

Leaving The Moon
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I came to Satapur in Maharashtra on a gamble. I was nineteen years old and a student at Vassar College. The English department, with a fellowship so ingeniously called "Going Places," funded seven first-years to travel to one of seven places and write. They were: San Ignacio in Belize, Huancayo in Peru, Sibiu in Romania, Kazan in Russia, Satapur in India, Nha Trang in Vietnam, and Takayama in Japan. When I'd been selected, along with six other classmates, I suggested drawing straws to determine where we'd each go. Sure, it was a chance thing to base a summer off of, but I saw it more as a small embodiment of any event, of everything. Living became so exciting, so precious when we came to think of how easily it could have been otherwise.

Everyone, except one girl who had apparently been obsessed with Japan since childhood – so obsessed, she

explained, that between the ages of seven and ten all of her birthday parties had been Japan themed – agreed to random selection. The longer the straw, the further the place was from New York.

It began to rain, I drew the longest straw, and the department booked a direct ticket for William Price from New York to Mumbai.

When my dentist heard about my summer plans during a routine teeth cleaning, he accidentally stabbed my gums, and they began to bleed.

"William's going to India!" he announced to the office. Everyone began to clap. I lay on the chair, mouth open, still bleeding.

"You will have to stay with my cousins' cousins," he said. "And make sure to show them how white your teeth are."

Eleven days later, I was sitting in the window seat of a plane, watching the icon on the in-flight map cross over war zones.

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A fragile-looking woman opened the door for me, then hurried away, returning with a glass of juice.

"Thank you," I said.

Behind her, four others stood in a horizontal line.

"Call me *Papa*."

"I am *Mammi*."

"My name is Pavani," said the older two sisters.

Ishika, who was seven years old, took my bag with her small arms. "Come, we will show you your room."

I'm not someone who remembers first impressions. This is either because I like to know people before I pass judgment on them or because I don't care to form opinions of people who are not constants in my life. Either way, there are few exceptions to this, and both sisters are exceptions.

The first thing I thought about Ishika was that she had a gift for attitude. Even the way she opened a door had character. The way she walked through the garden, and drank her water, and made eye contact – every action contained within it the expanse of her entire personality.

I once opened the door on Ishika doing a headstand, covered in paint.

"Why are you covered in paint?" I'd asked, laughing.

"Why so many questions?" she'd said, winking at me.

Sometimes, even though I was twelve years older than her, she would call me "darling" in conversation. Sometimes, she would shake her head disapprovingly when someone's tea was too hot.

On Pavani: it was impossible not to consider her beautiful. Pavani, whose name meant full moon, had

waist-length hair the color of carob pods. She had deep eyes and elevated cheekbones. Together they gave her appearance a level of dimension, so gripping, so lovely, it made you forget what a person usually looked like.

Inside the home, I spent most of my time with Ishika. It was Pavani, though, who became my guide of Satapur. Sometimes she would knock on my door and say, "Come with me," like some mysterious Cheshire Cat in Wonderland. Once, she came into my room at five in the morning, said, "Come with me." Half-asleep, I followed her down a dirt road, the air still wet and fragrant from yesterday's monsoon.

"Where are we going?"

"To the cows," she said, obviously.

Pavani moved through the streets fluently. When we were at the farm, she told me what to hold, where to step, each animal's name, and each animal's psychology. She began milking the cow named Candy, who was, Pavani explained, empathetic and romantic.

"I love cows," she said, cupping her hands beneath its body and squeezing a body part until the milk began dripping into the pail. "When I was little, I had twenty cow dolls in my room, and I named them all the same thing."

"Oh," I said. "What were they all named?"

"Motee."

"That's beautiful."

"It means fatty," she said. "What did you name things when you were young?" She was looking up at me from her crouched, cow-milking position.

"I gave everything a military title. I once had a parrot named General Henry."

"Did you want to be in the military?"

"I didn't think people did anything else."

"You never heard of being a doctor?" Pavani stroked the cow's back. "You know in Hindi we say *ghar ki murgi, dal barabar*. You know what this means?"

I'd never known anything less.

"It means, Mr. America, when something is right there, you don't appreciate it."

I could see what she was getting at. I had grown up in the suburbs, on the border of comfort and banality. Empires at war and planets at war and planets exploding excited me. Maybe elsewhere it would have been different.

"Are most Americans fond of war?" I laughed at the question. But the way she said it was innocent, even endearing.

"No," I said. I decided that Americans were purpose-driven, and war stories somehow stood for that. It wasn't random that the language of war found use in everyday life.

"So our popular stories tell what our culture is," she said, liking the sentence. "Growing up, our stories were all flying monkeys and talking animals."

I was sure many Americans were raised more on talking animals than battle cries, but I didn't say anything. I thought about how strange of an asymmetry it was that to her, I embodied an entire continent, and for me, she embodied a twenty-year-old girl in the village of Satapur. Not a country. Not even a town.

After some time, Pavani pulled me down beside her to milk the cow. She guided my hands underneath the cow whose body was warm and smooth. Milking the cow, Candy, I felt as if the rest of my life were some artificial game and this was the natural course of things.

"You've never milked a cow before," Pavani said, watching me.

"No, I've only eaten them," I said.

Pavani widened her eyes and curved her mouth into a frown. I began apologizing. She began to laugh.

"Hey, Mr. America, It's okay. But don't say it around my baby Candy. She's too empathetic."

"I'm sorry, Candy," I said to the cow.

When the pail was full, we carried it together into the farmhouse to filter it.

"Do you come here a lot?"

"To milk the cows?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes I come four days a week. Sometimes I forget to come for three months."

"That's how I am with writing."

"What do you think it is?"

"What is?"

"What's special about the weeks we do it every day?"

"I don't know," I said. I would come back to this question many times in my life.

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In the months I was there, we celebrated holidays. We walked along the Bay of Bengal. Ishika taught me many dances. I taught her how to play Monopoly. She beat me every time. Pavani told me about seasonal fruits and common diseases. I told her about home, about October, and my favorite sports teams. *Mammi* and *Papa* went to a wedding in Goa. Over time it became second nature to call them that. I got to know what felt like millions of their friends and became Mr. America to every single one. We shared many meals from many regions — inside and outside, home-cooked, store-bought. Some nights we would fall asleep on mats in the living room, watching films I couldn't understand. Still, Pavani told me I didn't have to understand a thing because, in the end, all films were about the same thing. Some nights I would fall asleep under the quilt in the guest room, reading the news.

What were these three months in the scheme of things? How was it all quantified? How long did you have to be in a place to live there? How long did you have to know someone to know them forever? And yet I knew the meaning of a time was different from its length. There were years I never thought to say goodbye to. There were parties I left like graduations.

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On my last night in Satapur, there was a dance festival at the school. Thousands of string lights fell from the ceilings and climbed up the pillars. There were jasmine flowers

everywhere. There were jasmine flowers tucked inside Pavani's braided hair.

We ate and watched the dances — we were always eating. Ishika came on the floor to do a dance. Pavani whistled and clapped along to the energetic bit, her mouth in an open smile, her nose slightly scrunched. The expression on her face was my favorite of all expressions. A combination of attention, and admiration, and genuine enjoyment. It was an expression I'd seen on faces watching live music, on parents as their children talked about their days.

It's possible it was the expression I had whenever I was with Pavani.

It's possible that everything she stood for was that expression.

Once the dancing finished, we ate more. Then Ishika went with her friends, while Pavani, Mammi, Papa and I went back to the house.

"There is a huge wedding in two weeks." Pavani said, as we were leaving. "It's sad you'll miss it."

"It's okay. I'll be back for your wedding," I said.

"Oh. When is that?" Then she said, "You must have so much packing to do."

I had never unpacked. "Oh. Not really."

"How!" She made a face of complete shock. As if I'd won the economy.

"I never like to unpack."

"Why not?"

"Because then I have to repack." The logic was sound.

Pavani told me a story about a nomadic father who kept coming to places, seducing women, having children, and exiting their lives just as they'd learned to say his name. The key part was that he never unpacked his bag in any of these places. Because he never unpacked, and not unpacking made leaving easy, he always left. Her point seemed to follow the principle that a human being will do whatever is easiest. Packed bags made it easy to go. But if you unpacked, the easy thing to do was stay.

I told her it was still easier to stay because the lines at the airport were long. Not to mention the price of transport.

Then I said, seriously, that it didn't make sense to settle into a room you'd have to leave.

She told me that I didn't make sense because for every place you went or ever would, leaving was a certainty. Mostly there was something called dying.

I was back to quantifying. How much time gave you enough to get settled in? One year? Four? I thought of how some people had a gift for settling in spaces. People who could fall asleep on their acquaintance's shoulders. People who made bedrooms out of two seats on the commuter rail. Meanwhile, I'd never fully settled in anywhere. There was always a carry-on by my door, always a rolled-up piece of artwork I'd purchased but never put up. I preferred makeshift furniture to the real thing — chairs that were window sills, carpets that were tablecloths, tables that were made for ping-pong. And I had never filled drawers with the ordinary miscellany of living: saran wrap, measuring tape, nail clippers.

"So you would unpack even if you were only staying for a night?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You'd probably forget things?"

"Not if I remember them."

"I'd definitely forget things."

"So what's so bad about leaving things behind?"

We stood there silently. It began raining, and the sound of rain pounding against the roof filled that silence.

"Goodnight, Mr. America," Pavani said, closing the door to my room.

When she'd gone, because I had nothing to pack, I lay on the bed counting how many beds I'd ever slept in. My estimate was three hundred. I counted how many beds I'd slept in twice, and the number cut in half, but one-fifty seemed low, so I added another forty for good measure. I asked myself if you were on a desert island, which bed would you bring? I matched beds to dreams. I matched beds to women.

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I came back to Satapur five years later. I was working in consulting because somewhere along the way, the things I wanted most out of life changed. At the time, I'd just moved boroughs and ended a two-year relationship. It was a moonless night in Brooklyn when I received that work email. The firm was sending a group of us to Delhi.

I flew to Delhi, and after four days, to Mumbai, where I hired a car to Satapur.

The house looked the same as before. Or it had changed, and I had simply, unconsciously accepted that it had always looked the way it did. Ishika opened the door. She said, "I remember you." Her attitude was the same; her face was longer. She yelled for *Mammi*, who came downstairs, fondly bringing me into the kitchen to sit down and eat something. I ate *Aloo Tikki*, and Ishika showed me a dance she'd been practicing. I told her that I'd always thought she should be an actress. She told me that actresses don't wear clothes.

I kept waiting for Pavani. Any wind was her skirt against the floor. Any rustling became her footsteps. How would it happen? How quickly would she recognize me? After some time, I asked. "Where is your sister, Ishika?" Ishika took a large sip from a glass. Then she lifted her eyebrows and said, "Married."

There's an expectation that when you come back to a place, you'll find the things you loved about it again. The same birds will sing to you. The same girl you met at nineteen will open the door and welcome you home. What happened was different: Pavani had married a man called Akosh and had moved into his home some hours away. They had a child, a two-year-old, and another on the way. It was a love marriage, Ishika told me. They met in a Mandarin class. It was a huge wedding. The party lasted a week.

I did not feel jealousy or regret, but instead, I felt that the color of my chaat had changed, and the flavor was now more dull. For a long time, I had thought that there was something special about Satapur. The things there, the marigolds, the masalas, the cows, the moon, stood out against the other things in my life. So was it worse that they were beautiful and lost? It was worst to tell yourself they were never beautiful at all.

When the beautiful became lost, out of reach, its charm could stay close. It was sustenance during the bitter weeks of winter, the long days of work. I was comforted knowing there were places, people, families that made me feel the way those places, people, families had. Longing, after all, stood for a belief in this world.

The issue was coming back. Coming back was threatening to the mind where memory had preserved that particular time and place and subjectivity as a unified whole. Coming back told you nothing was special – nothing ever would be again.

"So, how long are you staying?" Ishika's eyes were wide.

"I'm flying from Mumbai tonight."

"Just came to check in? That's so sweet."

"I wanted to make sure everyone was alive."

"Yes, Mr. America, everyone is alive. Except *Buntu*."

"Who is *Buntu*?"

"The janitor at the school."

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

"Heart attack," she shrugged.

"I'm so sorry," I said again.

"It's okay," she said, handing me a box of sweets.

Mammi walked into the kitchen wearing a long purple dress.

"Let's go for lunch, shall we?" she said.

"We just ate." Actually, I was still chewing.

"So, eat again," she said.

As we drove, it occurred to me that the act of leaving did more than put distance between a person and a place. I'd traveled seven thousand miles to come back, and I'd done it all wrong. I was buying plane tickets to a place which was not miles but years away.

Maybe, in that place five years ago, everything was as I left it -- quilt over bed, milk in fridge, moon in sight. It was not possible to go back. But what was possible was this: getting there, sitting, ordering my lunch.