

I'm not a bot















Little while more with Papa. I wonder if Amil thinks about you on this day like I do. Then Amil hobbled slow out of one of the hospital rooms on crutches. Maybe it's time Malli knew. I slipped a knife one in my mouth and tried to chew it, but it almost broke my teeth. Later when Amil and I went outside, we saw Kazi in the garden picking vegetables. I guess the difference is that I do well in school and Amil doesn't. Amil thinks he's being funny. I want to ask Dadi, but she never tells me anything, at least anything important. But I know he's not. I don't know where he keeps all of it, but each year on my birthday, another piece appears at my bedside in a dark blue velvet box with gold trim. Papa was quiet. "The other day made me realize we aren't safe. The boy playing the tabla also sang. He turned and saw me and motioned me over. He turned away. Usually I hear them talking loudly, laughing sometimes. I'm becoming more and more afraid to ask anyone else all the things I really want to know. He asked how school was. "Before he hired me, he did the cooking for your mama, and when they had guests, they'd pretend she did the cooking. "My family didn't understand how I could turn away from all the Hindu girls they found for me. I touched the small bump where the rock hit me. He said someone needs to make a record of the things that will happen because the grown-ups will be too busy. I think of everyone I know and try to remember if they are Hindu or Muslim or Sikh and who has to go and who can stay. "I just wish I knew who beat Kazi and why," I said. I finished my work and helped him clean some green beans and chop the garlic and ginger into the tiniest pieces you ever saw, but Kazi didn't tell me anything and I could tell he didn't want to. "It's okay, Nishi," he said, and patted my arm. Today we were running late, though, and Amil couldn't spend forever eating his kheer because Dadi took our plates away and told us to get ready. I hate hearing their tongues smacking around. Why are we fighting each other?" Amil cocked his head to the side, thinking. I remember trying to like it since Amil liked it so much. We quickly move to our own beds in the morning, so no one ever knows. I see the way he studies the writing, his eyes squinted, his face pinched. "Maybe," Amil answered. We broke off pieces to chew. Kazi once gave him a drawing pad. "Papa, Papa," we called, running toward him. I like to watch. One of them was a teacher at our school who always dyes his gray hair red. I watch the backs of them as they walk down the road, Sabeen's mother's hips swaying, her hand in Sabeen's, while Sabeen tells her everything about her day. "Only after, when it started to swell." He lowered his foot down carefully. He said he had known it because this morning he saw Papa take out the jasmine incense. The fear I felt almost seemed like something exciting, and yet I knew it wasn't. "What brings you here, Nisha?" he finally asked. "Everybody thinks they are protecting and defending their people. I thought about the old Papa, the one who tickled us. When Papa came in to kiss us good night, I could smell the rosewater on his lips from dessert. "Are you doing anything to provoke them?" Papa asked. "Papa will always be mad at me. An hour went by and he didn't come back, so I went out to look for him. When his breathing grew deep and rhythmic, I got up and tiptoed out of the room. I hope Amil doesn't think about it too much. Where can her family be safe? But I couldn't see anything and then you were gone. Good night, Mama. I'm just not what he wanted." "That's not true," I said, and put my hand on his shoulder. "Nisha and Amil, it's time to go to sleep," Papa said after he finished and sat down in his big chair. I wish you could give me a sign. In fact, other than my schoolteachers reading out of our textbooks, no one had ever read to me before. When we leave for the new India, things will be better. When Kazi was ready to go, Amil and Dadi had to pull me away. They were Muslim. It makes me think of the chewed-up food going down their throats slow and wet, and I want to scream. She slapped my hand and told me to run and play with Amil, who was nowhere to be found. My legs and arms get all scratched up. He decorates them with swirling snakes and hungry scorpions. "Amil," I said, poking him awake, standing over him. I chewed and stayed silent just like Amil said I should. He always falls asleep quickly, the moment his head touches his pillow. After everyone went home, Amil and I lay on our beds quietly. Many girls wear Kohl, but Papa is very strict about those things. I told him it was his fault because he drew too many angry pictures of the boys who chase him. I poked my head in, but he shooed me out quickly. When we were about seven or eight, Amil ran away. We're a family. A low, full moon glittered in the sky, and the light spilled through our window like a silver sun. She looked at the other girls, but no one said anything more. No one else knows it's there. So I kept quiet and went through the lentils, makingsure there were no little pebbles or grit and rinsed them off with water. What if he was hurt, alone, and bleeding? Sometimes Amil draws Dadi or Papa when they aren't looking and only shows me. His voice sounded small and light. His words were slow and heavy. This afternoon, I used his mortar and pestle to grind coriander seeds first crushing them as hard as I could, then twisting the pestle in circles to flatten them and make them into a powder. "He's lonely," Amil said. I found him sitting in the garden putting little green beetles in holes he dug, burying them alive. "What arewe doing?" Papa shook his head and he became quiet. We stood and waited in the hallway until Papa came. But he hates writing anything down, except for his drawings. I could still smell the scent of spices, perfume, and incense swirling around in the air. It feels scary to read, because once the words are out, you can't put them back in. "Why did they do that? He says he writes what he sees in the moment. I was already in medical college and my classes ended earlier. He lifted up my mosquito net and crawled into my bed next to me. I wondered if I had told a terrible secret. I don't ask many questions, so it would be fairer if he answered the few I ask. I rolled the dough into a ball and flattened it again into a thin circle. Then I stuck it in my schoolbook for Amil when no one was looking. Love, Nisha August 1, 1947 Dear Mama, This is what I did today: I got up, had a chapati and a bowl of yogurt, and sat at the table helping Dadi fold the linen napkins. "Why are we having a party?" He looked at us and smiled. There was one thing I did understand. He let me touch the drawing pad paper once. Amil's book is beautiful. When Amil heard, he jumped up and laughed and then gave out a yelp because he stepped on his swollen foot. He likes to yell. It's not fair. I don't want you to get hurt." I nodded, but I couldn't take in all that Papa was saying. It was the me I was underneath, the me that usually stays inside. I was afraid anything might stop Papa from talking about you. I didn't tell him what Amil said. Then we pass the jail where all the people have to go when they do things like steal from the markets. We crouched down as she rocked back and forth and whispered her prayers to Lord Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. We worked quietly, me filling the dough, Kazi frying them until they became golden brown. I've never talked about this before, but there were many who were unhappy that I married your mother," he started saying, his eyes wide and alert. But marriage has always been different. "I heard the names again, Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Mountbatten. Let them burn our gardens and the hospital and your picture, Mama, like it was never there at all. Amil told me that at his school a Hindu boy called a Muslim boy a very bad word that I can't even write down. I took a sip of my milk. Papa sat back down. But she also understood things about people. Jinnah and Nehru can't take him away from us. "It was nothing to worry about," she said. I asked him why Kazi wouldn't tell me anything. Papa would have his brothers over with my aunts and cousins. My brothers eventually moved closer to us, too." I let this sink in. "I'm sorry I left you. I nodded. When his cheeks felt warm and rosy, my head a little dizzy from the dancing, my belly happily stuffed with samosas, I whispered to my cousin Malli, who had her arm around my shoulders, "I'll miss you when we go. People leave gifts on our doorstep all the time, like flowers and sweets for the wonderful things he has done for them. We found a cluster of mango trees and hid behind them. I've decided that night is the best time to write to you. He must remember the way the house smelled when you were in it, the sound of your voice filling the air, the sight of you painting your pictures. Does this mean we were leaving? That's the only side I know how to be on. Amil would throw his head back and squeal for more. We stayed close to him as he went around and bought some yellow squash, a bag of potatoes, a bunch of peas, since we didn't have any more in our garden, a pouch of cumin seeds, garlic, gingerroot, turmeric root, and two sticks of white rock candy for me and Amil. The moment Amil and I were here with our crying, our bottles of milk, our little fingers and toes, you were gone. "Maybe he'll do it again," I said. "I'm not sure there is anything better tasting in the world. Penguin supports copyright. I thought Kazi might be joking. He always has. He asked if I wanted to slice the okra, but I hate okra. But I didn't think grown-ups could get lonely. During the day I fill back up and the pages wait. I stood by the door and watched him frying pooris. He was a slight boy, with very thick eyebrows and deep-set dark eyes. I just want to know what people are thinking. I just thought I was. But I guess not everyone. It was like he was born an adult, a father, a doctor. The thought made me dizzy. "Once as she was leaving the cricket game, she tripped, spilling her books. We've done this before. 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