

Unaccustomed Earth

After her mother's death, Ruma's father retired from the pharmaceutical company where he had worked for many decades and began traveling in Europe, a continent he'd never seen. In the past year he had visited France, Holland, and most recently Italy. They were package tours, traveling in the company of strangers, riding by bus through the countryside, each meal and museum and hotel prearranged. He was gone for two, three, sometimes four weeks at a time. When he was away Ruma did not hear from him. Each time, she kept the printout of his flight information behind a magnet on the door of the refrigerator, and on the days he was scheduled to fly she watched the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world.

Occasionally a postcard would arrive in Seattle, where Ruma and Adam and their son Akash lived. The postcards showed the facades of churches, stone fountains, crowded piazzas, terracotta rooftops mellowed by late afternoon sun. Nearly fifteen years had passed since Ruma's only European adventure, a month-long EuroRail holiday she'd taken with two girlfriends after college, with money saved up from her salary as a paralegal. She'd slept in shabby pensions, practicing a frugality that

was foreign to her at this stage of her life, buying nothing but variations of the same postcards her father sent now. Her father wrote succinct, impersonal accounts of the things he had seen and done: "Yesterday the Uffizi Gallery. Today a walk to the other side of the Arno. A trip to Siena scheduled tomorrow." Occasionally there was a sentence about the weather. But there was never a sense of her father's presence in those places. Ruma was reminded of the telegrams her parents used to send to their relatives long ago, after visiting Calcutta and safely arriving back in Pennsylvania.

The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had received from her father. In her thirty-eight years he'd never had any reason to write to her. It was a one-sided correspondence; his trips were brief enough so that there was no time for Ruma to write back, and besides, he was not in a position to receive mail on his end. Her father's penmanship was small, precise, slightly feminine; her mother's had been a jumble of capital and lowercase, as though she'd learned to make only one version of each letter. The cards were addressed to Ruma; her father never included Adam's name, or mentioned Akash. It was only in his closing that he acknowledged any personal connection between them. "Be happy, love Baba," he signed them, as if the attainment of happiness were as simple as that.

In August her father would be going away again, to Prague. But first he was coming to spend a week with Ruma and see the house she and Adam had bought on the Eastside of Seattle. They'd moved from Brooklyn in the spring, for Adam's job. It was her father who suggested the visit, calling Ruma as she was making dinner in her new kitchen, surprising her. After her mother's death it was Ruma who assumed the duty of speaking to her father every evening, asking how his day had gone. The calls were less frequent now, normally once a week on Sunday afternoons. "You're always welcome here, Baba," she'd told her father on the phone. "You know you don't have to ask."

Her mother would not have asked. "We're coming to see you in July," she would have informed Ruma, the plane tickets already in hand. There had been a time in her life when such presumptuousness would have angered Ruma. She missed it now.

Adam would be away that week, on another business trip. He worked for a hedge fund and since the move had yet to spend two consecutive weeks at home. Tagging along with him wasn't an option. He never went anywhere interesting—usually towns in the Northwest or Canada where there was nothing special for her and Akash to do. In a few months, Adam assured her, the trips would diminish. He hated stranding Ruma with Akash so often, he said, especially now that she was pregnant again. He encouraged her to hire a babysitter, even a live-in if that would be helpful. But Ruma knew no one in Seattle, and the prospect of finding someone to care for her child in a strange place seemed more daunting than looking after him on her own. It was just a matter of getting through the summer—in September, Akash would start at a preschool. Besides, Ruma wasn't working and couldn't justify paying for something she now had the freedom to do.

In New York, after Akash was born, she'd negotiated a part-time schedule at her law firm, spending Thursdays and Fridays at home in Park Slope, and this had seemed like the perfect balance. The firm had been tolerant at first, but it had not been so easy, dealing with her mother's death just as an important case was about to go to trial. She had died on the operating table, of heart failure; anesthesia for routine gallstone surgery had triggered anaphylactic shock.

After the two weeks Ruma received for bereavement, she couldn't face going back. Overseeing her clients' futures, preparing their wills and refinancing their mortgages, felt ridiculous to her, and all she wanted was to stay home with Akash, not just Thursdays and Fridays but every day. And then, mi-

raculously, Adam's new job came through, with a salary generous enough for her to give notice. It was the house that was her work now: leafing through the piles of catalogues that came in the mail, marking them with Post-its, ordering sheets covered with dragons for Akash's room.

"Perfect," Adam said, when Ruma told him about her father's visit. "He'll be able to help you out while I'm gone." But Ruma disagreed. It was her mother who would have been the helpful one, taking over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes, throwing loads of laundry into the machine. Ruma had never spent a week alone with her father. When her parents visited her in Brooklyn, after Akash was born, her father claimed an armchair in the living room, quietly combing through the *Times*, occasionally tucking a finger under the baby's chin but behaving as if he were waiting for the time to pass.

Her father lived alone now, made his own meals. She could not picture his surroundings when they spoke on the phone. He'd moved into a one-bedroom condominium in a part of Pennsylvania Ruma did not know well. He had pared down his possessions and sold the house where Ruma and her younger brother Romi had spent their childhood, informing them only after he and the buyer went into contract. It hadn't made a difference to Romi, who'd been living in New Zealand for the past two years, working on the crew of a German documentary filmmaker. Ruma knew that the house, with the rooms her mother had decorated and the bed in which she'd cooked, doing crossword puzzles and the stove on which she'd cooked, was too big for her father now. Still, the news had been shocking, wiping out her mother's presence just as the surgeon had. She knew her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty; in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her. Her father had never mentioned the possibility, and after her mother's death it

hadn't been feasible; their old apartment was too small. But in Seattle there were rooms to spare, rooms that stood empty and without purpose.

Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January, conceived just before the move. She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse. It was a dilemma Adam didn't understand. Whenever she brought up the issue, he pointed out the obvious, that she already had a small child to care for, another on the way. He reminded her that her father was in good health for his age, content where he was. But he didn't object to the idea of her father living with them. His willingness was meant kindly, generously, an example of why she loved Adam, and yet it worried her. Did it not make a difference to him? She knew he was trying to help, but at the same time she sensed that his patience was wearing thin. By allowing her to leave her job, splurging on a beautiful house, agreeing to having a second baby, Adam was doing everything in his power to make Ruma happy. But nothing was making her happy; recently, in the course of conversation, he'd pointed that out, too.

How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check. He had never visited the Pacific Northwest, never appreciated the staggering breadth of his adopted land. He had flown across America only once before, the time his wife booked tickets to Calcutta on Royal Thai Airlines, via Los Angeles, rather than traveling east as they normally did. That journey was endless, four seats, he still remembered,

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among the smokers at the very back of the plane. None of them had the energy to visit any sights in Bangkok during their layover, sleeping instead in the hotel provided by the airline. His wife, who had been most excited to see the Floating Market, slept even through dinner, for he remembered a meal in the hotel with only Romi and Ruma, in a solarium overlooking a garden, tasting the spiciest food he'd ever had in his life as mosquitoes swarmed angrily behind his children's faces. No matter how they went, those trips to India were always epic, and he still recalled the anxiety they provoked in him, having to pack so much luggage and getting it all to the airport, keeping documents in order and ferrying his family safely so many thousands of miles. But his wife had lived for these journeys, and until both his parents died, a part of him lived for them, too. And so they'd gone in spite of the expense, in spite of the sadness and shame he felt each time he returned to Calcutta, in spite of the fact that the older his children grew, the less they wanted to go.

He stared out the window at a shelf of clouds that was like miles and miles of densely packed snow one could walk across. The sight filled him with peace; this was his life now, the ability to do as he pleased, the responsibility of his family absent just as all else was absent from the unmolested vision of the clouds. Those returns to India had been a fact of life for him, and for all their Indian friends in America. Mrs. Bagchi was an exception. She had married a boy she'd loved since girlhood, but after two years of marriage he was killed in a scooter accident. At twenty-six she moved to America, knowing that otherwise her parents would try to marry her off again. She lived on Long Island, an anomaly, an Indian woman alone. She had completed her doctorate in statistics and taught since the seventies at Stonybrook University, and in over thirty years she had gone back to Calcutta only to attend her parents'

funerals. Meenakshi was her name, and though he used it now when he addressed her, in his thoughts he continued to think of her as Mrs. Bagchi.

Being the only two Bengalis in the tour group, naturally they'd struck up a conversation. They started eating together, sitting next to one another on the bus. Because of their common appearance and language, people mistook them for husband and wife. Initially there was nothing romantic; neither of them had been interested in anything like that. He enjoyed Mrs. Bagchi's company, knowing that at the end of a few weeks she would board a separate plane and disappear. But after Italy he'd begun thinking of her, looking forward to receiving her e-mails, checking his computer five or six times a day. He searched MapQuest for the town she lived in to see how long it would take him to drive to her home, though they had agreed, for the time being, to see each other only when they were abroad. Part of the route was familiar to him, the same path that he and his wife used to take to visit Ruma in Brooklyn.

He would soon see Mrs. Bagchi again, in Prague; this time, they'd agreed, they would share a room, and they were thinking, in the winter, of taking a cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. She was adamant about not marrying, about never sharing her home with another man, conditions which made the prospect of her companionship all the more appealing. He closed his eyes and thought of her face, which was still full, though he guessed she was probably almost sixty, only five or six years younger than his wife. She wore Western clothing, cardigans and black pull-on slacks and styled her thick dark hair in a bun. It was her voice that appealed to him most, well modulated, her words always measured, as if there were only a limited supply of things she was willing to say on any given day. Perhaps, because she expected so little, he was generous with her, attentive in a way he'd never been in his marriage. How shy he'd felt, asking

Mrs. Bagchi for the first time in Amsterdam, after they had a tour of the Anne Frank House, to pose for a photograph in front of a canal.

Ruma had offered to drive to the airport and greet her father, but he insisted on renting a car and following directions off the Internet. When she heard the sound of tires on the gravel drive, she started picking up the toys that were scattered across the living-room floor, putting away the plastic animals and closing the books that Akash insisted on leaving open to his favorite pages. "Turn off the television, Peanut," she called out to him now. "Don't sit so close to the screen. Come, Dadu's here."

Akash was lying motionless on the floor, on his stomach, his chin cupped in his hands. He was a perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam, his curly hair they'd never cut and his skin a warm gold, the faint hair on his legs gold as well, reminding her of a little lion. Even his face, with its slanted, narrow green eyes, had a faintly leonine aspect. He was only three, but sometimes she already felt the resistance, the profound barrier she assumed would set in with adolescence. After the move he'd grown difficult. It was a combination, she knew, of the new surroundings, and her lack of energy, and Adam being away so much. There were times Akash would throw himself without warning on the ground, the body she'd nurtured inside of her utterly alien, hostile. Either that or he was clingy, demanding that she hold him while she was trying to make a meal.

Though she'd mentioned nothing about the baby, she was convinced that he'd figured it out already, that already he felt replaced. She'd changed, too—she was less patient, quicker to say no instead of reasoning with him. She hadn't been prepared for how much work it was, how isolating it could be. There were mornings she wished she could simply get dressed and walk out the door, like Adam. She didn't understand how her

mother had done it. Growing up, her mother's example—moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household—had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now.

She walked across the living room, turned off the television. "Answer me when I talk to you, Akash. Get up, let's go."

The sight of her father's rental car, a compact maroon sedan, upset her, freshly confirming the fact that she lived on a separate coast thousands of miles from where she grew up, a place where her parents knew no one, where neither of her parents, until today, had set foot. The connections her family had formed to America, her parents' circle of Bengali friends in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, her father's company, the schools Ruma and Romi had gone through, did not exist here. It was seven months since she'd last seen her father. In the process of selling and packing up their old apartment, moving and settling into the new house, and her father's various trips, over half a year had gone by.

Akash got up and trailed behind her, and together they watched as her father opened the trunk of the car, lifting out a small black suitcase with wheels. He was wearing a baseball cap that said *POMPEII*, brown cotton pants and a sky-blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers. She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere. It was her mother who would have struck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels.

He began to pull the suitcase along the driveway, but because of the inconvenience of the gravel under the wheels, he picked it up by the handle and walked across the grass up to the house. She saw that it was a slight struggle for him, and she wished Adam were there to help.

"Akash, is that you?" her father called out in mock bewilder-

ment, in English. "So big you have become." By now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little. After he started speaking in full sentences English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali. Besides, it was one thing to coo at him in Bengali, to point to this or that and tell him the corresponding words. But it was another to be authoritative; Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her. Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn't mind. On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore, when an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday, she tripped over words, mangled tenses. And yet it was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life.

"How old now? Three? Or is it three hundred?" her father asked.

Akash did not respond, behaving as if her father did not exist. "Mommy, I'm thirsty," he said.

"In a minute, Akash."

Her father seemed the same to her. For a man of seventy, the skin of his hands and face was firm and clear. He had not lost weight and the hair on his head was plentiful, more so, she feared, than her own after Akash's birth, when it had fallen out in clumps on her pillow each night, the crushed strands the first thing she noticed every morning. Her doctor assured her it would grow back, but her bathtub was still filled with shampoos that promised to stimulate scalp growth, plump the shafts. Her father looked well rested, another quality Ruma did not possess these days. She'd taken to applying concealer below her eyes, even when she had no plans to leave the house. In addition she'd been putting on weight. With Akash she'd lost weight in her first trimester, but this time, at just twelve weeks, she was already ten pounds heavier. She decided that it must

have been the food she found herself always finishing off of Akash's plate and the fact that now she had to drive everywhere instead of walk. She'd already ordered pants and skirts with elastic waistbands from catalogues, and there was a solidity to her face that upset her each time she looked in the mirror.

"Akash, please say hello to Dadu," she said, giving him a gentle push behind the shoulder. She kissed her father on the cheek. "How long did it take you to get here? Was there traffic?"

"Not so much. Your home is twenty-two miles from the airport." Her father always made it his business to know the distances he traveled, large and small. Even before MapQuest existed, he knew the exact distance from their house to his office, and to the supermarket where her parents shopped for food, and to the homes of their friends.

"Gasoline is expensive here," he added. He said this matter-of-factly, but still she felt the prick of his criticism as she had all her life, feeling at fault that gas cost more in Seattle than in Pennsylvania.

"It's a long flight. You must be tired."

"I am only tired at bedtime. Come here," her father said to Akash. He set down the suitcase, bent over slightly, and put out his arms.

But Akash pressed his head into Ruma's legs, refusing to budge.

They came inside, her father leaning over to untie the laces of his sneakers, lifting one foot at a time, wobbling slightly.

"Baba, come into the living room, you'll be more comfortable doing that sitting down on the sofa," Ruma said. But he continued removing his sneakers, setting them in the foyer next to the mail table before straightening and acknowledging his surroundings.

"Why does Dadu take his shoes off?" Akash asked Ruma.

"He's more comfortable that way."

"I want shoes off, too." Akash stomped his sandals on the floor.

It was one of the many habits of her upbringing which she'd shed in her adult life, without knowing when or why. She ignored Akash's request and showed her father the house, the rooms that were larger and more gracious than the ones that had sheltered her when she was a child. Akash trailed behind them, darting off on his own now and then. The house had been built in 1959, designed and originally owned by an architect, and Ruma and Adam were filling it slowly with furniture from that period: simple expensive sofas covered with muted shades of wool, long, low bookcases on outwardly turned feet. Lake Washington was a few blocks down a sloping street. There was a large window in the living room framing the water, and beyond the dining room was a screened-in porch with an even more spectacular view: the Seattle skyline to the left, and, straight ahead, the Olympic Mountains, whose snowy peaks seemed hewn from the same billowing white of the clouds drifting above them. Ruma and Adam hadn't planned on living in a suburb, but after five years in an apartment that faced the backs of other buildings, a home so close to a lake, from which they could sit and watch the sun set, was impossible to resist.

She pointed out one of the two bridges that spanned the lake, explaining that they floated on pontoons at their centers because the water was too deep. Her father looked out the window but said nothing. Her mother would have been more forthcoming, remarking on the view, wondering whether ivory curtains would have been better than green. It appeared, as her father walked from one end of the living room to another, that he was inwardly measuring its dimensions. She remembered him doing this when he helped her to move in the past, into dorm rooms and her first apartments after college. She imagined him on his tours, in public squares, walking from one end to another, pacing up and down a nave, counting the number

of steps one had to ascend in order to enter a library or a museum.

She took him downstairs, where she had prepared the guest room. The space was divided into two sections by an accordion door. On one side was the bed and a bureau, and on the other, a desk and sofa, bookcase and coffee table. She opened the door to the bathroom and pointed to the wicker basket where he was to put his laundry. "You can close this off if you like," she said, pulling at the accordion door to demonstrate.

"It's not needed," her father said.

"All the way, Mommy," Akash said, tugging at the handle, causing the folded cream-colored panel to sway back and forth. "Close it all the way."

"No, Akash."

"This is my room when I get bigger," Akash announced.

"That little TV in the corner works, but it's not hooked up to cable," Ruma told her father. "Nine is the PBS station," she added, knowing those were the programs he was fond of.

"Hey, don't walk on my bed with your shoes on," her father said suddenly to Akash, who had gotten onto the bed and was walking with large, deliberate steps around the bedcover.

"Peanut, get off the bed."

For a moment Akash continued exactly as he was doing, ignoring them. Then he stopped, looking suspiciously at his grandfather. "Why?"

Before Ruma could explain, her father said, "Because I will have nightmares."

Akash dropped his head. Quickly, to Ruma's surprise, he slithered onto the floor, briefly crawling as if he were a baby again.

They went back upstairs, to the kitchen. It was the room Ruma was most proud of, with its soapstone counters and cherry cupboards. Showing it off to her father, she felt self-conscious of her successful life with Adam, and at the same time

she felt a quiet slap of rejection, gathering, from his continued silence, that none of it impressed him.

"Adam planted all this?" her father asked, taking in the garden that was visible through the kitchen window, mentioning Adam for the first time.

"No. It was all here."

"Your delphiniums need watering."

"Which are they?" she asked, embarrassed that she did not know the names of the plants in her own backyard.

He pointed. "The tall purple ones."

It occurred to her that her father missed gardening. For as long as she could remember it had been his passion, working outdoors in the summers as soon as he came home from the office, staying out until it grew dark, subjecting himself to bug bites and rashes. It was something he'd done alone; neither Romi nor Runa had ever been interested in helping, and their father never offered to include them. Her mother would complain, having to keep dinner waiting until nine at night. "Go ahead and eat," Runa would say, but her mother, trained all her life to serve her husband first, would never consider such a thing. In addition to tomatoes and eggplant and zucchini, her father had grown expert over the years at cultivating the things her mother liked to cook with—bitter melon and chili peppers and delicate strains of spinach. Oblivious to her mother's needs in other ways, he had toiled in unfriendly soil, coaxing such things from the ground.

He glanced at the gleaming six-burner stove with its thick red knobs and then, without asking, began to open one of the cupboards.

"What are you looking for?"

"Do you have a kettle?"

She opened the pantry. "I'll make tea, Baba."

"Let me water your delphiniums. They won't survive another day." He took the kettle from her hands and filled it at

the sink. Then he carried it, slowly and carefully, through the kitchen door outside, taking oddly small steps, and for the first time since his arrival she saw that in spite of his clear eyes and skin, her father had become an old man. She stood by the window and watched her father water the flowers, his head bent, his eyebrows raised. She listened to the sound of the water hitting the earth in a forceful, steady stream. It was a sound that vaguely embarrassed her, as if he were urinating in her presence. Even after the sound stopped, her father stood there for a moment, tipping the spout and pouring out the final drops that the kettle contained. Akash had followed her father outside, and now he stood a few feet away, looking up at his grandfather with curiosity.

Akash had no memory of her mother. She had died when he was two, and now, when she pointed her mother out in a photograph, Akash would always say, "she died," as if it were something extraordinary and impressive her mother had done. He would know nothing of the weeks her mother had come to stay with Runa after his birth, holding him in the mornings in her kaftan as Runa slept off her postpartum fatigue. Her mother had refused to put him into the bassinet, always cradling him, for hours at a time, in her arms. The new baby would know nothing of her mother at all, apart from the sweaters she had knit for Akash, which he'd already outgrown and which the new baby would eventually wear. There was a half-knit cardigan patterned with white stars still on its needles, one of the few items of her mother's Runa had kept. Of the two hundred and eighteen saris, she kept only three, placing them in a quilted zippered bag at the back of her closet, telling her mother's friends to divide up the rest. And she had remembered the many times her mother had predicted this very moment, lamenting the fact that her daughter preferred pants and skirts to the clothing she wore, that there would be no one to whom to pass on her things.

He went downstairs to unpack, arranging his two pairs of pants in one of the drawers of the bureau, hanging his four checkered summer shirts on hangers in the closet, putting on a pair of flip-flops for indoors. He shut his empty suitcase and put it in the closet as well and placed his kit bag in the bathroom, at the side of the sink. The accommodations would have pleased his wife; it had always upset her, the fact that Ruma and Adam used to live in an apartment, with no separate room for them to sleep in when they stayed. He looked out at the yard. There were houses on either side, but the back felt secluded. One could not see the water or the mountains from here, only the ground, thick with the evergreen trees he'd seen on the sides of the highway, that were everywhere in Seattle.

Upstairs, Ruma was serving tea on the porch. She had brought everything out on a tray: a pot of Darjeeling, the strainer, milk and sugar, and a plate of Nice biscuits. He associated the biscuits deeply with his wife—the visible crystals of sugar, the faint coconut taste—their kitchen cupboard always contained a box of them. Never had he managed to dip one into a cup of tea without having it dissolve, leaving a lump of beige mush in the bottom of his cup.

He sat down and distributed gifts. For Akash there was a small wooden plane with red propellers and a marionette of Pinocchio. The boy began playing with his toys immediately, tangling up Pinocchio's strings and demanding that Ruma fix them. There was a handpainted cruet that had the word "olio" on its side for Ruma, and a marbled box for Adam, the sort of thing one might use for storing paper clips. Mrs. Bagchi had chosen everything, spending nearly an hour in a toyshop, though she had no grandchildren. He had mentioned nothing to Ruma or Romi about Mrs. Bagchi, planned to say nothing.

He saw no point in upsetting them, especially Ruma now that she was expecting again. He wondered if this was how his children had felt in the past, covertly conducting relationships back when it was something he and his wife had forbidden, something that would have devastated them.

It was Ruma and his wife who were supposed to have gone on the first of his trips to Europe. In the year before she died, his wife had begun to remark that although she had flown over Europe dozens of times in the process of traveling from Pennsylvania to Calcutta, she had never once seen the canals of Venice or the Eiffel Tower or the windmills and tulips of Holland. He had found his wife's interest surprising; throughout most of their marriage it had been an unquestioned fact that visiting family in Calcutta was the only thing worth boarding a plane for. "They show so many nice places on the Travel Channel," she would remark sometimes in the evenings. "We can afford it now, you have vacation days that are wasting away." But back then he had had no interest in taking such a trip; he was impervious to his wife's sudden wanderlust, and besides, in all their years, they had never taken a vacation together, alone.

Ruma had organized as a sixty-fourth birthday present a package tour to Paris for her mother and herself. She scheduled it during the summer, a time Adam could take Akash to her in-laws' place on Martha's Vineyard. Ruma put down a deposit at the travel agency and sent her mother tapes to learn conversational French and a guidebook filled with colorful pictures. For a while he would come home from work and hear his wife up in her sewing room, listening to the tapes on a Walkman, counting in French, reciting the days of the week. The gallstone surgery was scheduled accordingly, the doctor saying that six weeks would be more than enough time for her to recover before traveling. Ruma took the day off from work and came down with Akash for the procedure, insisting on being there

even though he'd said there was no need. He remembered how irritated he'd felt in the waiting room over how long it was taking, that feeling vivid in a way the surgeon's news still was not. That information, and the chronology of events that followed, remained hazy to him: listening to the surgeon say his wife was dead, that she had reacted adversely to the Rocuronium used to relax her muscles for the procedure, he and Ruma taking turns with Akash as they went in to see the body. It was the same hospital where Ruma had been a candy stripper, where he had once rushed to the emergency room after Romi broke his arm on a soccer field. A few weeks after the funeral one of his colleagues at work suggested that he take a vacation, and it was then that he'd remembered the trip Ruma and his wife had planned. He'd asked Ruma if she still intended to go, and when she said no, he asked if it would be all right for him to reserve the tour in his own name.

"Did you like Italy?" Ruma asked him now. She sat with the Pinocchio on her lap, clumsily unwinding the strings. He wanted to tell her that she was going about it wrong, there was a knot in the center that needed to be undone first. Instead, he replied to her questions, saying that he had liked Italy very much, commenting on the pleasant climate, the many piazzas, and the fact that the people, unlike most Americans, were slim. He held up his index finger, waving it back and forth. "And everyone still smokes. I was nearly tempted to have a cigarette myself," he said. He had smoked when she was little, a habit he'd acquired in India but abandoned in his forties. He remembered Ruma, never Romi or his wife, pestering him about quitting, hiding his packs of Winstons, or removing the cigarettes when he wasn't aware of it and replacing them with balled-up tissue paper. There was the time she'd cried all night, convinced, after her teacher at school had talked about the dangers of smoking, that he would die within a handful of years.

He had done nothing, back then, to comfort her; he'd maintained his addiction in spite of his daughter's fear. He'd been attached to a small brass ashtray in the house, shaped like a nagrai slipper with a curling, pointed toe. After he quit he threw out all the other ashtrays in the house, but Ruma, to his puzzlement, appropriated his favorite, rinsing it out and keeping it among her toys. He recalled that she and her friends would pretend it was the glass slipper in Cinderella, trying to get it to fit over the unyielding plastic feet of her various dolls.

"Did you?" she asked him now.

"What?"

"Have a cigarette in Italy."

"Oh no. I am too old for such things," he said, his eyes drifting over to the lake.

"What did you eat there?" she asked.

He remembered one of the first meals the group had had, lunch at a restaurant close to the Medici Palace. He'd been shocked by the amount of food, the numerous courses. The marinated vegetables were enough for him, but then the waiters brought out plates of ravioli, followed by roasted meat. That afternoon a number of people in the group, including him, went back to the hotel to recover, forgoing the rest of the sightseeing. The next day their guide told them that the restaurant lunches were optional, as long as everyone met back at the next designated place and time. And so he and Mrs. Bagchi began to wander off together, picking up something small, commenting with amazement that there had once been a time when they, too, were capable of eating elaborate lunches, as was the custom in India.

"I tried one or two pasta dishes," he said, sipping his tea.

"But mainly I ate pizza."

"You spent three weeks in Italy and all you ate was pizza?"

"It was quite tasty pizza."

She shook her head. "But the food there is so amazing."
 "I have videos," he said, changing the subject. "I can show them later if you like."

They ate dinner early, Ruma saying her father must be hungry from the journey and her father admitting that he was eager to turn in, that it was after all three hours later on the East Coast. She'd spent the past two days cooking, the items accumulating one by one on the shelves of the refrigerator, and the labor had left her exhausted. When she cooked Indian food for Adam she could afford to be lazy. She could do away with making dal or served salad instead of a chorchori. "Is that all?" her mother sometimes exclaimed in disbelief on the phone, asking Ruma what she was making for dinner, and it was in such moments that Ruma recognized how different her experience of being a wife was. Her mother had never cut corners; even in Pennsylvania she had run her household as if to satisfy a mother-in-law's fastidious eye. Though her mother had been an excellent cook, her father never praised her for it. It was only when they went to the homes of others, and he would complain about the food on the way home, that it became clear how much he appreciated his wife's talent. Ruma's cooking didn't come close, the vegetables sliced too thickly, the rice overdone, but as her father worked his way through the things she'd made, he repeatedly told her how delicious it was.

She ate with her fingers, as her father did, for the first time in months, for the first time in this new house in Seattle. Akash sat between them in his booster seat, wanting to eat with his fingers, too, but this was something Ruma had not taught him to do. They did not talk about her mother, or about Romi, the brother with whom she had always felt so little in common, in spite of their absurdly matching names. They did not discuss her pregnancy, how she was feeling compared to last time, as

she and her mother surely would have. They did not talk very much at all, her father never one to be conversant during meals. His reticence was one of the things her mother would complain about, one of the ways Ruma had tried to fill in for her father.

"It is still so light outside," he said eventually, though he had not lifted his eyes from his plate since he'd started eating, had seemed, as he so often did to Ruma, oblivious to his surroundings.

"The sun doesn't set until after nine in the summer," she said. "Sorry the begunis broke apart," she added. "I didn't let the oil get hot enough."

"It doesn't matter. Try it," he told Akash, who for the past four months refused to eat anything other than macaroni and cheese for dinner. To Ruma he added, pointing to Akash's plate, "Why do you buy those things? They are filled with chemicals." When Akash was younger she had followed her mother's advice to get him used to the taste of Indian food and made the effort to poach chicken and vegetables with cinnamon and cardamom and clove. Now he ate from boxes.

"I hate that food," Akash retorted, frowning at her father's plate.

"Akash, don't talk that way." In spite of her efforts he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things. When he was younger, he'd eaten whatever her mother made for him. "You used to eat Dida's cooking," she said. "She used to make all these things."

"I don't remember Dida," Akash said. He shook his head from side to side, as if denying the very fact that she was ever alive. "I don't remember it. She died."

She was reading stories to Akash before his bedtime when her father knocked softly on the door, handing her the receiver of

the cordless phone. He was holding up his right hand awkwardly in front of his chest, and she saw that it was soapy from dishwater. "Adam is on the phone."

"Baba, I would have done those. Go to sleep."

"It is only a few things." Her father had always done the dishes after the family had eaten; he claimed that standing upright for fifteen minutes after a meal helped him to digest. Unlike Ruma, unlike her mother, unlike anyone Ruma had ever known, her father never ran the water while he soaped everything. He waited until the plates and pans were ready to be rinsed, and until then it was only the quiet, persistent sound of the sponge that could be heard.

She took the phone. "Rum," she heard Adam say. That was what he'd begun to call her, soon after they met. The first time he wrote her a letter, he'd misspelled her name, beginning, "Dear Room—"

She pictured him collapsed on the bed in a hotel room in Calgary, where he'd gone this time, his shoes off, his tie loosened, ankles crossed. At thirty-nine he was still boyishly handsome, with the generous, curling brown-blond hair that Akash had inherited, a whittled marathoner's body, cheekbones she secretly coveted. Were it not for the powerful depth of his voice and the glasses he wore these days for distance he could still pass for one of the easy-going, athletic boys she went to college with.

"My dad's here."

"We spoke."

"What did he say?"

"The usual questions: 'How are you? How are your parents?'" It was true; this was all her father ever had to say to Adam.

"Have you eaten?"

There was a pause before he replied. She realized he must have been watching something on the television as they were

speaking. "I'm about to head off to dinner with a client. How's Akash?"

"Right here." She put the receiver to his ear. "Say hi to Daddy."

"Hi," Akash said, without enthusiasm. Then silence. She could hear Adam saying, "What's going on, buddy? Having fun with Dadu?" But Akash refused to engage any further, staring at the page of his book, and eventually she put the phone back to her own ear.

"He's tired," she said. "He's about to fall asleep."

"I wish I could fall asleep," Adam said. "I'm wiped."

She knew he'd been traveling since early morning, that he'd been working all day, would have to work through his dinner. And yet she felt no sympathy. "I can't imagine my father living here," she said.

"Then don't ask him to."

"I think the visit is his way of suggesting it."

"Then ask."

"And if he says yes?"

"Then he moves in with us."

"Should I ask?"

She heard Adam breathing patiently through his nose.

"We've been over this a million times, Rum. It's your call. He's your dad."

She turned a page of Akash's book, saying nothing.

"I need to get going," Adam said. "I miss you guys."

"We miss you, too," she said.

She hung up the phone, putting it beside the framed photograph on the bedside table, of Ruma and Adam on their wedding day, slicing into the tiered white cake. She could not explain what had happened to her marriage after her mother's death. For the first time since they'd met, at a dinner party in Boston when she was a law student and he was getting his MBA, she felt a wall between them, simply because he had not

experienced what she had, because both his parents were still living in the house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, where Adam had been raised. It was wrong of her, she knew, and yet an awareness had set in, that she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives. Though his absences contributed to her isolation, sometimes it was worse, not better, when Adam was home. Even with Akash to care for, part of her was beginning to prefer the solitude, without Adam hovering around, full of concern about her state of mind, her mood.

Ten years ago her mother had done everything in her power to talk Runa out of marrying Adam, saying that he would divorce her, that in the end he would want an American girl. Neither of these things had happened, but she sometimes thought back to that time, remembering how bold she'd had to be in order to withstand her mother's outrage, and her father's refusal to express even that, which had felt more cruel. "You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line," her mother had told Runa again and again. She knew what a shock it was, she had kept her other involvements with American men a secret from her parents until the day she announced that she was engaged. Over the years her mother not only retracted her objections but vehemently denied them; she grew to love Adam as a son, a replacement for Romi, who had crushed them by moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties. Her mother would chat with Adam on the phone, even when Runa was not at home, e-mailing him from time to time, carrying on a game of Scrabble with him over the Internet. When her parents visited, her mother would always bring a picnic cooler filled with homemade mishti, elaborate, syrupy, cream-filled concoctions which Runa had never learned to make, and Adam loved.

It was after she'd had a child that Runa's relationship with her mother became harmonious; being a grandmother trans-

formed her mother, bringing a happiness and an energy Runa had never witnessed. For the first time in her life Runa felt forgiven for the many expectations she'd violated or shirked over the years. She came to look forward to their nightly conversations, reporting the events of her day, describing what new things Akash had learned to do. Her mother had even begun to exercise, getting up at five in the morning, wearing an old Colgate sweatshirt of Runa's. She wanted to live to see her grandchildren married, she'd said. There were times Runa felt closer to her mother in death than she had in life, an intimacy born simply of thinking of her so often, of missing her. But she knew that this was an illusion, a mirage, and that the distance between them was now infinite, unyielding.

After finishing with the dishes he dried them and then scrubbed and dried the inside of the sink, removing the food particles from the drainer. He put the leftovers away in the refrigerator, tied up the trash bag and put it into the large barrel he'd noticed in the driveway, made sure the doors were locked. He sat for a while at the kitchen table, fiddling with a saucepan whose handle—he'd noticed while washing it—was wobbly. He searched in the drawers for a screwdriver and, not finding one, accomplished the task with the tip of a steak knife. When he was finished he poked his head into Akash's room and found both the boy and Runa asleep. For several minutes he stood in the doorway. Something about his daughter's appearance had changed; she now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly. That first glimpse of her earlier, standing on the lawn with Akash, had nearly taken his breath away. Her face was older now, as his wife's had been, and the hair was beginning to turn gray at her temples in the same way, twisted with an elastic band into a loose knot. And

the features, haunting now that his wife was gone—the identical shape and shade of the eyes, the dimple on the left side when they smiled.

In spite of his jet lag he had trouble falling asleep, was distracted by the sound of a motorboat cutting now and then across the lake. He sat up in bed flipping absently through an issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, which he'd taken from the seat pocket on the plane, and then opened a guidebook to Seattle that had been placed on the bedside table, he guessed, for his benefit. He glanced at the photographs, of the new library and coffee shops and whole salmon displayed on beds of ice. He read about the average yearly rainfall, and the fact that it seldom snowed. Studying a map, he was surprised by how far he was from the Pacific Ocean, not realizing until now that mountains stood in the way. Though he had traveled such a distance, his surroundings did not feel foreign to him as they had when he went to Europe. There he was reminded of his early days in America, understanding only a word or two of what people said, handling different coins. Here, as on a summer night in Pennsylvania, moths fluttered against the window screen, and sometimes an insect would bang against it, startling him with its force.

From his position in bed he took in the spacious, sparsely furnished room. When he was Ruma's age, he had lived with his wife and children in a small apartment in Garden City, New Jersey. They'd converted a walk-in closet into a nursery when Romi and then Ruma were born. He had worried for his family's safety in that apartment complex, the surveillance cameras in the lobby making him nervous rather than putting him at ease, but at the time, still working on his PhD in biochemistry, it was the best he could afford. He remembered his wife making meals on the electric stove in the tiny kitchen, the rooms smelling afterward of whatever she'd prepared. They lived on the fourteenth floor and she would dry her saris one by one

over the narrow balcony railing. The bedroom in which Romi and Ruma had both been conceived was dreary, morning light never penetrating, and yet he considered it, still, the most sacred of spaces. He recalled his children running through the rooms, the pitch of their young voices. It was a part of their lives only he and his wife carried with them. His children would only remember the large house he'd bought in the suburbs with willow trees in the backyard, with rooms for each of them and a basement filled with their toys. And compared to where Ruma now lived even that house was nothing, a flimsy structure that he always feared could burn down from the flame of a match.

Now that he was on his own, acquaintances sometimes asked if he planned to move in with Ruma. Even Mrs. Bagchi mentioned the idea. But he pointed out that Ruma hadn't been raised with that sense of duty. She led her own life, had made her own decisions, married an American boy. He didn't expect her to take him in, and really, he couldn't blame her. For what had he done, when his own father was dying, when his mother was left behind? By then Ruma and Romi were teenagers. There was no question of his moving the family back to India, and also no question of his eighty-year-old widowed mother moving to Pennsylvania. He had let his siblings look after her until she, too, eventually died.

Were he to have gone first, his wife would not have thought twice about moving in with Ruma. His wife had not been built to live on her own, just as morning glories were not intended to grow in the shade. She was the opposite of Mrs. Bagchi that way. The isolation of living in an American suburb, something about which his wife complained and about which he felt responsible, had been more solitude than she could bear. But he enjoyed solitude, as Mrs. Bagchi did. Now that he had retired he spent his days volunteering for the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania, work he could do from his computer at home,

and this, in addition to his trips, was enough to keep him occupied. It was a relief not to have to maintain the old house, to mow and rake the lawn, to replace the storm windows with screens in summer, only to have to reverse the process a few months later. It was a relief, too, to be living in another part of the state, close enough so things were still familiar, but far enough to feel different. In the old house he was still struck in his former life, attending by himself the parties he and his wife had gone to, getting phone calls in the evenings from concerned friends who routinely dropped off pots of chicken curry or, assuming he was lonely, visited without warning on Sunday afternoons.

He was suddenly tired, his vision blurring and the words in the guidebook lifting off the page. Beside the small pile of books there was a telephone. He set down the book, lifted the receiver, checked for a dial tone, and set it down again. Before coming to Seattle he had given Mrs. Bagchi his daughter's phone number in an e-mail, but it was understood that she was not to call. She had loved her husband of two years more than he had loved his wife of nearly forty, of this he was certain. In her wallet she still carried a picture of him, a clean-shaven boy in his twenties, the hair parted far to one side. He didn't mind. In a way he preferred knowing that her heart still belonged to another man. It was not passion that was driving him, at seventy, to be involved, however discreetly, however occasionally, with another woman. Instead it was the consequence of being married all those years, the habit of companionship.

Without his wife, the thought of his own death preyed on him, knowing that it might strike him just as suddenly. He'd never experienced death up close; when his parents and relatives had died he was always continents away, never witnessing the ugly violence of it. Then again, he had not even been present, technically, when his wife passed away. He had been reading a magazine, sipping a cup of tea from the hospital cafeteria.

But that was not what caused him to feel guilty. It was the fact that they'd all been so full of assumptions: the assumption that the procedure would go smoothly, the assumption that she would spend one night in the hospital and then return home, the assumption that friends would be coming to the house two weeks later for dinner, that she would visit France a few weeks after that. The assumption that his wife's surgery was to be a minor trial in her life and not the end of it. He remembered Ruma sobbing in his arms as if she were suddenly very young again and had fallen off a bicycle or been stung by a bee. As in those other instances he had been strong for her, not shedding a tear.

Sometime in the middle of the night she'd woken up in Akash's bed and stumbled into her own. Normally Akash came into her bed at dawn, falling asleep beside her for another few hours before waking her up and wanting cereal. She didn't mind Akash coming into her bed, especially when Adam was out of town. But this morning the bed was empty. She no longer felt sick in the mornings. Instead, her first thought was of food; she wanted a burrito, or one of the egg and cheese sandwiches from the bagel shop near their old apartment in Park Slope, a reminder that all through the night, as she slept, her body had been hard at work. In the kitchen she saw that the dinner dishes, washed and dried, were at one side of the countertop. In the drainer was a clean bowl, spoon, juice glass, and mug. Beside the stove, on a saucer, was a drying tea bag, reserved for a second use. She heard Akash's voice coming from somewhere outside, but couldn't see him through the window. She went onto the porch, where the sound of his voice was more distinct. "But I didn't see a turtle," she heard him say, and she gathered that he and her father had taken a walk down to the lake.

She took her prenatal vitamin, put on water for tea. She was

making toast when her father and Akash came in through the kitchen door.

"We went to the lake and Dadu put me into a movie," Akash said excitedly, pointing to the video camera strung around her father's neck.

"You're wet," she observed, noticing that the straps of his sandals and the front of his shorts were darkened by water. She turned to her father. "What happened?"

"Nothing, nothing. We thought we saw a turtle, and Akash wanted to touch it," he said to Ruma. "He is asking for cereal."

"Come on, first you need to change," she said to Akash. When she returned she saw that her father had opened up the cupboard. "Is this the one he takes?" he asked, holding up a box of Chetrios.

She nodded. "When did you wake up, Baba?"

"Oh, I was up before five. I sat on the porch and had my breakfast, and then Akash joined me and we went outside."

"I can take over," she said, watching her father pour milk into the cereal bowl.

"I don't mind. Have your food."

She opened the fridge for butter and jam, prepared her tea. When she was finished, her father took the kettle, put the dried-out tea bag into the same cup that was in the dish drainer, and added the remaining hot water.

"Dadu, outside?" Akash said, tugging on her father's pants.

"Soon, Babu. Let me finish."

As she ate her breakfast she mentioned the places they could see during the course of his visit—before his arrival she had looked up hours of admission, ticket prices, and in her mind she'd already conceived of an itinerary, something to keep them occupied each day. She hadn't had the time or energy to explore much of downtown Seattle, and thought the week with her father would provide the opportunity. "There's the Space Needle of course," she began. "And Pike Place Market. There's

an aquarium along the waterfront I've been meaning to take Akash to. They have ferry rides across Puget Sound that are supposed to be nice. We could go to Victoria for the day. And then there's the Boeing factory, if you're interested. They give tours."

"Yes," her father said. He looked tired to her, his eyes small behind his glasses. "To be honest," he said, "I wouldn't mind a rest from all that."

She was confused; she had assumed her father would want to see Seattle with his video camera, just as he was interested in seeing so many other places in the world these days. "Well, otherwise, there's not much else to do here."

"I don't need to be entertained."

"That's not what I meant. Whatever you'd like, Baba." Her confusion was followed by worry. She wondered if there was something he wasn't telling her. She wondered how it was in the condominium, whether there were too many stairs to climb, if he had any neighbors who knew or cared about him. She remembered a statistic she'd heard, about long-term spouses typically dying within two years of one another, the surviving spouse dying essentially of a broken heart. But Ruma knew that her parents had never loved each other in that way.

"Are you all right?"

He looked up at her; he'd been leaning close to Akash, making faces to distract him as he finished the cereal. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you feeling all right?"

"I am feeling fine. I was just hoping for a vacation from my vacations," he said. "The tours are work, in their own way."

She nodded. "I understand." She did understand, for deep down she knew that there was nothing wrong with her father. Though it upset her to admit it, if anything, he seemed happier now; her mother's death had lightened him, the opposite of what it had done to her.

He took a worn white handkerchief from his pocket, wiped remnants of milk and cereal off Akash's face. The gesture reminded her of being small, and the little ways her father had come to her rescue, pulling out a handkerchief if she'd spilt food on her clothes, or needed to blow her nose, or had scraped her knee. "Let a few days go by. Maybe then we can take a boat ride."

After breakfast Akash had his weekly swimming lesson. She expected her father to stay at home, but he said he wanted to go, bringing his video camera along. He offered to drive them to the pool in the rental car, but because the car seat was in the SUV, Ruma drove. She had learned to drive in high school, but then for years she had lived in cities and not owned a car, so that until now it was an activity she associated only with visiting her parents: taking the car to drop off videos, or going with her mother to the mall. It was something she had to get used to in Seattle—having to fill the car with gas, making sure there was air in the tires. Though she was growing familiar with the roads, with the exits and the mountains and the quality of the light, she felt no connection to any of it, or to anyone. She had exchanged only pleasantries with her neighbors—a retired husband and wife on one side, two gay professors at the University of Washington on the other. There were some women she would talk to as she sat watching Akash in the swimming pool, but at the end of each class they never suggested getting together. It felt unnatural to have to reach out to strangers at this point in her life.

She was used to the friends she'd left behind in Brooklyn, women she met in prenatal yoga and through a mommy group she'd joined after Akash was born, who had known the everyday details of her life. They'd kept her company when she went into labor, handed down the clothes and blankets their children

had outgrown. Those friends had been a five- or ten-minute walk from her apartment, some of them in the building itself, and back when she worked part time they could meet her at a moment's notice, pushing their strollers through Prospect Park. They had gotten to know Ruma's mother when she came to visit on weekends, and some of them had driven down to Pennsylvania for the funeral. At first, after the move, these friends sent Ruma e-mails, or called from their cell phones as they sat in the playground without her. But given the time change and the children always at their sides, it was impossible to carry on a meaningful conversation. For all the time she'd spent with these women the roots did not go deep, and these days, after reading their e-mails, Ruma was seldom inspired to write back.

The car was silent apart from the sound the tires made on the road, and the slicing sound of cars passing in the opposite direction. Akash was playing with one of his toy trains, running its wheels along the surface of the door and the back of Ruma's seat. She was aware of her father quietly monitoring her driving, glancing now and then at the speedometer, looking along with her when she was about to switch lanes. She pointed out the grocery store where she now shopped, the direction of Mount Rainier, not visible today.

"There's the exit Adam takes to go to work," she said.

"How far is it?"

When she was younger she would have corrected him; "How far is it?" she would immediately have said, irritated, as if his error were a reflection of her own shortcomings. "I don't know. I think it takes him about forty minutes each way."

"That's a lot of driving. Why didn't you choose a house closer by?"

"We don't mind. And we fell in love with the house." She wondered whether her father would consider this last remark frivolous.

"And you? Have you found work in this new place?"

"Part-time litigation work is hard to find," she said. "Pre-school is only until noon, and Adam and I don't want Akash in daycare."

"In order to practice here you will have to take another bar exam?" her father asked.

"No. There's reciprocity with New York."

"Then why not look for a new job?"

"I'm not ready yet, Baba." She had not bothered to contact any firms in Seattle, not called up the trusts and estates attorney one of the partners at her old firm had given her the name of, suggesting maybe Ruma could write briefs on a case-by-case basis. She realized she'd never explicitly told her father that she intended, for the next few years, to be at home. "We're still getting settled."

"That I understand. I am only asking if you have a time frame in mind."

"Maybe when the new baby starts kindergarten."

"But that is over five years from now. Now is the time for you to be working, building your career."

"I am working, Baba. Soon I'll be taking care of two children, just like Ma did."

"Will this make you happy?"

She didn't answer him. Her mother would have understood her decision, would have been supportive and proud. Ruma had worked fifty-hour weeks for years, had earned six figures while Romi was still living hand to mouth. She'd always felt unfairly cast, by both her parents, into roles that weren't accurate: as her father's oldest son, her mother's secondary spouse.

"They won't be young forever, Ruma," her father continued. "Then what will you do?"

"Then I'll go back."

"You'll be over forty. It may not be so simple."

She kept her eyes on the road, pushing a button that turned

on the radio, filling the car with the determined drone of a reporter's voice. She had never been able to confront her father freely, the way she used to fight with her mother. Somehow, she feared that any difference of opinion would chip away at the already frail bond that existed between them. She knew that she had disappointed him, getting rejected by all the Ivy Leagues she'd applied to. In spite of Romi's itinerant, uncertain life, she knew her father respected him more for having graduated from Princeton and getting a Fulbright to go abroad. Ruma could count the arguments she'd had with her father on one hand. In high school, after she'd gotten her license, he'd refused to insure her on the family car so that she could drive it on her own. In college, when it was time to declare her major, he'd tried to convince her to choose biology instead of history. He had balked at the cost of law school, but when she'd gotten into Northeastern he had paid for it all the same. And he had argued, when she and Adam were planning their wedding, that an outdoor ceremony was unwise, recommending an institutional banquet hall instead of the bluff on Martha's Vineyard she and Adam desired as a location. As it turned out the weather was perfect, the sun beaming brilliantly on the ocean as they exchanged their vows. And yet, even to this day, Ruma suffered from nightmares of the white tent and folding chairs and hundreds of guests soaked by rain.

She pulled into the parking lot where the swimming pool was. Inside the building, she told her father to wait on the benches where they could watch the class through a window, while she went into the locker room to change Akash into his bathing suit. When she joined her father he was busy with his camera, putting in a new tape and adjusting the settings. "There's Akash," she said, pointing to where he sat, wrapped in a towel, waiting for the class to begin. She had thought Akash was too young to go into the pool without her, that they would have to take the earlier class, in which parents went into the

water as well. But there were no spots in that class, and from the very beginning Akash had separated from her willingly, leaping into the arms of the instructor, an auburn-haired teenage girl.

For the next thirty minutes her father taped Akash continuously: having the flotation device strapped on his back, jumping into the pool, blowing bubbles and practicing kicks. Her father stood up from the bench where Ruma sat, the lens of the video camera nearly touching the window. He had not paid this sort of attention when Ruma and Romi were growing up. Back then it was their mother who sat watching their swimming lessons, who held her breath, terrified, as they climbed the ladder and waved at her, then plunged off the high diving board. Her father had not taught Romi to throw a baseball, and he had not taken them to learn to skate on the pond, a short walk through the woods behind their neighborhood, that froze every winter.

In the car on the way home, her father brought up the topic of her career again. "Work is important, Ruma. Not only for financial stability. For mental stability. All my life, since I was sixteen, I have been working."

"You're retired."

"But I cannot stay unoccupied. That is why I am traveling so much. It is an extravagance, but I don't need all the money I've saved up."

"Self-reliance is important, Ruma," he continued. "Life is full of surprises. Today, you can depend on Adam, on Adam's job. Tomorrow, who knows."

For a split second she took her eyes off the road, turning to him. "What are you suggesting? What are you saying?"

"Nothing. Only, perhaps, that it makes me nervous that you are not employed. It is not for my sake, you understand. My concern is for you. I have more than enough money to last until I am dead."

"Who else is dead?" Akash called out from the backseat.

"No one. We are only talking silly things. Oh dear, what a nice train you have, has it left the station?" her father inquired, turning back to Akash.

That night after dinner he showed his videos. First, to Akash's delight, they watched the footage of the swimming class, and then he showed videos of Europe: frescoes in churches, pigeons flying, the backs of people's heads. Most of the images were captured through the window of the tour bus, as a guide explained things about the monuments they were passing. He had always been careful to keep Mrs. Bagchi out of the frame, but as he watched the video enlarged on his daughter's television, he realized there were traces throughout—there was Mrs. Bagchi's arm resting on the open window of the bus, there was her blue leather handbag on a bench.

"That's Luigi," he said, as the camera focused briefly on their Italian guide.

"Who goes on these tours with you?" Ruma asked.

"They are mostly people like me, retired or otherwise idle," he said. "A lot of Japanese. It is a different group in each country."

"Have you made any friends?"

"We are all friendly with one another."

"How many of you are there?"

"Perhaps eighteen or twenty."

"And are you stuck with them all day, or do you have time on your own?"

"An hour here and there."

"Who's that?" she asked suddenly.

He stared, horrified, at the television screen, where for a few seconds Mrs. Bagchi chopply appeared, sitting at a small table at a café, stirring sugar with a tiny spoon into a tiny cup. And then he remembered offering to let Mr. Yamata, one of his

Japanese companions, look through the lens. Without his realizing, Mr. Yamata must have pressed the record button. Mrs. Bagchi vanished, did not appear again. He was grateful the room was dark, that his daughter could not see his face. "Who do you mean?"

"She's gone now. A woman who looked Indian."

It was an opportunity to tell Ruma. It was more difficult than he'd thought, being in his daughter's home, being around her all day. He felt pathetic deceiving her. But what would he say? That he had made a new friend? A girlfriend? The word was unknown to him, impossible to express; he had never had a girlfriend in his life. It would have been easier telling Romi. He would have absorbed the information casually, might even have found it a relief. Ruma was different. All his life he'd felt condemned by her, on his wife's behalf. She and Ruma were allies. And he had endured his daughter's resentment, never telling Ruma his side of things, never saying that his wife had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide.

Like his wife, Ruma was now alone in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminding him, too much, of the early years of his marriage, the years for which his wife had never forgiven him. He had always assumed Ruma's life would be different. She'd worked for as long as he could remember. Even in high school, in spite of his and his wife's protests, she'd insisted, in the summers, on working as a busgirl at a local restaurant, the sort of work their relatives in India would have found disgraceful for a girl of her class and education. But his daughter was no longer his responsibility. Finally, he had reached that age.

"That is one thing I have observed on my travels," he said as Siena's sloping pink piazza flashed across the screen, Mrs. Bagchi concealed somewhere in the throng. "Indians are everywhere these days."

Akash woke her the following morning, running into her room and tugging her arm. "Dadu went away."

"What are you talking about?"

"He's not here."

She got up. It was quarter to eight. "He's probably gone for a walk, Akash." But when she looked out the window, she saw that the rental car wasn't in the driveway.

"Is he coming back?"

"Hold on, Akash, let me think." Her heart was pounding and she felt as she would sometimes on a playground, unable, for a few seconds, to spot Akash. In the kitchen she saw that her father had not had his breakfast; there was no bowl and spoon in the dish drainer, no dried-out tea bag on a plate beside the stove. She wondered if he'd been feeling ill, if he'd driven off in search of a pharmacy for aspirin or Alka-Seltzer. It would be like him, to do that and not wake her up. Once he'd had root canal surgery without telling anyone, coming home in the evening with his mouth swollen and full of gauze. Then she wondered if he'd discovered the boats moored to the dock they shared at the edge of the lake and taken one onto the water. There was no way to reach him; her father did not carry a cell phone. As for calling the police, she didn't know the number of the rental car's license plate. She picked up the phone anyway, deciding to call Adam, to ask him what to do. But just then she heard the sound of gravel crackling under tires.

"Where on earth did you go?" she demanded. There was nothing to indicate that her father was in any type of distress; he was carrying a flat box tied with string that looked like it had come from a bakery.

"I remembered, yesterday on the way to swimming, passing by a nursery. I thought I would drive by and see their hours."

"But we've already decided on a nursery school for Akash."

"Not a school. A place that sells plants. You get a fair amount of sun in the back, and the soil looks rich," he said, looking out the window. "A rainy climate is good for the garden. I can plant a few shrubs, some ground covering if you like."

"Oh," she said.

"It is just six miles from your home. Next to it is a place that sells pastries. Here," he said, opening the box and showing it to Akash. "Which would you like?"

"You don't have to work on our garden, Baba. You said you wanted to rest."

"It is relaxing for me."

Flowers in the backyard had not occurred to her until now. And yet his offer appealed to her. She felt flattered by his interest in the place in which she lived, by his desire to make it more beautiful.

"You could have let me know you were going out," Ruma said.

"I did," he replied. "I left a note on the bureau downstairs, saying I was going for a drive."

She turned to Akash, who had pulled apart a croissant and scattered flakes of dough across the front of his pajamas. She was about to blame him for being hasty in his search of her father's room. But of course Akash was too small to see the top of the bureau, too young to read a note.

When the nursery opened her father went out again, taking Akash with him this time, transferring the car seat into the sedan. As they drove off, she realized that this was the first time she was leaving Akash exclusively in her father's care. It was odd being alone in the house, and she worried that perhaps Akash would suddenly demand her presence. She used to feel that way in his infancy, when he would nurse every two hours,

when being without him, even briefly, felt abnormal. An hour later her father and Akash returned, with bags of topsoil, flats full of flowers, a shovel, a rake, and a hose. Her father asked if he could borrow some old clothes of Adam's, and Ruma gave him a pair of khakis and a torn oxford shirt, things Adam had set aside to give to the Salvation Army, and lent him a pair of Adam's running shoes. The clothes were large on her father, the shoulders of the shirt drooping, the cuffs of the pants rolled up. For the rest of the day, with Akash playing at his side in a growing mountain of soil, her father pushed the shovel into the ground, hacking away at grass with a soft, forceful sound, wearing his baseball cap to protect his head from the sun. He worked steadily, pausing briefly at midday to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich along with Akash, coming in at dusk only because he said the mosquitoes were out.

The next morning her father drove back to the nursery to get more things: a bale of peat moss, bags of mulch and composted manure. This time, in addition to the gardening supplies, he brought back an inflatable kiddie pool, in the form of a crocodile spouting water from its head, which he set up in the yard and filled with the hose. Akash spent all day outdoors, splashing in the pool and squirting water into the garden, or searching for the worms her father dug up. Again her father worked almost continuously until dusk. With Akash outside all day, Ruma had time to do a few things around the house, small and large things she'd been putting off. She paid the bills that were due at the month's end, filed away piles of the paperwork her life with Adam generated, and then began to sort through Akash's clothing, weeding drawers of what he'd outgrown, bringing up larger things from plastic tubs stored in the basement. Depending on whether she had a boy or a girl, she'd have to save the smaller clothes or give them away. It would be another four weeks until the amnio, allowing them to learn the sex. She wasn't showing significantly, had yet to feel any kicks.

But unlike the last time she didn't doubt the presence of life inside her.

She dug out her maternity wear, the large-paneled pants and tunics that she would soon require. After sorting through the clothing, she turned to the unfinished bookcase in Akash's room, which she'd been meaning to paint ever since she bought it, over ten years ago in Boston, to hold her law books. She removed all the toys and books and began to put them in the corner. She would ask her father to help her carry it outside, so that she could paint in the yard. At one point Akash came into the room, surprising her. He was barefoot, his golden legs covered with dirt. She wondered if he would be upset with her for touching his things, but he regarded the pile as if it were perfectly normal and then began picking items out of it.

"What are you up to?" she asked him.

"Growing things."

"Oh? What are you planting?"

"All this stuff," he said, his arms full, walking out of the room. She followed him outside, where she saw that her father had created a small plot for Akash, hardly larger than a spread-open newspaper, with shallow holes dug out at intervals. She watched as Akash buried things into the soil, crouching over the ground just as her father was. Into the soil went a pink rubber ball, a few pieces of Lego stuck together, a wooden block etched with a star.

"Not too deep," her father said. "Not more than a finger. Can you touch it still?"

Akash nodded. He picked up a miniature plastic dinosaur, forcing it into the ground.

"What color is it?" her father asked.

"Red."

"And in Bengali?"

"*Lal*."

"Good."

"And *meri*!" Akash cried out, pointing to the sky.

While her father was in the shower, she made tea. It was a ritual she liked, a formal recognition of the day turning into evening in spite of the sun not setting. When she was on her own, these hours passed arbitrarily. She was grateful for the opportunity to sit on the porch with her father, with the teapot and the bowl of salted cashews and the plate of Nice biscuits, looking at the lake and listening to the vast breeze work its way through the treetops, a grander version of the way Akash used to sigh when he was a baby, full of contentment, in the depths of sleep. The leaves flickered as if with internal light, shivering though the air was not cold. Akash was asleep, exhausted from playing outdoors all day, and the house was filled with silence.

"If I lived here I would sleep out here in the summers," her father said presently. "I would put out a cot."

"You can, you know."

"What?"

"Sleep out here. We have an air mattress."

"I am only talking. I am comfortable where I am."

"But," he continued, "if I could, I would build a porch like this for myself."

"Why don't you?"

"The condo would not allow it. It would have been nice in the old house."

When her father mentioned their old house, tears sprang to her eyes. In a way it was helpful to be in a place her mother had never seen. It was one of the last conversations she had had with her mother, telling her about Adam's new job, which back then was only a remote possibility, as they rode together to the hospital. "Don't go," her mother had said from the front seat.

"It's too far away. I'll never see you again." Six hours after saying this, her mother was dead. Ruma suddenly wanted to ask her father, as she'd wanted to ask so many times, if he missed her mother, if he'd ever wept for her death. But she'd never asked, and he'd never admitted whether he'd felt or done those things.

"If you were to have built one, where would you have put it?"

He considered. "Off the dining room, I suppose. That side of the house was coolest."

She tried to think of her parents' house transformed this way. She imagined a wall in the dining room broken down, imagined speaking to her mother on the telephone, her mother complaining as the workmen hammered and drilled. Then she saw her parents sitting in the shade, in wicker chairs, having tea as she and her father were now. For when she pictured that house in her mind, her mother was always alive in it, impossible not to see. With the birth of Akash, in his sudden, perfect presence, Ruma had felt awe for the first time in her life. He still had the power to stagger her at times—simply the fact that he was breathing, that all his organs were in their proper places, that blood flowed quietly and effectively through his small, sturdy limbs. He was her flesh and blood, her mother had told her in the hospital the day Akash was born. Only the words her mother used were more literal, enriching the tired phrase with meaning: "He is made from your meat and bone." It had caused Ruma to acknowledge the supernatural in everyday life. But death, too, had the power to awe, she knew this now—that a human being could be alive for years and years, thinking and breathing and eating, full of a million worries and feelings and thoughts, taking up space in the world, and then, in an instant, become absent, invisible.

"I'm sorry we haven't seen your new apartment," she said to

her father. "Adam doesn't have any vacation for a while. But we'll come after the baby's born."

"There is nothing to see there. Just a TV and a sofa and my things. There is no space for all of you to stay. Not like here."

"I'd like to see it anyway," she said. "We can stay in a hotel."

"There is no need, Ruma. No need to travel all that way, just to see an apartment," her father said. "You are a mother now," he added. "No need to drag your children."

"But that's what you and Ma did, taking us to India all those times."

"We had no alternative. Our parents weren't willing to travel. But I will come here again to see you," he said, looking approvingly into the distance and taking a sip of his tea. "I like this place."

"My dad's planting flowers in the backyard," she told Adam that night on the phone.

"Does he plan to be around to take care of them?"

His flippancy irritated her, and she felt defensive on her father's behalf. "I don't know."

"It's Thursday, Ruma. How long are you going to torture yourself?"

She didn't feel tortured any longer. She had planned to tell Adam this, but now she changed her mind. Instead she said, "I want to wait a few more days. Make sure everyone gets along."

"For God's sake, Ruma," Adam said. "He's your father. You've known him all your life."

And yet, until now, she had not known certain things about him. She had not known how self-sufficient he could be, how helpful, to the point where she had not had to wash a dish since he'd arrived. At dinner he was flexible, appreciating the grilled fish and chicken breasts she began preparing after the Indian

food ran out, making do with a can of soup for lunch. But it was Akash who brought out a side of her father that surprised Ruma most. In the evenings her father stood beside her in the bathroom as she gave Akash his bath, scrubbing the caked-on dirt from his elbows and knees. He helped put on his pajamas, brush his teeth, and comb back his soft damp hair. When Akash had fallen asleep one afternoon on the living-room carpet, her father made sure to put a pillow under his head, drape a cotton blanket over his body. By now Akash insisted on being read to at night by her father, sleeping downstairs in her father's bed.

The first night Akash slept with her father she went downstairs to make sure he'd fallen asleep. She saw a sliver of light under her father's door and heard the sound of his voice, reading *Green Eggs and Ham*. She imagined them both under the covers, their heads reclining against the pillows, the book between them, Akash turning the pages as her father read. It was obvious that her father did not know the book by heart, as she did, that he was encountering it for the first time in his life. He read awkwardly, pausing between the sentences, his voice oddly animated as it was not in ordinary speech. Still, his effort touched her, and as she stood by the door she realized that for the first time in his life her father had fallen in love. She was about to knock and tell her father that it was past Akash's bedtime, that he should turn out the light. But she stopped herself, returning upstairs, briefly envious of her own son.

The garden was coming along nicely. It was a futile exercise, he knew. He could not picture his daughter or his son-in-law caring for it properly, noticing what needed to be done. In weeks, he guessed, it would be overgrown with weeds, the leaves chewed up by slugs. Then again, perhaps they would hire someone to do the job. He would have preferred to put in vegetables, but they required more work than flowers. It was a

modest planting, some slow-growing myrtle and phlox under the trees, two azalea bushes, a row of hostas, a clematis to climb one of the posts of the porch, and in honor of his wife, a small hydrangea. In a plot behind the kitchen, unable to resist, he also put in a few tomatoes, along with some marigolds and impatiens; there was just time for a small harvest to come in by the fall. He spaced out the delphiniums, tied them to stalks, stuck some gladiola bulbs into the ground. He missed working outside, the solid feeling of dirt under his knees, getting into his nails, the smell of it lingering on his skin even after he'd scrubbed himself in the shower. It was the one thing he missed about the old house, and when he thought about his garden was when he missed his wife most keenly. She had taken that from him. For years, after the children had grown, it had just been the two of them, but she managed to use up all the vegetables, putting them into dishes he did not know how to prepare himself. In addition, when she was alive, they regularly entertained, their guests marveling that the potatoes were from their own backyard, taking away bagfuls at the evening's end.

He looked over at Akash's little plot, the dirt carefully mounded up around his toys, pens and pencils stuck into the ground. Pennies were there, too, all the spare ones he'd had in his pocket.

"When will the plants come out?" Akash called out from the swimming pool, where he stood crouching over a little sailboat.

"Soon."

"Tomorrow?"

"Not so soon. These things take time, Akash. Do you remember what I taught you this morning?"

And Akash recited his numbers in Bengali from one to ten.

In bed that night, after Akash had fallen asleep beside him, he wrote Mrs. Bagchi a postcard. It was safer, he decided, than

sending an e-mail from Ruma's computer, a mode of communication he could not bring himself fully to trust. He had bought the card off a rack at the hardware store where he had bought Akash's swimming pool. The picture was a view of ferries on Elliott Bay, a sight he had not seen. In Europe he was always careful to buy postcards only of places he'd been to, feeling dishonest otherwise. But here he had no choice. He composed the letter in Bengali, an alphabet Ruma would not be able to decipher. "I am planting Ruma a garden," he began. "Akash has grown and is learning to swim. The weather is pleasant, no rain here in summer. I am looking forward to Prague," he ended. He did not sign his name. He looked through his wallet, where on a folded slip of paper he had written down Mrs. Bagchi's mailing address. He carried only a few addresses with him: his son and his daughter and now Mrs. Bagchi, all written on slips of paper that lived behind his driver's license and Social Security card. He filled out the address in English, and finally, at the top, her name.

He wondered where the nearest post office was. Would Ruma find it odd if he were to ask her for a stamp? He could take it back with him to Pennsylvania and mail it from there, but that seemed silly. He decided he could tell Ruma that he needed to mail a bill. There was a public mailbox two miles down the road; at some point before leaving he could drop it there. He didn't know where to put the postcard now. It was not an easy room to hide things in: the surfaces were clear, the corners visible, the closet bare apart from his few shirts. At some point in the day Ruma came downstairs—he never could tell when—in order to make his bed and check the hamper for laundry and wipe away the water that he splattered, in the course of brushing his teeth and shaving, at the sides of the sink. He considered putting the postcard in the pocket of his suitcase, but was too tired to get out of bed. Instead, he tucked it between the pages of the Seattle guidebook on the side table,

and then, as an extra precaution, put the book into the table drawer.

He turned to face his sleeping grandson, the long lashes and rounded cheeks reminding him of his own children when they were young. He was suddenly conscious that he would probably not live to see Akash into adulthood, that he would never see his grandson's middle age, his old age, this simple fact of life saddening him. He imagined the boy years from now, occupying this very room, shutting the door as Ruma and Romi had. It was inevitable. And yet he knew that he, too, had turned his back on his parents, by settling in America. In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore, he had forsaken them. He kissed Akash lightly on the side of his head, smoothing the curling golden hair with his hand, then switched off the lamp, filling the room with darkness.

Saturday morning, the day before her father was scheduled to leave, the garden was finished. After breakfast, he showed Ruma what he'd done. The shrubs were still small, with mulch around their bases and enough space to distinguish one from the next, but he said they'd grow taller and closer together, showing her with his hand the height she could anticipate by next summer. He told her how often to water, and for how long, to wait until the sun had gone down. He showed her the bottle of fertilizer he'd bought, and told her when to add it to the watering. Patiently she listened as Akash dashed in and out of his pool, but she absorbed little of what her father said.

"Watch out for these beetles," he said, plucking an insect off a leaf and flicking it away. "The hydrangea won't bloom much this year. The flowers will be pink or blue depending on the acidity of your soil. You'll have to prune it back, eventually."

She nodded.

"They were always your mother's favorite," her father added. "In this country, that is."

Ruma looked at the plant, at the dark green leaves with serrated edges. She had not known.

"Make sure to keep the tomatoes off the ground." He leaned over, readjusting one of the plants. "This stake should be enough to support them, or you could use a little string. Don't let them dry out. If the sun is strong check them twice a day. If frost comes before they've ripened, pick them and wrap them up in newspaper. And cut down the delphinium stalks in the fall."

"Maybe you could do that," she suggested.

He stood up awkwardly, a hand gripping the front of his thigh. He took off his baseball cap and wiped his forehead with his arm. "I have a trip scheduled. I've already bought the ticket."

"I mean after you get back, Baba."

Her father had been looking down at his dirt-trimmed fingernails, but now he raised his face and looked around him, at the garden and at the trees.

"It is a good place, Ruma. But this is your home, not mine." She had expected resistance, so she kept talking. "You can have the whole downstairs. You can still go on your trips whenever you like. We won't stand in your way. What do you say, Akash," she called out. "Should Dadu live with us in here? Would you like that?"

Akash began jumping up and down in the pool, squirting water from a plastic dolphin, nodding his head.

"I know it would be a big move," Ruma continued. "But it would be good for you. For all of us." By now she was crying. Her father did not step toward her to comfort her. He was silent, waiting for the moment to pass.

"I don't want to be a burden," he said after a while.

"You wouldn't. You'd be a help. You don't have to make up your mind now. Just promise you'll think about it."

He lifted his head and looked at her, a brief sad look that seemed finally to take her in, and nodded.

"Would you like to do anything special on your last day here?" she asked. "We could drive into Seattle for lunch."

He seemed to brighten at the suggestion. "How about the boat ride? Is that still possible?"

She went inside, telling him she was going to get Akash ready and look up the schedule. He was suddenly desperate to leave, the remaining twenty-four hours feeling unbearable. He reminded himself that tomorrow he would be on a plane, heading back to Pennsylvania. And that two weeks after that he would be going to Prague with Mrs. Bagchi, sleeping next to her at night. He knew that it was not for his sake that his daughter was asking him to live here. It was for hers. She needed him, as he'd never felt she'd needed him before, apart from the obvious things he provided her in the course of his life. And because of this the offer upset him more. A part of him, the part of him that would never cease to be a father, felt obligated to accept. But it was not what he wanted. Being here for a week, however pleasant, had only confirmed the fact. He did not want to be part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it. He did not want to live in the margins of his daughter's life, in the shadow of her marriage. He didn't want to live again in an enormous house that would only fill up with things over the years, as the children grew, all the things he'd recently gotten rid of, all the books and papers and clothes and objects one felt compelled to possess, to save. Life grew and grew until a certain point. The point he had reached now.

The only temptation was the boy, but he knew that the boy would forget him. It was Ruma to whom he would give a new reminder that now that his wife was gone, even though he was still alive, there was no longer anyone to care for her. When he saw Ruma now, chasing Akash, picking up after him, wiping his urine from the floor, responsible for his every need, he realized how much younger his wife had been when she'd done all that, practically a girl. By the time his wife was Ruma's age, their children were already approaching adolescence. The more the children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent—they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands. Oddly, it was his grandson, who was only half-Bengali to begin with, who did not even have a Bengali surname, with whom he felt a direct biological connection, a sense of himself reconstituted in another.

He remembered his children coming home from college, impatient with him and his wife, enamored of their newfound independence, always wanting to leave. It had tormented his wife and, though he never admitted it, had pained him as well. He couldn't help thinking, on those occasions, how young they'd once been, how helpless in his nervous arms, needing him for their very survival, knowing no one else. He and his wife were their whole world. But eventually that need dissipated, dwindled to something amorphous, tenuous, something that threatened at times to snap. That loss was in store for Ruma, too; her children would become strangers, avoiding her. And because she was his child he wanted to protect her from that, as he had tried throughout his life to protect her from so many things. He wanted to shield her from the deterioration that inevitably took place in the course of a marriage, and from the conclusion he sometimes feared was true: that the entire enterprise of having a family, of putting children on this earth,

as gratifying as it sometimes felt, was flawed from the start. But these were an old man's speculations, an old man who was himself now behaving like a child.

Her father left early the next morning, while Akash was still asleep. Again she'd offered to go to the airport, but this time he was even more adamant, telling her he didn't want to upset Akash's schedule. They were all tired from their day in Seattle. After the ferry ride they'd gone up the Space Needle and then had dinner in Pike Place Market before driving home. Joining her father in the kitchen, she saw that he'd already finished his cereal, the bowl and spoon in the drainer. The tea bag normally saved for a second cup later in the day had been tossed out.

"You've got everything?" she asked, seeing his suitcase by the door. He'd come bearing gifts but had bought nothing to take back with him. Everything he'd purchased in the past week, all the things from the nursery and the hardware store, the coiled-up hose and tools and bags of leftover topsoil now neatly arranged under the porch, had been for her.

"Call when you get home," she said, something her mother would say to her children when they parted. She asked for his flight information, writing it on the bottom of the same sheet of paper that was on the refrigerator door with Adam's itinerary.

"Adam will be here tonight?"

She nodded.

"Good. Things will return to normal then."

She wanted to tell him how normal it had felt, to have her father there. But she couldn't bring herself to say the words. Her father glanced at his watch, then poured a bit of his tea into his saucer in order to cool it more quickly. He raised the saucer to his lips, sipping from the rim.

"It has been a marvelous week, Ruma. I have enjoyed each day."

"Me too."

"These days with Akash have been the greatest gift," he added, his voice softening. "If you like, I can come for a while after you have the baby. I won't be as useful as your mother would have been."

"That's not true."

"But please understand, I prefer to stay on my own. I am too old now to make such a shift."

His gentle words fell on her thickly, too quickly. She understood that he had not had to think it over, that he had never intended to stay.

"Make time to look into law firms here," he continued. "Don't let all that hard work go to waste."

He stood up, and before she could stop him, rinsed out his cup and saucer and put those into the drainer as well. It was time to go.

"Let me go downstairs and give Akash a kiss," he said. He turned to leave the room, then stopped. "Do you have a spare stamp? I need to put a bill into the mail."

"In the drawer of the little table in the hall," she said. "There's a roll there."

She heard the drawer opening, then closing, then the sound of his flip-flops hitting the stairs. When he returned, he went to the entryway to put on his shoes, tied his laces, fit the flip-flops into the front pocket of his suitcase. He kissed Ruma on the cheek. "Take care of yourself. Let me know how the garden comes along." He glanced at her stomach and added, "I am waiting for the good news." He turned and walked outside to his car, putting the suitcase into the trunk. She stood watching as he turned on the engine and backed out, wondering when she would see him again. At the mailbox he paused, and for a

moment she thought he was about to open the window and put his bill inside. But he only waved through the closed window, leaning toward her, looking lost, and a few seconds later he was gone.

"Where's Dadu?" Akash asked as she was finishing her tea.

"He went home today."

"Why?"

"Because that's where he lives."

"Why?" In her son's small face she saw the disappointment she also felt.

"Daddy's coming back tonight," she said, trying to change the subject. "Should we make a cake?"

Akash went to the kitchen door and tried the knob, looking through the glass at the yard. "I want Dadu."

She opened the door for him and followed him out, both of them padding barefoot, Ruma treading gingerly, Akash not fearful of stones or twigs. It was chillier than she expected, still too early for the warmth of the day to have gathered. She considered going back in for sweaters. "Sweetpea? You cold?" she asked, folding her arms across her chest, but Akash did not reply. He picked up the empty watering can her father had left underneath the porch and pretended to water things in his little plot. She looked at the items poking out of the ground: pens and pencils, a straw, a Popsicle stick. There were papers, too: old envelopes from junk mail, the cards that fell out of magazines, seeking subscribers, folded up like little tents on the soil. Her eye fell to another piece of paper, stiffer than the rest. She bent down to look at it, recognizing her father's handwriting. She assumed it was a postcard her father had sent to her, one Akash had removed from the front of the refrigerator door, or the basket on the hall table. But this postcard bore no post-

mark, had not been sent. It was composed in Bengali and addressed in English to someone on Long Island. A Mrs. Meenakshi Bagchi.

She picked it up. "Akash, what's this?"

He reached out, attempting to snatch it back from her. "It's mine."

"What is it?" she asked, more harshly this time.

"It's for my garden."

"Did Dadu give this to you?"

He shook his head angrily, and then he started to cry.

She stared at the card and instantly she knew, just as she'd known from the expression on the surgeon's face what had happened to her mother on the operating table. The woman in the video, the reason for her father's trips, the reason for his good spirits, the reason he did not want to live in Seattle. The reason he'd wanted a stamp that morning. Here, in a handful of sentences she could not even read, was the explanation, the evidence that it was not just with Akash that her father had fallen in love.

He was in a bookshop in the airport, buying a newspaper to read at the gate, when he saw, propped by the register on a metal stand, a copy of the same guidebook to Seattle that had been at his bedside in Ruma's house. He'd searched everywhere for the book, overturning all the sheets, nearly waking up Akash in the process. He opened drawers he'd never used, peering on the shelf of the closet, wedging his hand as far as it would go under all sides of the mattress, cursing himself for not making the time to mail the card earlier. At last he spotted the book on the floor beneath the bed, on the side where Akash slept. He searched frantically through each page, shaking the book by its spine, but the postcard was missing. For an instant he'd been tempted to wake the boy, to ask if he'd seen it, put it

somewhere. He looked in the bathroom, in the laundry hamper, in the tub where just that morning he'd bathed. Finally, unable to justify his search any longer, knowing that he would miss his plane, he left, the unused stamp from Ruma still floating in his shirt pocket, its value more than a postcard needed, a weightless thing that filled him with dread.

She took Akash inside, wiped his tears and held him, and then, when he was calm, prepared his breakfast. She said yes when he asked if he could watch television, setting him with his cereal bowl behind the coffee table, and returned to the kitchen to look at the postcard again. Her first impulse was to shred it, but she stopped herself, staring at the Bengali letters her mother had once tried and failed to teach Ruma when she was a girl. They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in an instant, sentences that proved, with more force than the funeral, more force than all the days since then, that her mother no longer existed. Where had her mother gone, when life persisted, when Ruma still needed her to explain so many things?

She walked back outside, across the grass and looked at the hydrangea her father had planted, that was to bloom pink or blue depending on the soil. It did not prove to Ruma that her father had loved her mother, or even that he missed her. And yet he had put it there, honored her before turning to another woman. Ruma smoothed out the postcard in her hand, scraping away, with her fingernail, the dirt that obscured a bit of the Zip code. She turned the postcard around and looked at the front, at the generic view her father had chosen to commemorate his visit. Then she went back into the house, to the table in the hall. From the drawer she took out the roll of stamps and affixed one to the card, for the mailman, later in the day, to take away.