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West Indies

Right before the Veterans Expressway dumps its occupants onto Dale Mabry, it turns sharp and hard. The turn is deceptively in the middle of a few other meanders, As a warning it forces drivers to face a concrete wall about eight feet high, painted with arrows, urging the driver to turn left, now, as quickly as possible.

The first time she drove her car home from school, Shruti took the curve too fast, in the naïve confidence of a 16-year-old. The car veered wild and skidded off the shoulder; only a last-minute jerk of the steering wheel saved her from grinding into the concrete. The car whipped around back into the lane, overcorrecting. Too fast. For a brief moment, Shruti felt that she was entirely out of control of the vehicle, and that it might careen into the cars next to her, or swing off the shoulder and into the ditch to the right. It was Diwali and she had worn a shalwar-kameez to school at her mother's bidding. The long dupatta was balled up in the passenger seat; she'd lost her bindi hours ago, in math class. The bangles on her wrist clanged against each other. Under her hands she could feel the car purring a life that felt as real as her own. And she thought: Oh god, I'm going to die here.

She braked, skidded, stopped, put on her hazards, and broke down into shivering sobs, panicking. Her adventure had landed her half in a lane, half out, but the cars behind her had slowed down. She was lucky to not have been killed. A few other drivers stopped to make sure she was okay. No one was quite sure of what to do with a shaking Indian teenager in traditional garb, but the moment passed, and Shruti declined offers of help, pointing out that the car was not damaged, and she needed to return home.

She did not say a word of it to her parents, but that night at pooja, when the family gathered to say their prayers for good luck in the next year, Shruti silently said her thanks. She wasn't quite sure who she was praying to, or what she was saying, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

The car was an old Nissan Maxima, one of dad's extravagances from the early days. When she was little Shruti used to trace the sticker on the side that said 4DSC, four-door-sports-car, thinking to herself that her dad drove a *sports car*, and that was *cool*. Inside it always smelled of cigarettes and his papers were strewn everywhere — an engineer is always on the job, he would say. As soon as he got a cell phone he was always on that, too, driving down Bruce B. Downs like a lunatic, only half-paying attention.

After mom and dad decided to sell the old house and buy the big one in Tampa Palms, mom was insistent on selling the car, or even just scrapping it, so long as she could get it out of the driveway. Filthy cigarette-smelling car. I know those *kalryos* like the same car. What will people think, seeing us driving to functions in *that*?

Then Smriti would say, *mom*, you can't *say* things like that.

Why not? Mom would demand, holding her rolling pin in one hand as she made chapatti in front of the evening news.

Smriti was the only one willing to go through it all again with her, the importance of breaking down stereotypes, the argument that if we judge others on their appearances, others will judge us. Shruti, younger than Smriti but already too old for this, would watch mom as she pretended to understand, pretended to acquiesce, and then rolled her eyes when her American teenager turned her back.

Anyway, Shalini took the car, saved it from the scrap heap. She was 15 when they moved to the big house and she persuaded Papa to let it stick around for another year in the three-car garage. Dad was always loath to throw away anything so it stayed, and Shalini and Smriti got into the habit of smoking cigarettes in the car late at night, because the smell could always be blamed on the preexisting smell.

Shruti was always the tagalong at these crucial adolescent events. Her older sisters Shalini and Smriti were close in age, just two years apart, and for a while had thought themselves to be the only ones. Shruti was just five years younger than Smriti, but it was enough, somehow, to alienate them. But they would never purposefully exclude her, even if it seemed most of the time that they spoke in a language no one else could understand — a language of immigrant children, forced into the role of raising their parents and themselves in an unfamiliar land. Smriti would bring her burned CDs to play in the car—mixes that had System of a Down and the Offspring on them. Shalini would pass off her fake IDs to Smriti and tell her how to sneak around with boys. The two sisters could not be more different, somehow, and yet they had formed an unshakable partnership, a codependency based on isolation and desperation.

Whenever white people met them they would spend a few minutes trying to untangle their names—“sooo similar!” Mom and dad both had names that began with an S, and in India, it is not so strange for all of your children to have “matching” names. If anything, it marks you as a wanted child. Apparently Shalini was supposed to have been named Shruti, but at the last minute Papa had some kind emotional connection to the baby girl that he had hoped would be a boy and shifted it a few letters over to Shalini. Shruti got the leftover name when she came later, and her mother always said she was special because of that. But Shruti did not feel particularly special. She was accidental, incidental, leftover: the clean-up crew. She felt that keenly when Smriti left for college. Shalini had not gone far — to the state school a few miles away — but Smriti, ever willful, had chosen somewhere way up north, in Ohio. She seemed very happy and dyed her hair blue and never called home. Shalini would come by every weekend to drop off laundry and tell Shruti the stories of her boyfriends, giving her half-used makeup and nailpolish and trashy magazines. Papa was always glad to see Shalini come in the door, Shruti noticed, but Mom missed arguing with Smriti.

With the girls gone Shruti found herself an only child, without anyone to speak the language of immigrant children to. She ran upstairs when she came home, uninterested in the neverending loop of Hindi serials and the *nashto* Mom put out. Smriti and Shalini would always invite her to their colleges, and sometimes she would visit, but she did not feel quite right there, either, hovering the background as white boys and girls groped and made out with each other.

In fact the only place she began to feel comfortable was the driver's seat. Even though she'd gotten her license the latest of them all, Shruti was the steadiest driver—not distracted like dad, or anxious like mom, or careless like Shalini, or competitive like Shruti. She heard from a mechanic that everybody thinks they're an above-average driver, and privately she thought that all of the drivers in her family were below average, destined to slam into a guardrail at some point. More people ought to think of driving as a skill to improve, like a language, or an art.

Shruti could drive for hours without tiring, and knew her way anywhere, so after a while, whenever the family went somewhere, it went without saying that Shruti would climb into the drivers' side seat, adjusting the chair for her long legs and short torso, holding her hair back with her favorite cap—a Florida Gators cap, a gift from Shalini. It never occurred to her to buy car magazines, or watch NASCAR, or tune into *Top Gear*, or anything like that. No one thinks of driving as a hobby, and 16-year-old Indian girls, least of all.

The car went through Shalini's boyfriends and late nights and through Smriti's brief internship at a law firm in town. By the time it came to Shruti it had been abandoned at one end of the three-car garage, next to the disused Christmas decorations and the deep-freeze full of mom's stored leftovers. She would still go in there and sit sometimes, lying down in the backseat with a can of Coke and her phone, inhaling the smell of smoke.

When she did start applying to colleges, it was only to places that had campus parking; not for her an urban campus with public transportation. Mom almost forbade her from taking the car with her to school, because at this point it was 20 years old, knocked about and near-used up. But Shruti could not bring herself to let it go, and her friends in college nicknamed it Maximus, and took it to McDonald's late at night. Shruti always drove, and never drank.

The day after Shruti's college graduation they piled up everything in Mom's SUV, the twin-sized bedding, the textbooks, her cheap Target clothes, her plastic lamps. Mom and Dad were teary-eyed, watching their youngest graduate; Smriti and Shalini were affecting boredom, too recently out of college to not be jealous. Shalini missed the parties; Smriti missed the classes. Shruti did not think she was going to miss anything.

When the SUV was packed up the parents got into the front and started the three-hour drive home. The girls had a late lunch at Panera, smoking cigarettes on the patio, and then slid into the Maxima. Shruti pulled out to I-75 steady and smooth, feeling the familiar growl of the engine beneath her.

Shalini sat in the front, flicking through the radio. Smriti was lying in the backseat. “Stop there. That one.”

“What is this?”

“What? This is Beyonce!”

“I thought you didn’t like Beyonce.”

“What! Since when? I *loooove* Beyonce!”

“I’m the one that hates Beyonce. Helloo, memory fart.”

“Look, it’s hard to tell you two apart, your names are *really similar*.”

Shruti raised her hand and did the universal fuck-you hand motion to the backseat, sending Smriti into spasms of laughter.

“Shalini, stop texting.”

“It’s Kai.”

Shruti and Smriti both groaned.

“That guy? Again?”

“I thought you said you didn’t like him.”

“I never said I didn’t, I said I wasn’t sure.”

“It’s so weird you keep dating Indian guys.”

“It’s so weird you keep dating *not* Indian guys.”

After a moment, Smriti said: “I don’t want to end up like mom and dad.”

Shalini nodded, as if it were a given. But Shruti looked in the rearview and said: “What’s so bad about mom and dad?”

“Nothing exactly. But they’re so miserable.”

“Mom is always watching those serials, it’s exhausting. Like, what is her life even about?”

“And dad hates his job. Always has. That’s why he’s always buying stuff.”

Shruti checked her driver’s side mirror as she changed lanes. “Well, maybe that’s as good as it gets.”

This surprised the sisters into silence. Shruti was a little surprised herself.

It never took long for Smriti to get faux-philosophical, and after a bit, she said: “Look at this. We’re all grown up. Even Shruti.”

“Yeah, girl, how does it feel?” Shalini punched her arm.

“I don’t know. Good. Bad. I’ll miss college. But I’m happy I went.”

“So you’re doing this med school thing?”

Shruti hesitated, braking as another car cut in front of her. “I don’t know. I could. I did the requirements. I’m not a great candidate, but I’m reasonable enough. I could probably get into some kind of school somewhere.”

“The Caribbean!” Smriti laughed.

Shalini said, “Laugh all you want, but it’s med school same as everywhere else. And at least you’d get to be by the beach. I’d visit.”

“I doubt I’d have any time to be by the beach.”

“But Shruti,” Smriti said, sitting up. “Don’t you have stuff you want to do before you graduate? Don’t you have dreams?”

“Dreams?”

“You know. Things you want to do.”

“Like how I wanted to go to New Orleans for Habitat for Humanity,” offered Shalini.

Smriti snorted. “Yeah, and for Mardi Gras.”

“And how Smriti spent two years living in her boyfriend’s parents’ basement trying to be a writer.”

“*And* getting laid,” Smriti pointed out.

“I’ve thought about it,” Shruti said slowly after a moment. “I sometimes feel—I feel I’d like to go places. Somewhere different.”

“Like where? Europe?”

“India?”

“On a road trip?”

“Maybe. Maybe all of those things. Somewhere where I don’t have to feel like myself. Where everything is different.”

“Without mom and dad?” said Smriti, sympathetically.

“Without anyone. Without me,” Shruti said.

“Without you?” Shalini asked, puzzled.

It started raining. Shruti turned on the windshield wipers. They needed to be replaced, she noticed. In the blur she’d missed their exit. She was going to have to swing around, and come down the Veterans from the South. Odd. She hadn’t missed an exit in years. She slowed, braked, took the exit onto Hutchinson. Without thinking she swung back around onto the expressway, remembering only as she passed through the tollbooth that she could have just struck out home on local roads. She was cross with herself for making such a beginner’s mistake. This is where she’d grown up. She should know better.

Now they were going north towards home, the same route she used to drive from school. Up ahead the curve was coming, and Shruti would have started slowing down already, but she'd been distracted thinking, and now the concrete wall was coming fast. She'd seen her blood and guts spattered across the wall in her dreams before, the Maxima in pieces on the highway. Her family would not put a cross up because they were not Christian. Perhaps they would put up flowers. Perhaps other people would think to themselves, oh, someone else died here, maybe I should put down my cell phone—oh but wait, just one more call.

Shalini was looking down and texting. Smriti had her back to the door, headphones on, eyes closed. This was her precious cargo, and there was the wall. No one would notice. She could feel it already, the crunch of the plastic bumper, the groan of twisted metal, the hard thud to her chest as the steering wheel went into her breastbone (because what was the chance the airbags even worked anymore?), Shalini's characteristic stifled scream, Smriti's cry of anger. Shattering glass, wheels spinning. Other cars might be involved. It would be an event. There might even be a picture on TV.

In the end the problem was that the highway curved left, not right. Shalini was sitting on the leading edge of the crash that had not yet happened. Smriti had her back to it. Shruti had not done all that well in physics but logic suggested were she to send herself to the death she knew was waiting for her, she would send her sisters, too.

A younger sister in India is supposed to call her older sisters "didi." Smriti never got into the habit of calling Shalini that, because they were too close. Shruti called them both "didi," without fail.

The wall was coming so fast it was like a dream, but at the last minute Shruti pumped the brakes, following the rules she'd read online after her first near-miss. The car shocked and spun, and unexpectedly fishtailed out a bit, swinging its rear end into the next lane. In a panic, Shruti hit the gas, trying to turn the steering wheel in time, but it was too late. The front end of the Maxima crashed into the wall, and behind them the squeal of breaks denoted traffic desperately trying to avoid them. The airbags popped and blew, and Shruti fell against hers, held back painfully by the seatbelt locked in position, teeth coming together with a snap.

Shalini was screaming and Smriti was screaming too, it seemed, and for a moment Shruti thought that she had done what she intended to, and killed them all, but after a moment the noises stopped, and all she could hear was her own breathing, and it was so silent it was unbearably loud. She pushed at the airbag, trying to see something beyond it.

She found her voice. “Didi—Didi—”

Two hands reached out to find hers, one warm, one cool.

“Are you okay? Are you okay?” One headphone had fallen out of Smriti’s ear, and Shalini’s phone had flown out the right-side window. The dashboard had shattered—that was the noise—but the glass was the kind that didn’t get sharp when it broke, and Shruti picked pieces out of her mouth and Shalini’s hair. Shalini’s knees hurt from the impact, and Smriti’s shoulder, but it did not seem serious.

“What about you, Shruti?”

She looked down at herself. Nothing. Not a scratch. The car had saved her.

The Maxima was totaled, of course. It was barely worth the cost of its upkeep anyway. No one would ever drive it again. Shruti threw the keys out over the edge of the concrete wall when the girls extricated themselves, trembling but unharmed. Shalini retrieved her phone and called 911. Smriti smoked three cigarettes in a row.

The ambulance came and inspected them, as did mom and dad, eventually, but they were fine, the girls were all fine. These goddamn American drivers, Papa said, haranguing the cops who showed up at the scene. And mom just cried and hugged Shruti, her baby, her baby. You could have been killed.

To which Shruti said, “Hindus believe in reincarnation, mom. We would have been okay.”

Smriti said that an aggressive driver had forced Shruti onto the shoulder, where she lost control of the car. Shalini said the lanes weren't clearly marked. Shruti said nothing.

Anyway, Shruti thought to herself, you can't drive a car to the Caribbean.