

Nine Twelve

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Like a ghost in the room, the future hung between them, and the question he posed rolled around Maria's head like a handful of colorful glass marbles dumped from a can. How could she tell him the question froze her brain? They - Maria Mannenta and Dr. Taranjeet Singh - sat at her dining room table, he studying a medical text and she tapping out short descriptions of churches for a history book she'd been hired to write. Taran's white turban lay unravelled on the other side of the table, the black band that rested beneath it - his *fiftie* - atop the pile, and he, minus the turban with his hair still rolled in a neat bun atop his head, propped his leg across hers. He absently stroked her upper arm, as if touching her would sear the medical words into his brain, and he looked serious and studious in his large wire-framed glasses, glasses she'd always teased him about, saying they made him look like a bug. And she, focussed on searching the precise word, rubbed the ball of his bare foot, gently squeezing his toes as if, genie-like, the act would inspire words to come. She patted his leg, gently pulling his curly leg hair. Taran smiled and touched her nose with the index finger of his right hand, his thin iron kara circling his wrist like a bracelet, cool against her cheek.

"So, *Mishri*? The verdict?" he asked, his musically-accented English betraying his Punjabi heritage. "A Thai restaurant is neutral," he added. He looked mischievous. He looked hopeful. "Just think. Each side will have to be civil in such a public place. And we'll invite your beloved M of Cs, too, for good measure".

She laughed. "First, we'd have to *tell* the M of Cs. And they may not be allowed to eat in restaurants, you know".

"We could explain that their presence is necessary to ensure peace between the two families, to quell riots between

the Italians on one side and Indian Sikhs on the other," he said, and laughed. "Bad press all the way around - we can tell them. Two sides with their own warriors, Soldatos and Sikhs." He smiled and removed his bug-eyed glasses and set them on the text, his large root beer-brown eyes filled with mirth. "The birth of the double-I war, Italy and India," he said. "It could spawn an entire Discovery Channel documentary".

Maria laughed. "Not even funny. Plus the M of Cs won't help much after my father asks yours why he wears a 'rag' on his head. That would be as welcome as a fart in an elevator and just as stinky."

Taran laughed. "I predict they will both say yes to each other all night long, because neither will understand what the other is saying," he said. "Think about it. 'Electricity' sounds like 'I-83.' Neither of them will know what the other is talking about, and they will nod and agree with each other all night."

She stopped typing and pushed her small, rectangular glasses into her hair like a headband. "I'm not sure my family is ready for us. Timing is everything," she said.

"No time like the present," he said.

After meeting a year ago at the convent where the Missionaries of Charity, the congregation of religious women founded by Mother Teresa, cared for dying AIDS patients, they'd dated on the sly, neither having the courage to tell their families or friends about each other. Between his hospital rounds, office hours, and on-call schedules and her magazine, newspaper, and book deadlines as a freelance writer, they'd spent every free moment together and even managed to take two weekend vacations - one to western Maryland's mountains, where she'd shivered in the early morning August chill and clung to his warm, brown body under the bed blankets before daring to ride bikes up and down the hills, and the other to Ocean City, where he'd substituted a blue-printed patka, a bandana, for his turban

because of the sand, and where he'd complained about the July sun baking his brain into a brick, while they flew kites on the beach. Although they couldn't bear to be without each other in their off times, they both felt it important to keep the existence of each other close to their hearts, like precious jewels. She pictured the post-announcement melodrama on both sides, her mother crossing herself a gazillion times saying, "*Madonna a la miseria*," and his mother doing whatever Sikh mothers did under duress when sons defied expectations for suitable mates. A multitude of reasons, a nine-year age difference - her being older - chief among them, and her status as a divorcee, ranked high against her, she knew without him having to say it.

"Exactly right," Taran added. "Timing exactly is everything. My family is pressuring me to marry. Already my mother and aunty have begun lining up suitable mates. I can't make new excuses much longer, especially now that they see my practice thriving. They have concluded that I'm ready to settle down, and they're right. They just don't yet know, my *Mishri*, of you."

Maria stiffened at the thought of him being introduced to others, but she harboured no illusions. "They are conservative, TJ. You said so yourself. They won't accept me. I know how divorced and widowed women are treated in India. Lower than pond scum."

"We're not Hindus. Sikhs are different. Everyone is equal, and you know this already. We're both in the same boat, *Mishri*. You know this, too. Your family won't be thrilled, either. So we present ourselves as a couple, and let the storm rage for as long as it takes for both sides to accept the inevitable. The question becomes when and where, and my vote is for as soon as possible. Besides, I have the final say of who, and I have already decided 'who' is you, regardless of the histrionics on either side. You just need to say 'who' is me. That's all."

She undid his hair-bun and watched the black folds fall

around his face and shoulders, cascading to his waist. She loved his hair, how it framed his face, making his root beer-colored eyes look bigger under his arched eyebrows. She loved how his pupils shrank and grew with his emotions, his eyes showing more expression than anyone she'd ever known. "Your family would never have to worry that I'd discourage you from keeping your hair the way it is," she whispered, running her fingers through the shiny, black strands. She wanted to rub coconut oil in them and massage his head.

"Quite beside the point, *Mishri*. Stop trying to change the topic. My worry isn't hair, as it is always under the turban except for when I am with you". He leaned forward and kissed her. "We've got to do this soon, the sooner the better, because I can't hold off my family with any more flimsy excuses. Already my brother is asking if I am gay."

She laughed. "Point taken. Maybe we should talk to the Sisters first," she said. "They can advise us."

Maria would never forget first seeing Taran. She'd spotted him from one of the convent's empty hospital-like rooms she'd been asked to clean with two other Sisters. Except for Hector, the sickest, the residents had gone into the kitchen or the common room. She'd watched his slender, brown fingers tenderly pull the feeding tube out of Hector's black belly, and she'd watched him care for the ailing man with a rare tenderness. He'd spoken to Hector in soft, slow tones, and she remembered smiling at the cadences, his accented English sounding musical. She'd watched him clean the tube, his nimble fingers practiced, his face placid, not grimacing at the chore that she knew she'd find difficult to complete, and she'd watched Hector, who probably looked older than his actual years, peering into his caretaker's face and smiling appreciatively, wrapping his trembling, black, skeletal fingers around his the caretaker's brown ones. From the room where her double-gloved hands had cleaned hospital beds with bleach water, wiped down

drawers and chairs, wiped the bed springs, where she'd worked with the Sisters at the convent hospice, she'd watched him through the gap of the door left ajar, watched him smile at Hector, squeeze his bony hand, joke with him, tell him stories, his melodious voice lifting and falling as his long fingers wrung a cloth in a basin sitting on a night table. He'd gently run the cloth over Hector's thin face, across his chin, down his wrinkled neck, washed the man's hands. A Sikh, his wine-colored turban folded precisely in neat pleats, he'd wet the cloth again and washed Hector's arms and belly, and when he glanced away from Hector for just a moment, his eyes met hers - for only a minute - and she'd thought they looked merry, and she'd known that he knew she'd been watching him. He'd smiled at her, and she'd lowered her eyes and looked away, focusing on the work that the Sisters had assigned her, the cleaning of the hospice rooms, the making of beds with crisp, white sheets. The Sisters - two in the room with her - had worked diligently, praying aloud, pulling her back into the task with their strong prayer-filled voices.

"You say the second part," one of the Sisters said after they'd completed the first half of the prayer. But the words had flown out of her head. The glance between them - her and the Sikh - had lasted only a minute, but it'd thrilled her, and she had felt her stomach tense and adrenaline race through her body like an electric current, and unlike the Sisters, Maria could only focus on the classic beauty of his face, strong features, sensuous lips like David come to life. Except thinner. She couldn't say the prayer.

Busy with their separate duties, Maria and the Sikh hadn't spoken to each other at all, and when she, exhausted, left the convent to walk three miles home, she thought she'd never see him again. She'd passed boarded-up homes standing in lines like fallen soldiers, their windows like sightless dead slumped in a row on Monument Street in the heart of east Baltimore's worst ghetto. She'd travelled only

a mere two blocks when she heard a car horn honking furiously. The maroon turban tight and neat around his head, the Sikh waved from a silver Toyota and flashed that brilliant smile, his eyes as merry as if he'd just heard a good joke.

"Sister T. asked me to drive you home. She said it might be unsafe for you to walk," he'd said, still smiling, his moustache and nascent beard encircling his lips and white teeth like a fence protecting that smile. Instead of taking her home, he had taken her to a coffee shop, where she'd ordered a sandwich and eaten it ravenously. She hadn't eaten at the convent, just worked.

"I sometimes forget to eat when I'm there too," he'd said.

"I didn't forget. All their food is donated. I hold off until I get home," she said.

"Hmmm," he'd said, smiling.

The same smile that beguiled her a year ago graced his face now, and his shiny, black eyes looked just as bemused. He took both her hands into his. "Stop typing for one minute. I phoned Sister T. two days ago and told her everything. They know everything."

Maria jerked her head back in surprise. "Serious? What did Sister T. say?"

"The usual. She said she'd pray over it. She'll let us know about the restaurant. Sundays are busy days for them, especially when they visit D.C."

"Was she surprised?"

"If she was, she didn't sound it," he said.

"Such an organized and planful King of Tigers," Maria said.

"All for you, my Queen of Hearts", he said. He replaced those large-lensed, wire-rimmed glasses on his nose and pulled a paper from the back of his medical text.

"Now, voila, the Dr. Singh treatment plan for our future. Today is September ninth. We invite both families to a Thai place or anyplace you want next Sunday, the sixteenth. So you can't procrastinate or hide behind deadlines. The

Mannenta family - parents and siblings and spouses - and the Singh family - parents and sibling and spouse - will meet for the first time on September 16 and so begin the double-I wars. Seriously, Maria, my *Mishri*, I want to be with you for my lifetime. I don't care about your divorced status or the age difference or anything else. We can marry sometime in 2002 - and no hurry, as I know that concept scares you - but in the meantime, our families can get used to the idea. They might even discover they actually like each other."

In the kitchen, Taran filled a pot with milk. He added a little masala (spices) - some cardamom, a clove, some cinnamon - sugar and water and set the pot on the burner. Moving around her kitchen, taking the bag of loose tea, spooning it into a tea egg, and dropping it into the pot before he reached into another cabinet for two mugs, he looked at home. Maria watched him, liking how comfortable he looked in her kitchen, how his height enabled him to reach the topmost cabinet shelves, how he moved with self-assurance, as if his being there meant the most natural place for him to be. He brought two mugs of chai (tea) to the dining room table and set one before her with a napkin.

"I like your hopeful plan," she said. Her stomach tensed at the prospects of sharing Taran with her family, but it tensed more at the prospects of his family starting the wheels of an arranged marriage for him. To someone else. She'd seen miracles take place at the convent, miracles that had attracted both of them to volunteer with the Sisters, miracles like answered prayers and transformed lives, and their families accepting them as a couple would be nothing short of a miracle. Taran sat back in his chair and propped his leg across hers again, and she couldn't help herself, she had to touch him.

"This time next week, the proverbial muck might be flying in the double-I war, but *Mishri*, at least we won't have to hide anymore. Just like a chemo treatment - it might get worse before it gets better, but the prognosis looks positive

hereon, positive, indeed," he said. He sipped the tea and stuffed the paper with the outline of his hopeful plan for their future in the back of his textbook.

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Taran's beeper rang on Monday morning at 4 a.m. and shook them out of their sleep. He leaned across the bed, his loose hair cascading around them both, and reached the annoying device. Instinctively, she raised her arms around his slender body and groaned, revelling in the faint smell of cologne still on him. He viewed the number.

"Who, TJ?" she said, yawning and stretching.

"Who else? Hospital," he said, still leaning across her and dialling the number from her phone.

"Singh here," he said into the phone. "Uh-hm, hm hm, subdural hematoma. Fractured sternum, broken ribs, that too? Lorry accident. Okay, okay, okay, I'll be there." He clicked off the phone and returned it to the base.

"Darling *Mishri*, I must go, but you sleep," he said, kissing the tip of her nose.

"Nope. I'll get up now, work for a few hours, and then spend the day with the M of Cs," she said. "Tea?" she asked.

Taran rose, hurriedly slipped into a pair of socks, and stepped into his pants. "No time," he said. "Patient's prognosis is poor." When Taran disappeared into the bathroom to wash, Maria slipped into a tee shirt and gym shorts and ran downstairs to collect the unravelled turban and fiftie from the table. In the bedroom, he finished buttoning his shirt. He bent over, hanging his hair down, in front of his face, and carefully combed it in swift, downward strokes. He stood before the mirror, collected all the strands in his fists, twisted the hair like a rope, and then rolled it into a bun on the top of his head. She watched him from behind and marvelled how fast he worked and how, in the mirror, their images contrasted so starkly, he, tall and brown and she, short and light. Her hair, honey-colored with blond highlights, looked almost golden compared to his shiny,

much longer, black hair, in keeping with the Sikh requirement that he keep it unshorn throughout his life. Their eyes - both sets dark brown - and their seemingly perpetual smiles remained their only similarities. When he appeared satisfied with the way the bun sat on the top of his head, she handed him his black fiftie, which he wrapped carefully midway on his forehead.

"I'll help so you won't have to use the door knob," she said.

Taran took the unravelled turban fabric and opened it, handing her the two opposite ends. The yardage - close to six yards, she gauged - always surprised her. "Thanks," he said. She could tell he was already thinking about the duties that faced him at the hospital.

"Back up, we have to pull to it - stretch it - remember?" She nodded, backing out of the bedroom door into the hallway. Taran pulled the fabric and directed her to fold it into half and half again and half again. "Stay there," he said, walking toward her and rolling the fabric around his elbow and arm the same way her father wrapped the garden hose around his when he was putting it away.

He stood close to her, his eyes shining, and gingerly took the ends from her hands, their fingers brushing. "Thanks for helping my turban *poonie*," he said, almost in a whisper. His arms filled with the fabric, he stood so close she could feel his breath and the bottom of his dwarfish beard, and she tiptoed and hugged him.

"I prefer helping you to unravel it," she said, knowing that outside his family, she was probably the only one who had ever seen him without it. Unlike Maria, who had been married before and who had experienced the emotional roller coaster of the dating scene, Taran had focussed solely on his education almost to the exclusion of other activities. But by the time they'd met, Maria had lived a monastic and celibate life, mourning not the loss of her former husband who'd betrayed her, but the loss of the potential. Her post-

divorce life rolled from one story to the next, from one project to the next, punctuated by time at the gym and her volunteer work with the Sisters. Until Taran had invited her to dinner that first time and asked her about her life, she hadn't realized that five years had evaporated into paper clouds, gym sweat, and buckets of bleach water. It startled her how content she'd grown in a solitary life that she would have dismissed as lonely in her pre-divorce days. She hadn't felt lonely so much as self-sufficient and self-contained, until Taran, who had surprised her with deliveries of roses, sent her text-message jokes, showed up when she was in deadline with Chinese dinners, commandeered her couch where he studied and read, and he had wooed her with his sensitivity and quiet intelligence; despite their cultural differences - largely contained in the turban sitting atop his head - she relied on his steady smile and calm voice and now couldn't imagine him not there. Wishing the pager had remained mute, she looked into his shining eyes and ran her finger around his ear, along his chin, and to his lips.

"As do I," he said, and kissed her finger first and then her.

She watched him place one end in his mouth and wrap the turban neatly and carefully, until his entire head was encircled by the fabric. He pulled up a portion from behind and covered up the top of the fiftie and the top of his head and used her rattail comb to smooth the wraps in the front.

"So, neat and smooth?" he asked.

She patted the wraps, smoothed them. "Give me the comb," she said, and used the stem to push remaining hair from his neck under the turban. His face, framed by the white turban and the black triangle now left of fiftie, looked different. She understood the strength of character and courage it took to set oneself visually apart from everyone else. Taran must have had eleven different turbans, royal blue, black, houndstooth, printed ones, the wine-coloured one, but he'd been favouring the white ones since his

residency ended and he focussed on building a practice. She considered the Sisters - weren't they doing the same thing with their blue-edged sari habits and sandals? - distinguishing themselves, just as Taran's turban distinguished him.

"Okay, Queen of Hearts, you must call the troops for Sunday. Which Thai place - Charles Street or Fells Point? I'll make the reservations later, as I know you will be busy with the Sisters."

"Charles Street is bigger."

"More room for food fights?" he said, and laughed.

"Don't leave your day job because you won't make it as a comedian," she said.

"Do your thing, *Mishri*. Call up the troops for Sunday. I think my parents have an inkling, anyway. I'm never home anymore so, so, so I must go there tonight."

He kissed her lips quickly. "Love you love you love," he said, and then hurried down the stairs. "Later," he shouted before shutting the door behind him.

At the dining room table, Maria fired up her laptop. She wondered how different next Monday would feel since the entire family by then would know that she'd committed herself to a Sikh. The church description she'd been working on the previous night popped up: Saint Thérèse of the Little Flower, the saint who focussed on little ways to be good in this world and who'd developed a reputation for sending roses for granted prayers, and she realized that saints and gurus did pretty much the same thing: led the faithful to the same shapeless, formless, faceless God. She and Taran echoed each in the most important ways. So why not commit to a Sikh, her Sikh, her King of Tigers? Her lover, TJ.

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Unable to sleep without Taran next to her, Maria awoke at dawn on Tuesday.

She missed him, missed the smell of his cologne, missed the sound of his gentle voice, missed the feel of his arms

around her body, missed the rhythmic sound of his breathing. She pulled his pillow close to her and hugged it, sniffing it because it carried his scent. She closed her eyes and forced herself to find sleep again, but it eluded her, and so she decided to start the day with a twenty-minute run before she'd clean the house, inspired by yesterday's cleaning sessions at the convent. She didn't mind the early start and enjoyed watching the sunrise over the Inner Harbour when she jogged around Rash Field. The yellow sun painted the azure sky, promising a spectacular fall day.

Back at home, she switched on the stereo to listen to CDs and made herself instant oatmeal. Expecting a quiet morning, she'd mapped the day out in her head: cleaning and working.

She cleaned her house the way she'd cleaned the convent the day before, except instead of praying, she sang and danced her way through the rooms, courtesy of rock and roll and techno dance music, to keep her energy high. Later in the shower, the phone rang incessantly. At first she ignored the rings, but when the rings failed to stop, she hurried to answer it. The phone rang again and she, muttering, ran for it.

"Maria, where the hell have you been? Turn the TV on now," her sister Tina shouted at the other end of the phone.

"Hurry up, I'll hold on."

Tina had never sounded so unglued. "What's going on?"

"You'll see", she said. "OhmyGod, ohmyGod, you'll see," Tina cried.

"Has something happened to Mom or Dad?" Maria asked, unnerved by her sister's weepiness.

"Worse, worse, worse," Tina repeated.

What possibly could be worse? Maria wondered. Wrapped in a towel, still damp, Maria rushed downstairs, clicked off the loud stereo, and flicked on the TV, just in time to see an airplane fly into the World Trade Center. "Holy shit! Oh, my God," she said into the phone.

"That was the second plane. A first one flew into the other tower. I've been trying to call you. Where've you been?" The cool sister Tina hardly ever broke down but laughed when she saw people fall in the street, not out of maliciousness but stress. Tina had long been tougher, whereas Maria had always cried in movies, over books, over newspaper articles so much, Tina had dubbed her "The Wuss".

Now Maria felt shocked into numbness. Transfixed, she watched events unfold on the television and news of a third plane hitting the Pentagon caused her sister to sob. "Holy shit, holy shit," she said. "It'll be okay, Tina", she heard herself whispering monotone into the phone, not believing it. She wanted to talk to Taran, but she usually didn't call him at work.

Call-waiting signals chimed in. Both her parents and three aunts called, and she hid the disappointment that none of the callers brought his voice into her ear.

Fingering the towel, she realized she needed to get dressed and eased her sister off the phone. She called Taran, but his cell phone took her directly to voice mail. "It's me", she said. "I guess you've heard about what's happening. Call me when you can."

Hurriedly, she pulled on jeans and a tee shirt and sprinted back to the living room to watch television news, now announcing that another plane had crashed in rural Pennsylvania. In mute shock, she watched first one and then the other tower fall and realized she felt too scared to cry. Instead of working, instead of calling the troops for Sunday's announcement, she couldn't tear herself away from news and even trolled for it on her laptop.

Finally, in late afternoon, Taran sent a text message: "*Mishri*, too hectic to call. Tonight with parents due to today's events. Tomorrow night, dinner Mem Saheb. Urgent you are ready at 6 p.m. 'Till then, all my love."

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The Mem Saheb, a cozy Indian restaurant in Havre de Grace - about an hour's drive northeast of Baltimore - sat in the middle of the block. Initially, they had eaten there to avoid detection, to avoid being spotted at Baltimore restaurants by their numerous family and friends, but over the year, it had evolved into their place, gaining significance with their special booth and recognition by the wait staff. Maria especially loved the restaurant's elephant décor and often stood before one of two wooden elephant statues that flanked the entryway. The elephant décor hadn't impressed Taran as much as the restaurant's off-the-menu offering of *Wazoo*, a series of dishes with the main course being lamb or mutton, prepared almost exactly as he remembered it growing up in Kashmir. "What an unexpected surprise," he'd said, when the restaurant owner had sent it out to him on their third or fourth visit to the place.

Tonight, a large sign printed in red ink greeted them. It said, "We are not Arabs. We are Sikh, and we love America."

Taran's face darkened. He glanced at the eatery's Punjabi owner and grimaced. "Let's just take our seat", he said, and guided her to their booth. The owner, a heavyset man came over and welcomed them. He and Taran spoke in Punjabi.

"TJ, what's going on?" Maria asked.

"Nothing, slow since yesterday," he said.

The table had already been set, and a candelabra with two long, white candles aflame sat in the center.

"That candelabra doesn't look Indian," Maria said. "It looks Italian!"

Taran smiled. "Just a small celebration that we are alive and found each other," he said. "Yesterday's events inspired me to put things in a different perspective. We're not promised tomorrow, even if we take it for granted. So I want to celebrate today," he said.

"You sound like you OD'ed on Hallmark cards", Maria said, taking a sip of her lassi.

"I started thinking about it after speaking to a colleague at the ER at Saint Vincent's, where the great surprise came from the small numbers of the wounded being brought to the ER", he said. "I ordered for us, already, when I made the reservation, so no menus tonight, *Mishri*."

"What did you order for me?"

"The dish you've chosen to have more times than any other since we've been eating here," he said. "Ms. Eggplant. But other stuff as well, you'll see".

"I can't believe what happened yesterday," Maria said.

"Shocking. Totally shocking," Taran said. "We were waiting to hear if some physicians were needed to get to New York to help with the wounded, but the eeriest thing, only a small number of the wounded showed up at ERs," he said. "So instead, a group of pathologists got on a train this morning."

"Hard to believe it happened," she said. "My sister Tina broke down and actually cried. But I haven't been able to cry. All those people in that building, the daycare center, the people on the subways, the people on the planes that crashed, thinking of them makes my brain freeze. Like being on a roller coaster and being too afraid to scream," she said.

"People were guilty of only going to work," he said. He shook his head. "I often see how delicate the line is between life and death, but yesterday just hammered it home in such an unforgettable way, and that's why I wanted us to be together tonight at our special place." He took her hand, the kara on his wrist sliding around the top of his hand.

"You know, *Mishri*, Sikhs have endured a long history of violence at foreign hands. When the Moguls first invaded India, they gave Sikhs a choice to convert to Islam or die, and many people, whole families, died. Our tenth Guru's entire family was slaughtered, first his father, then two of his sons, and then the other two sons. Feeling vulnerable and powerless inspires one to reevaluate everything in life. Nothing will be the same for anyone."

"My parents wore kirpans - ceremonial knives, articles of faith really, symbolizing the Sikh vow to fight injustice, and some Sikhs actually learn some kind of martial arts."

"Did you learn this martial arts thing?"

"Nah, no need. Especially not in the U.S.," he said.

When the meal began to arrive, the array and variety of the foods - many she had never eaten before - surprised her. "Except for the eggplant, these aren't regular menu selections, are they?" Maria asked.

"Some are, but most aren't. They are traditional dishes from where my family comes from in Kashmir," he said. "Do you like them?"

"Very much," she said, spooning some black dal onto her rice.

"Traditional dishes served at engagement parties," he said. Taran pulled a small box from the inside pocket of his jacket and placed it on the table. "*Mishri*, I wanted this night to be special. I was going to do this Sunday in front of all the troops, but after yesterday, I decided not to wait but to do it now, just us, the way it has been for all these months. Just the two of us."

Taran opened the box and pulled out a ring and slipped it on her finger. "Say yes to a lifetime with me, *Mishri*," he whispered.

Maria nodded a yes. She blinked back tears, looked at the ring on her finger, and grinned. "The start of the double-I wars."

Through the rest of the dinner, Maria kept looking at the ring - a pear-shaped diamond in a platinum setting - shining on her finger. "TJ. We're doing this! We're actually doing this!"

"Yesterday, I wondered who I'd call if I were facing my last hours and, again and again, your face came to mind. Despite the obstacles of culture, despite the objections - real or imagined - by family members, I only want to be with you. So why not make it happen?"

When Taran asked for the check, the restaurant owners refused to deliver one. Husband and wife, he, in his kitchen clothes and she, a green-and-gold salwar-kameez, smiled and waved from the doorway to the kitchen. Taran left a pile of bills on the table, anyway, and pulled her out of the restaurant.

"It's done now," he said, and smiled. They strolled around the quaint town and headed for the waterfront. Holding hands, they sat on the gray stone bulkhead of the Susquehanna River and watched a train speed by on the bridge crossing the river and moonlight dance on the river water.

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In the car, before Taran slipped the key into the ignition, Maria leaned over and kissed him. "Do you think we should tell the troops before Sunday?" she asked.

"Up to you. You can do whatever you want," Taran said. "Because right now, nothing can make me feel unhappy, not even your dad's supposed comments about my wearing a 'rag' on my head."

Taran pointed the car in the direction of I-95 South, and both of them admired the large Victorian houses that lined some of the small town's streets, nearly all the houses displaying American flags.

"Not even on July fourth have I seen so many flags," Maria said.

"Because of the attack," he said. "I understand too. I was thinking about getting a small flag for the car aerial," he said.

"Oh, please get one for mine too," she said.

Closer to the highway, he spotted a gas station and drove in.

"Be right back", he said. Maria watched him enter the convenience store, and through the window, she watched as he paid for gas, the top of his white turban visible over the store's sale signs. He strolled over and began pumping gas into the Toyota, and Maria decided to get out of the car and

keep him company. She kept looking at the ring on her hand.

"So when did you get this?" she asked.

"Yesterday - I ran over to a jeweller near the hospital. I did everything yesterday - why it was too hectic to call you, and I was afraid I would just blurt it out, anyway, and spoil the surprise."

Maria laughed. "You're pretty good with secrets," she said.

"You will discover that that is a great myth," he said, "especially when it pertains to you."

"Not true, TJ," Maria said.

"Here's proof. I told my parents last night. They know now, and they're looking forward to meeting you. Like tomorrow night. For dinner," Taran smiled wide. "You'll get to meet all my family, including my brother and his wife, and grandparents, and my dog Jimmy."

A silver BMW sedan swung into the gas station. Maria watched two white men in baseball caps step out front and two others remained in the vehicle. One of them pointed at Taran before they went into the store.

"TJ, I have a bad feeling. Let's get out of here," she said.

"We're in a gas station, *Mishri*. In plain view."

"Please, let's go. I have a bad feeling."

"Nothing's going to happen. We'll be fine. Just let me finish pumping, and we'll leave."

The two men emerged from the store and both leaned on the sedan, staring at them and talking to the two others in the back. Finally, the larger one screamed, "Hey, A-Rab!"

"TJ, let's leave now."

"Only two dollars more to go, *Mishri*."

"We don't need the two dollars that much. Let's go, please, TJ."

"I don't want to scamper away like a coward. I'm not Arab," he said. "I am Sikh. I am not a coward."

The two men sauntered over to them, followed by the two others who emerged from the sedan.

"I said, A-RAB," the larger one said.

Neither Taran nor Maria answered.

"If you stinking A-rabs hate our country so much, why don't you just go back. Fucking al-Qaida," the smaller one said. The other two stood behind them, their legs spread apart as if they were going to spring.

"I'm not Arab. I am Sikh," Taran said. He replaced the nozzle. "I am Sikh from India, nowhere near the Middle East."

"You look like an A-Rab to us. You're denying it now because you don't want your ass whapped," the bigger man shouted. "And you're going to pay for what you people did to us yesterday, you and your al-Qaida fuckers who hate our country but want to live here anyway."

"NO," Maria screamed. "Leave us alone."

"You're no better, fucking cunt. Cohorting with a traitor who attacked our country."

"Taran's not a traitor. He's not Arab. He's not al-Qaida," she screamed, moving closer to Taran.

"Liars," the bigger one yelled. "Let's get 'em, boys. Show this fucking al-Qaida bastard what happens when he fucks with Americans."

The men - all four - sprang toward Taran, and without thinking, Maria placed herself in between them and her man. She felt a blow land and another. She kicked at one of the attackers, but ineffectively. Someone pulled her away from Taran, and she scrambled back to him, only to be dragged away again. She saw Taran throw one punch and then another. He didn't look like a fighting man. She saw him kick at one of his attackers, but the kick sliced the air. She saw him, grim-faced, fend off blows, but overwhelmed by the two men, he sank, his turban crooked on his head. Maria dug her heel into the shin of one of her attackers and ran toward where she saw Taran go down, but the other man dragged her away from him and then pinned her to the ground. She couldn't see her lover after that, but she heard grunts, yelps, slaps, and blows land and she heard bones break.

"Let's show this cunt what happens to traitors," she heard one of the attackers say. She struggled to loosen herself from the grip of two pair of hands, but they overpowered her. Without weapons, she raised her torso, attempting to headbang the man sitting on her. Maybe she could bite his nose, his lips, his hands? She tried to smack her attacker with her head, but he blocked her effort, and everything went black after that.

* * *

When Maria opened her eyes, she saw lights, white lights, and she heard the computer beep of hospital machinery. Sister T.'s face, her head covered by the white-and-blue edged sari habit, peered down at her.

"Maria?"

"Where's TJ?" Maria whispered. Her parched throat hurt when she spoke.

"Don't speak. You're badly hurt," she said.

Maria looked around, realized the beeping hospital machines were not a dream.

"Taran?"

Sister T. shook her head. She placed a pile of white fabric - bloodstained - in Maria's hands. Maria could still smell Taran's British Sterling cologne. She held the fabric tightly, clung to it. She blinked her eyes in frustration. No one was telling her what she wanted to know: Where was TJ?

"You have visitors," Sister T. said.

Sister T. left the room, her footsteps silent on the hospital floor. Maria smelled the fabric, the remnant of cologne mixed with the remnants of old blood. She thought about Taran. She pictured him smiling. She remembered his kicks slicing the air.

Sister T. returned with a man and woman Maria had never seen before. Like Taran, the man wore a turban, except his was navy blue, and he had a longish beard that parted ever so slightly in the middle of his chin. The woman wore a white salwar-kameez, and Maria wondered if she were

one of the Sisters, except in a different habit without the head covering. But the woman looked familiar, as if Maria had seen her before somehow and had forgotten. Maria looked at them quizzically, and her head began to hurt.

Her parents, both looking frail, and her sister Tina, looking fatigued, and Tina's husband, followed the strange couple in with Sister M. behind them. Another man with a turban and woman in a light salwar-kameez entered the room. The man looked like a shorter, fatter version of TJ.

"You can't stay long," Sister T. told the group.

"Taran's parents," Sister T. said. "His brother Mandeep and his wife. They've all been sitting vigil with your family since you've been here."

"TJ?" she croaked the words. "We got engaged," she whispered. "Where is he?" Images of Taran's legs slicing the air flashed in her mind. She tried to raise herself from the bed but the movement made her head hurt. "TJ's OK?"

No one said anything. Not Sister T., not her parents, not Tina, whose eyes blinked, not her husband, whose pursed lips looked as if they were locked shut, and not Taran's parents, who stood stiff like tall statues. Not his brother or his brother's wife, their eyes wide and serious, their lips a straight line across the bottoms of their faces. No one uttered a syllable. All mute. She looked at their faces, one by one, and then at the bloodstained white turban, bundled in her hands.

* * *

I dedicate this story to the American martyr, Sardar Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was killed in Arizona on 9/12, 2001[Author].

Remembering Father

Tenth Anniversary

Ajmer Rode

All beings are the honey of this earth - *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*

Iron Notes

Why celebrate the memory
of a man like my father who was just
one of the tribe

Never to school
Never to gurdwara
Never learnt to read

No time. No special
accomplishment except he married
my mother eight decades ago

raised a family
now numbering 70
scattered over half the globe.

Some remember him
sitting on his feet, anvil in front,

iron bar
in the left hand
hammer in the right

iron notes
echoing the rhythm of
his heartbeat.

Some see his naked biceps
rise and fall
as he saws a log of tahli,