suddenly noticed that Charlie had moved the baseball from the table. It was now hanging from a tree branch like a chandelier. It looked good there, Sahana had to admit, spinning mid-air. The kids were gathering around it, laughing and pointing as Charlie untied the scarf she’d been wearing around her neck. She moved, shaking her hips like a dancing girl, fluttering the scarf in front of her face—full of herself!—to where Jimi was talking to one of the girls. She said something that made him roll his eyes, but he grinned widely when Charlie slipped the scarf over his eyes and knotted it behind his head. What was she doing? Everyone was laughing.

“Divyesh?” she called up the stairs. There was no answer. Outside, the kids were watching Jimi as he shifted blindly back and forth beneath the tree. Charlie stepped away, clapping, and bent over to pick up something at her feet. It wasn’t until Jimi stepped out further into the center of

the circled group that Sahana saw that Charlie had handed him his baseball bat. Before Sahana could move, Jimi took a wild swing at the hanging baseball.

Sahana's puzzlement turned immediately to anger. "Divyesh!" she screamed, leaping towards the glass door. Didn't the idiot woman know that it was delicate, made of paper? But this was a person who would leave underwear in a man's mailbox!

Jimi turned blindly, swinging the bat over his head, the kids backing away, the baseball spinning out wildly from a glancing blow. "Divyesh!" Sahana screamed again. She grabbed the handle of the sliding door and plunged out into the yard. The kids and parents turned towards her scream, their faces lit with surprise, and Jimi blindly swung again, the bat barely missing the one boy's head before making solid contact with the baseball, which let out an oomph of released air. It swung wide on its string, arcing out under the tree, and from the gaping hole in its side, a river of color showered over the lawn, drops of green and red and orange and blue, discs of butterscotch and peppermint patties, and the kids turned away from Sahana and screamed and lunged, diving at the ground, scrambling for the candy raining out in swoops of color as the baseball continued to swing.

Sahana watched in astonishment as Jimi tore the scarf from his eyes and plunged into the heap of children piled up and scrabbling at the ground beneath the tree. She could see Charlie looking her way and whispering to one of the other women. She was starting to see how this life would be: no canyon, but a bombardment of women who gave underwear, parrots where none should be, boys peeing from rooftops, candy inside baseballs, icebergs of bland beef and sparks of lime pickle, all of it reeling out around her. She turned to the house to look for Divyesh, to ask him to explain, and found him standing in the door, his eyes lapsing from fear into amusement as he took in the scene. She did not care when he started laughing; she cared only to see that he'd been close enough, after all, to hear her calling.