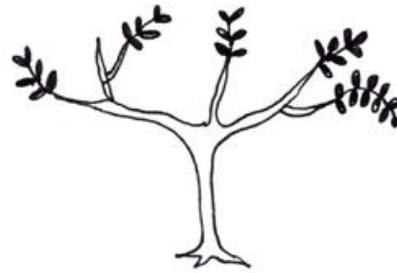


○SHORT STORY ○

Lorry Raja

Madhuri Vijay



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WHAT HAPPENED was that my older brother, Siju, got a job as a lorry driver at the mine and started acting like a big shot. He stopped playing with Munna the way he used to, tossing him into the air like a sack of sand, making him sputter with laughter. When Amma asked him anything, he would give her a pitying look and not answer. He stopped speaking to his girlfriend, Manju, altogether. He taunted me about playing in the mud, as he called it, breaking chunks of iron ore with my hammer. With Appa especially he was reckless, not bothering to conceal his disdain, until he said something about *failed drivers who are only good for digging and drinking*, and Appa wrestled him to the ground and forced him to eat a handful of the red, iron-rich earth, shouting that this was our living now and he should bloody learn to respect it. Siju complained to the mine's labor officer, Mr. Subbu, but Mr. Subbu dismissed it as a domestic matter and refused to interfere. After that, Siju maintained a glowering silence in Appa's presence. When Appa wasn't around, Siju sneered at our tent, a swatch of blue plastic stretched over a bamboo skeleton. Never mind that he was being paid half a regular driver's salary by the owner of the lorry, a *paan*-chewing Andhra fellow called Rajappa, because Siju was only fourteen and could not bargain for more.

Never mind that Rajappa's lorry permit was fake, a flimsy transparent chit of paper with no expiry date and half the words illegible, which meant that Siju was allowed to transport the ore only to the railway station in Hospet and not, like the other drivers, all the way to port cities like Mangalore and Chennai, where he'd run the risk of arrest by border authorities. Never mind that the mine's lorry cleaners, most of whom were boys my age, called him Lorry Raja behind his back and imitated his high-stepping walk. None of it seemed to matter to him. And, as little as I wanted to admit it, he *was* a raja in the cab of that lorry, and moreover he looked it. His hair was thick and black, and a long tuft descended at the back of his neck, like a crow's glossy tail feathers. His nose was straight, and his eyeballs were untouched by yellow. His teeth remained white in spite of breathing the iron-laden air. He seemed, when he was in the cab of that lorry, like someone impossible and important, someone I didn't know at all.

The ore went to the port cities, and then it went onto ships the size of buildings. I hadn't seen them, but the labor officer, Mr. Subbu, had told us about them. He said the ships crossed the ocean, and the journey took weeks. The ships went to Australia and Japan, but mostly they went to China. They were building a stadium in China for something called the Lympic Games. Mr. Subbu explained that the Lympic Games were like the World Cup, except for all sports instead of just cricket. Swimming, tennis, shooting, running. If you won you got a gold medal, Mr. Subbu said. India had won a gold medal in boxing the last time the games were held.

The stadium in China would be round like a cricket stadium, except ten times bigger. Mr. Subbu spread his arms out wide when he said this, and we could see patches of sweat under the arms of his nice ironed shirt.

The whole world worked in the mines. At least that is what it seemed like then. There was a drought in Karnataka and neighboring Andhra Pradesh, and things were so bad people were starting to eye the mangy street dogs. Our neighbor poured kerosene on himself and three daughters and lit them ablaze; his wife burned her face but escaped. Then came the news of the mines, hundreds of them opening in Bellary, needing workers. And people went. It seemed to happen overnight. They asked their brothers-in-law or their uncles to look after their plots and their houses, or simply sold them. They pulled their children out of school. Whole villages were suddenly abandoned, cropless fields left to wither. Families waited near bus depots plastered with faded film signs, carrying big bundles stuffed with steel pots and plastic shoes and flimsy clothes. The buses were so full they tilted to one side. There wasn't enough space for everyone. The people who were left behind tried running alongside the buses, and some of the more foolish ones tried to jump in as the bus was moving. They would invariably fall, lie in the dust for a while, staring up at the rainless sky. Then they would get up, brush off their clothes, and go back to wait for the next bus. For months my family watched this happen. We didn't worry, not at first. Appa had a job as a driver for a subinspector of the Raichur Thermal Power Plant, and we thought we were fine. Then there was the accident, and Appa lost the job. He spent the next few weeks at the rum shop, coming home long enough to belt me or my brother Siju or Amma. After that was over he cried for a long time. Then he announced that we were going to work in the mines. All of us. Siju, who was in the seventh standard at the time, tried to protest, but Appa twisted a bruise into his arm and Siju stopped complaining. I was in the fifth standard, and to me it seemed like a grand adventure. Amma said nothing. She was

pregnant with Munna then, and her feet had swollen to the size of papayas. She hobbled into the hut to pack our things.

Within a week, we squeezed onto a bus that was leaking black droplets of oil from its heavy bottom, and Appa bought us each a newspaper cone of hot peanuts for the journey. I flicked the burnt peanuts into my mouth and watched as the land slowly got dryer and redder, until the buildings in the huddled villages we passed were red too, and so was the bark of the trees, and so were the fingers of the ticket collector who checked the stub in Appa's hand and said, "Next stop." We lurched into a teeming bus station with a cracked floor, and I asked Appa why the ground was red, and he told me this was because of the iron in it. While Appa was busy asking directions to the nearest mine that was hiring, and Amma was searching in her blouse for money to buy a packet of Tiger biscuits and a bottle of 7Up for our lunch, Siju came up to me and whispered that, really, the ground was red because there was blood in it, seeping up to the surface from the miners' bodies buried underneath. For months I believed him, and every step I took was in fear, bracing for the sticky wetness of blood, the crunch of bone, the squelch of an organ. When I realized the truth I tried to hit him, but he held my wrists so hard they hurt, and he bared his teeth close to my face, laughing.

That afternoon, just about a year after we had come to the mine, I was working an open pit beside the highway, along with a few other children and a handful of women. I squatted by the edge of the road, close enough that the warm exhaust from the vehicles billowed my faded T-shirt and seeped under my shorts. The pinch of tobacco Amma had given me that morning to stave off my hunger had long since lost its flavor. It was now a bland, warm glob tucked in my cheek. Heat pressed down on my skin, and there was a sharp, metallic tinge to the air that made me uneasy. The women, who usually laughed and teased each other, curved their backs into shells and hammered in silence. The children seemed more careless than usual because I kept hearing small cries whenever one of them brought a hammer down on a thumb by accident. The horizon to the west was congested with a dark breast of clouds, but above me the sun blazed white through a gauze sky. The monsoons were late, too late for crops, but I knew they would hit anytime now. Over the past week, furious little rainstorms had begun to tear up the red earth, flooding various pits, making them almost impossible to mine. I remembered that during the last monsoon, a drunk man had wandered away one night and fallen into a flooded pit. His body, by the time it was discovered, was bloated and black.

Lorries crawled in sluggish streams in both directions on the highway. The ones heading away from Bellary were weighed down with ore, great mounds wrapped in gray and green tarpaulin and lashed with lengths of rope as thick as my ankle. The empty ones returning from the port cities rattled with stray pebbles jumping in the back. The faces of the lorry drivers were glistening with sweat, and they blared their horns as if it might make the nearly immobile line of traffic speed up. Now and then a foreign car, belonging to one of the mine owners, slipped noiselessly through the stalled traffic. I recited the names of the cars, tonguing the tobacco in my mouth: Maserati. Jaguar. Mercedes. Jaguar. Their shimmering bodies caught the sun and played with it, light sliding across their hoods, winking in their taillights. The mine owners lived in huge pink and white houses on the highway, houses with fountains and the grim heads of stone lions staring from the balconies. I looked up as a sleek black Maserati went by, and in its tinted window I saw myself, a boy in shorts and a baggy T-shirt, crouching close to the dirt.

And standing behind me, the distorted shape of a girl. I stood up quickly, hammer in hand, and whirled around.

Manju flinched, as if I might attack her with it. A few days before, I had seen two kids get into a hammer fight over a Titan watch they had found together. One of them smashed the other's hand. Later I found a small square fingernail stamped into the ground where they fought.

"I'm not going to hit you," I said.

Her slow smile pulled her cheeks into small brown hills sunk with shadowy dimples. She smoothed down the front of her dress, which was actually a school uniform. It had once been white but was now tinged with red iron dust. It wrapped around her thin body, ending below her knees and buttoning high at her throat. Her hair spilled in knotted waves down her back. She and her mother had arrived at the mine around the same time as we had. Her mother was sick and never came out of their tent. I didn't know what was wrong with her. For a while Manju had been Siju's girlfriend, saving up her extra tobacco for him, nodding seriously when he spoke, following him everywhere. Then he had stopped speaking to her. The one time I asked him about it, Siju leaned to one side, curled his lip, and spat delicately into the mud.

"Hi, Manju," I said. We were the same height, though she was a few years older, maybe fifteen.

"Hi, Guna," she said, and squatted at my feet. I squatted too and waited for her to do something. She picked up the piece of ore I had been working on and gave it two halfhearted taps with her hammer. Then she seemed to lose interest. She let it fall and said, "He came by already?"

"No," I said.

I liked Manju. Whenever journalists or NGO workers came to tour the mines, Manju and I would drop our hammers and prance in circles, shouting, "No child-y labor here!" According to the mine owners, it was our parents who were supposed to be working. We simply lived with them and played around the mine. The hammers and basins were our toys. The journalists would scribble in their notepads, and the NGO workers would whisper to one another, and Manju would grin widely at me. Then, after we found out about the Lympic Games, we had contests of our own. Running contests, stone-throwing contests, rock-piling contests. The winner got the gold medal, the runner-up clapped and stomped the dirt in applause. I liked playing with Manju because I almost always won, and she never got angry when she lost, like the boys sometimes did.

"Manju," I said now. "Want to race? Bet I'll get the gold medal."

But she just shook her head. She stared up at the lorries. She was thin, and the bones at the top of her spine pushed like pebbles against her uniform. I wanted to reach out and tap them gently with my hammer. One of the lorry drivers, a man with a thick mustache, saw her watching and made a wet kissing sound with his lips, like he was sucking an invisible straw. His tongue

came out, fleshy and purple. He shouted, “Hi, sexy girl! Sexy-fun girl!” My cheeks burned for her, and I could feel the weight of the women’s gazes, but Manju looked at him as if he had told her that rain was on the way. I busied myself with filling my *puttu* with lumps of ore. Each full basin I took to the weighing station would earn me five and a half rupees. On a good day I could fill seven or eight *puttus*, if I ignored the blisters at the base of my thumb.

I felt the other workers looking at us, the frank stares of the children. I carefully shifted the glob of tobacco from my right cheek to my left.

“You shouldn’t be playing those dumb-stupid games anyway,” Manju said.

“No?” I said cautiously. “Why not?”

Manju said, “You should be in school.”

I didn’t know what to say. It had been two years since I sat in a classroom. I had only vague recollections of it. The cold mud floor. Sitting next to a boy called Dheeraj, who smelled of castor oil. Slates with cracked plastic frames. The maths teacher who called us human head lice when we couldn’t solve the sum on the board. All of us chanting in unison an English poem we didn’t understand. *The boy stood on the burning deck*. The antiseptic smell of the girls’ toilet covering another, mustier, smell. Dheeraj giggling outside. Then three, four, five whacks on the fleshy part of my palm with a wooden ruler, and trying not to show that it hurt. *The boy stood on the burning deck whence all but he had fled*.

“You used to come first in class, no?” Manju said. A gray gust of exhaust blew a wisp of hair between her teeth. She chewed on it. Her face was whiskered with red dust.

“How do you know?”

“Siju told me,” she said, which surprised me. “Siju said you got a hundred in every subject, even the difficult ones like maths. He said you shouldn’t be wasting your potential here.”

I had never heard him say anything like that. It sounded like something an NGO worker might say. I wondered where he had heard the phrase.

“But, Manju,” I said, “I like it here.”

“Why?”

I was about to tell her why—because I could play with her every day and because the mine was vast and open and I was free to go where I liked, and, yes, the work was hard but there was an excitement to the way the lorries rumbled past, straining under their heavy cargo—but right then Manju dropped her hammer.

In a strained voice she said, “He’s coming.”

Siju's lorry looked no different than any of the others, except that it had been freshly cleaned. It had an orange cab, and the outer sides of the long bed were painted brown. The bed bulged with ore, like the belly of a fat man. Siju was clearly on his way to the Hospet railway station. The back panel of the lorry was decorated with painted animals—a lion and two deer. The lion, its thick mane rippling, stood in a lush forest, and the two deer flanked it, their delicate orange heads raised and looking off to the sides. Siju was especially proud of the painting, and I knew he stood over his lorry cleaner each morning, breathing down the boy's neck to make sure that all the red dust was properly wiped off the faces of the animals. His insistence on keeping the lorry spick-and-span was part of why the lorry cleaners made fun of him.

He must have seen us squatting there by the highway, but he kept his eyes on the road. I raised my hand and waved. When he didn't respond, I said, "Oy, Siju! Look this way!"

He swiveled his head toward us briefly.

Manju's big eyes followed him.

Then one of the women working nearby, a woman with a missing eye whose eyelid drooped over the empty socket, spat out her tobacco with a harsh smack and said to Manju, "Enough of your nonsense. Go sit somewhere else. Leave those boys to do their work."

Manju didn't answer, so the woman said more loudly, "You! Heard me? Go sit—"

Manju picked up a pebble and flung it at her. It hit the woman on the shoulder, and she yelped.

"*Soole!*" the woman hissed.

Manju turned her thin face to the woman. "*Soole?*" Manju's voice trembled. "You're calling me a *soole*? You old dirty one-eyed monkey."

I looked at Manju, afraid to speak. She picked up my ore and began hammering at it.

"Manju—" I began. I thought she was going to cry, but then she looked up. "I wish you had a lorry," she said. "Then you and me could drive to China."

Later I took my full *puttu* to the weighing station. On my way I passed Amma working with a group of women at the base of a slope. I stopped to watch her. She was shaking a sieve, holding it away from her body, a red cloud billowing around her. Dark pebbles of ore danced and shivered in the wide shallow basin. A few feet away Munna, naked except for an old shirt of mine, crawled in aimless circles. If he got too far or tried to stuff a fistful of dirt into his mouth, Amma or one of the women would reach out an arm or a leg and hook him back in. When Munna saw me, he stretched out his short arms, ridiculous in their baggy sleeves, and screamed with delight. Amma looked up. She put down the sieve and straightened her back. She was as small as a child, her hands barely bigger than mine. The other women glanced at me and continued working. The muscles in their forearms were laid like train tracks.

“How many?” Amma called up.

“Three,” I said. I held up the *puttu*. “This is the fourth one.” There were still a few hours of daylight left. A few hours before the red hills of Bellary turned black and the day’s totals were tallied and announced by the sweating labor officer, Mr. Subbu, and no matter the numbers, how high or how low, the workers would be expected to cheer.

With her eyes on me, she put a hand inside her blouse to touch the small velvet jewelry pouch she kept there. Whatever jewelry had been in there was pawned long ago. I knew that now it contained a few hundred rupees, two or maybe three. This was what she had saved, in secrecy, for months, money that Appa overlooked or was too drunk to account for. It was for me, my school fees, and she liked to remind me it was there. She eyed me, her lower lip hanging open. I knew she was debating whether to speak.

“Guna,” she said finally. “Tonight, when Appa comes—”

“Have to go,” I said. “Lots of work. It’s going to rain later.”

She sighed. “You don’t want to go back to school?” she asked. “You don’t want to study hard and get a proper job?” She lowered her voice. “Such a clever boy you are, Guna. Such good marks you used to get. You want to waste your brains, fill your head with iron like a *puttu*?”

I made no reply. I remembered what Manju had said about my potential, and I saw myself flinging the entire contents of the *puttu* in Amma’s face, iron flying everywhere, scattershot.

Amma was keeping half an eye on Munna, who was trying to climb into the sieve. “Did Siju get a trip today?” she asked.

“You’re asking about Lorry Raja?” I said.

“Don’t act like those lorry-cleaner boys. He drives well.”

I hopped from one foot to the other, balancing the *puttu* like a tray. “Lorry Raja tries to turn on his indicators and turns on the windshield wipers instead.”

“Guna!” Amma said.

“Lorry Raja is always combing his hair in the rearview mirror.”

One of the women working next to Amma laughed. She had large yellow teeth and a gold stud in her flared nostril. Amma glanced at her, then at the ground.

Encouraged by the woman’s laugh, I added, “Lorry Raja’s lorry doesn’t even go in a straight line.” I wagged my palm to show the route Siju’s lorry took.

Amma scooped up Munna before he overturned the sieve. She sucked the edge of her sari’s

pallu and scrubbed his cheek, which was, like her own, like mine, red with iron dust. The dust mixed with our sweat and formed a gummy red paste, which stuck to our skin and was almost impossible to get off without soap and water, of which we had little, except for whatever dank rain gathered in stray pits and puddles. It was easy to tell who the mine workers were. We all looked like we were bleeding.

Amma put Munna down, and he began to try to crawl up the slope to me. She held her small body very straight and looked at the other women. "Siju is the youngest driver on-site," she announced loudly. The other women, even the one who laughed earlier, took no notice.

"Only fourteen and already driving a lorry." Amma was breathing heavily, and under her red mask she was flushed.

Munna slid back down the slope and landed on his bottom. He began to wail, his toothless mouth open in protest and outrage.

"He's your brother," Amma said.

We looked at Munna. Neither of us moved to pick him up.

"I know," I said.

I registered my fourth load at the weighing station and emptied my *puttu* into the first of a line of lorries waiting there. The weighing station was marked off from the neighboring permit yard by a low wall of scrap metal: short iron pipes and rusted carburetors and hubcaps that sometimes dislodged and rolled of their own accord across the yard, stopping with a clang when they hit Mr. Subbu's aluminum-walled shed. This shed, a square, burnished structure three times as big as the tent we lived in, was the labor office. Complaints were lodged there, and labor records were written down in a big book. How many laborers worked per day; how many *puttus* they filled; how many laborers were residents at the mine camp; how many were floaters, men and women who arrived by the busload in the mornings and stood in a ragged line, waiting to be given work. Mr. Subbu would come out of his office and point at random, and those who were not chosen would shuffle back to the bus depot on the highway, where they would take a bus to the next mine to try their luck. Those who stayed were given a hammer and *puttu*. Most of them, used to this routine, brought their own. During the day Mr. Subbu's shed could be seen from anywhere at the mine. All you had to do was look up from your hammering, and there it was, a sparkle on the rust-colored hillside. His maroon Esteem was parked outside, a green, tree-shaped air freshener twirling slowly from the rearview mirror. I noticed the greenness of the air freshener because there was not a single green tree near the mine; they all bore red leaves.

Mr. Subbu stood in the shade thrown by a backhoe loader, drinking a bottle of Pepsi. He was wearing a full-sleeved shirt with the top button undone, and I could see the triangle of a white undershirt and a few black tangles of hair peeping from the top. He sweated profusely, and there were large damp patches on his chest and lower back, and two damp crescents in his armpits, which swelled to full moons when he raised his arms.

I stood there, watching him. One of the workers, a young woman with two long braids, came up to him to say something. Mr. Subbu listened with his head bent. Then he put his hand on the girl's shoulder and replied. The girl stood so still that her braids did not even swish. When he finished speaking, he let his hand fall, then she turned and walked away. There had been a rumor in the mine camp about one of the new babies, and how it had Mr. Subbu's nose, and the mother, a rail-thin woman called Savithri, had been forced to sneak away from the camp at night before her husband came for her with the metal end of a belt. I had heard Appa call Mr. Subbu shameless and a *soole magane*, but something about the way he stood all alone in his nice clothes seemed lonely and promising. And as I stood there watching him, it occurred to me suddenly that he might be able to help me. My heart beat faster, and I pictured myself standing in the shade with him, talking, him smiling and nodding.

I went over to stand by him, my empty *puttu* thudding against my thighs. He finished the Pepsi and threw the bottle under the backhoe loader, all without paying attention to me. Then he wiped his mouth with a handkerchief.

"Taking rest?" he said. He had seen me around the mine, but he didn't know my name, of course. There were hundreds of children running everywhere, and under that coat of red we must have all looked the same to him.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Only five minutes," I added, lest he think I was shirking.

"Very good," said Mr. Subbu.

His eyelids drooped, and he nodded his head slowly. I waited for him to offer me a Pepsi, and when he didn't, I kept standing there. I wondered what a man like that thought about. I looked out over the mine, the land cut open in wide red swatches. Compared to the mine, the plain beyond seemed colorless, the trees sitting low to the ground, hardly different from the bushes, whose woody stems bore patches of dry leaves. In the distance there were hills that had not yet been mined, and they looked impossibly lush, rising and falling in deep, green waves against the sky. And the sun, the sun was a white ball that tore into everything, into the blistered skin on the backs of my hands, into the body of the backhoe loader, into the yawning red mouth of the mine.

I cleared my throat. Mr. Subbu's mouth parted and closed, parted and closed. Long strings of spit stretched and contracted between his lips.

"Sir," I said.

Mr. Subbu's eyes snapped open. "Hm?"

"Sir, I want to ask something."

He looked at me. I took a deep breath and held his eyes. They were not unkind eyes, only a little distant, a little distracted.

“I want to become a driver, sir. Lorry driver,” I said, speaking quickly.

Mr. Subbu seemed to be waiting for more, so I continued, “I know driving, sir. My father taught me. He was the driver for the subinspector of the Raichur Thermal Station, sir. He drove an Esteem, sir, just like yours.” And I pointed to the maroon car that was parked outside his shed.

I didn’t think of it as a lie. When Appa had driven for the subinspector, I had sat in his lap whenever the subinspector was in a meeting or on an inspection tour or at the flat of a woman who was not his wife. I would hold the Esteem’s steering wheel, dizzy from the musky odor of the leather upholstery, while Appa drove us slowly around the streets of Raichur, his foot barely touching the accelerator, whispering in my ear, “Left, now. Get ready. Turn the wheel slowly.” And his hands would close over mine, swallowing them, and I would feel the pressure of his fingers and respond to them, pulling as he pulled, inhaling the spice of the cheap home-brewed *daru* that was always on his breath, waiting for those moments when his lips brushed the back of my head, and we would guide the car together, the big maroon bird making a graceful swoop and coming straight again. “Expert,” Appa would whisper warm and rich into my hair as I frowned at the road to hide my pleasure. “So young and already driving like an expert.”

I said nothing about the accident, about how Appa had been drunker than usual, how he had shattered the knee of the woman, how he had cried later because of the noise the woman made—a resigned sigh, *oh*—before she fell.

Mr. Subbu’s fingers kneaded one another.

“Please, sir,” I said.

“How old are you?” he asked.

I paused. “Thirteen,” I said, rounding up.

“Thirteen,” Mr. Subbu said. He squinted out into the sun, and then he pointed to the one of the workers moving over the surface of the red, undulating plain. The sun shrank him into a black dot, no bigger than one of the pebbles I filled my *puttu* with. “See him?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said. And together we watched him for a while.

Then Mr. Subbu said, as if posing a maths problem, “What is he doing?”

“Working,” I said.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Subbu. “Smart boy. He’s working.”

I watched a lorry wind its way to the bottom of a hill, heading to the highway, on an uneven road sawn into the hillside. Behind it trailed a hazy red cloud.

“Work hard, and you will get whatever you want,” Mr. Subbu said, his voice louder than necessary, as if many people had gathered to hear to him. “That’s the best advice I can give you, my boy. Your father would tell you the same thing.” And he touched me on the shoulder, a fatherly touch, at the same time pushing me lightly so that I found myself back in the sun again.

Instead of going back to the site beside the highway, I went to find Appa. Half-hidden behind a mound of earth, I watched him being lowered into a pit, a rope tied under his arms and passing across his bare chest. He had taken off his pants and wore only a pair of frayed striped boxer shorts. He carried a long-handled hammer like an extension of his arm. The loose end of the rope was held by three men, who braced their feet to hold the weight of Appa’s body. And then earth swallowed him, feet first.

I often came to watch him work like this, when he didn’t know I was there. I would count the seconds he was down in the pit, listening for the steady crash of his hammer, muffled thunder. I would wait, alert to the slightest sound of panic, the faintest jerking of the rope. I knew that no matter how many times one did a job, the worst could happen the next time. And just as the waiting became unbearable, and I was about to run into the open, to give myself away, he emerged, red-faced, dangling, gasping like a man being pulled from water.

They untied him, and he began rubbing his skin where the rope had cut into him. One of the men said, “Nice weather down there?” and Appa said, “Sunny like your wife’s *thullu*.” The man laughed. Appa said, “One day I want to tie up that bastard Subbu and send him down there.” The other man said, “He’d get stuck, first of all. Second thing is he’s too busy putting his fat hands all over girls. What else you think he does in that office all day?”

“Fat bastard,” Appa said. He raised his hammer and brought it down once, hard. Then he lifted it again and let it crash down, and then he did it again, the rise and fall of the hammer all part of the same smooth motion. I could feel the impact of each blow travel through the ground between our bodies, from the muscles in his arms to the muscles in my legs, connecting us.

“Thank god I have only sons,” Appa said, and the man laughed again.

When I returned to the site beside the highway, Manju had disappeared. The ground where she had been squatting was scuffed. I crouched over it and tried to make out the marks of her bare feet. A few women were still hunched over, their hammers clinking in rhythm. The woman with the missing eye pulled a pinch of tobacco from a large gray wad and handed it to me. I took it and chewed on it slowly. The bitter tobacco juice flooded my mouth.

The woman watched me chew. “Want to know where that girl went?” she asked.

I tried to imagine what could have happened to her eye. I wanted to apologize for Manju throwing a stone at her, but I was angry at the woman for calling Manju a *soole*.

“She probably went back to her tent,” I said.

“Take another guess,” the woman said. “Shall I tell you?”

“No,” I said.

“Smart boy,” she said.

Then she leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Listen to me. That girl is not nice. Okay? Not nice. You should stay away from her.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “I have to work.”

For the next few hours I worked without stopping. I pounded the ore with my hammer, the blows precise, never faltering, the ring of metal against metal filling my head. Sweat poured down my wrists, and I had to keep wiping my hands on my shorts. Lorries ticked by on the highway, marking time. Siju’s lorry did not drive past again. After a while the women stood up and stretched their backs. They flexed their fingers and curled their toes in the dirt. The one who had given me the tobacco smiled, but with just one eye her smile looked insincere. They took up their full *puttus* and their hammers and walked off in the direction of the weighing station. As they walked, I noted their square backs, their strong thigh muscles showing through their saris, their strange bowlegged gait, their gnarled feet caked with dirt. None of them owned shoes except for the odd pair of rubber or plastic sandals. Manju had been right, I thought. They looked less like women and more like monkeys, the muscular brown monkeys that would swarm our village outside Raichur. They were fearless and feral, those monkeys, grabbing peanuts from children’s hands, attacking people with their small, sharp teeth. A pack of them would sit on top of a low, crumbling wall, chattering and picking lice from each other’s fur, in the way that these women scratched their armpits and laughed in low, coarse voices.

The day ripened into purple and then rotted into black, the air sagging with the smells I never noticed when the sun was there to burn it all away, the stench from pools filled with stagnant water and buzzing with mosquitoes, the sweet whiff of shit drifting from the field we all used, furtively or defiantly, even the women and girls. I registered my last load of iron and returned to our tent, where Amma was preparing the coals for dinner. Clouds pressed down on the camp, our city of plastic tents, and we could hear the voices of the men coming down from the top of the rise where they gathered to drink after work every evening. I could hear Appa’s voice above the others, his laugh the loudest. Amma glanced up every now and again, her face a shining red circle of worry in the light of the coals. I held Munna on my lap, and he blinked sleepily into the coals. When we heard Appa’s singing, the notes warbling as he came down the rise toward us, Amma glanced quickly at me and began blowing at the coals. I pressed my nose into Munna’s neck and smelled his sour baby smell. The coals pulsed brightly every time Amma blew, her cheeks puffed with the effort.

“Guna, the *paan*,” Amma hissed, and I rummaged in a plastic bag for the battered shoe-polish tin in which we kept a stock of crumbled areca nut and a small stack of betel leaves.

“Wipe Munna’s nose,” she ordered, and I used Munna’s sleeve to wipe away the shining thread of mucus that trickled out of one nostril.

“Guna—” and that was all she had time to say before Appa ducked his head under the tent and collapsed among us, creating a confused tangle of arms and legs. Amma smoothly moved out of his way and began pressing balls of dough between her palms and pinching the edges until the dough became round and flat, and she laid them over the coals to bake. She stared at them intently, as if they might fly away. Appa leaned on his elbow. He was no longer stripped down but was wearing his torn T-shirt that said *Calvin Kline* and his faded pants rolled up to his knees. In January he had smashed his hammer into the large toe of his left foot, and it had healed crooked, like a bird’s beak.

“Supriya,” Appa said, drawing her name out. *Shoopreeya*.

Amma said nothing.

“So serious you look,” Appa said. His face seemed to contract and expand, and his *daru*-scented breath filled the tent. “Not happy to see me? Not even one smile for your husband? Your poor husband who has been working like a dog all day?”

Amma bit her lip so hard the bottom of her face twisted. She picked a baked roti off the coals with her bare fingers and laid it on a sheet of newspaper. Appa hiccupped.

I held out the shoe-polish tin. Appa took it, popped it open, and sprinkled some areca nut on a betel leaf. He folded the leaf into a neat square and began chewing it. Red juice came out of the side of his mouth. I watched it trickle down his chin.

“Guna,” he said then, his mouth red and wet. “How many *puttus* today, Guna?”

I was about to say eight when I caught sight of Amma’s face, looking engorged and pleading in the light from the coals. Without taking her eyes off the rotis, she slipped a hand into her blouse and touched her breast where the velvet pouch was.

I said, “Six.”

“Six,” Appa repeated. “That’s all?”

“Yes,” I said. “Sorry, Appa.” I waited for the sting of the slap.

But instead he reached out and slowly caressed the side of my face. He ran his hand from the top of my head down my cheek, over my chin, and to the soft spot on my neck, where my pulse had begun to race. His hand was like sandpaper, covered in scabs and blisters, some that had burst and scarred, some that were still ripe. I felt every bump and welt against my skin, every dip and hollow. It was as if he were leaving the living imprint of his hand on my face.

“No, no,” he said in a rich voice, his singing voice. “Don’t say sorry. I should be sorry. I should be the one saying sorry. It’s because of me you are here. All of you. It is all my fault.” His voice trembled on the edge of a cliff, and his eyes were so dark.

I felt a pricking behind my eyes. My face was humming. There was a heaviness to my limbs. I wondered if this was what he felt like when he was drunk.

“My fault,” Appa said. “I’m a bad father.”

Appa held out his hand, and I dropped my wages into it. All of it, even the eleven rupees I had just lied to him about. Appa’s palm closed around the money, and he dropped it into his pocket. I tightened my arms around Munna. I didn’t dare look at Amma.

I heard her body shift. She let out a breath she’d been holding.

“That is his school money,” she said.

Appa didn’t turn to look at her.

“That is his school money,” she said again. “We said this year he would go back. You have to keep some of that for tuition fees.”

He said, “You’re telling me what to do? In my own house you’re telling me?”

Black spots appeared on the rotis, each accompanied by a small hiss.

“You’re just one man,” Amma said, staring at the spots. “How much *daru* will you drink?” She paused. “I should have had a daughter.”

“What bloody daughter?” said Appa. “Why you want a daughter? You want for me to pay dowry? Some snot-nosed fellow comes and says, I want to marry her, and I have to go into my own pocket and lick his bum? No, thank you.”

“Daughters help their mothers. And you’d drink all of her dowry anyway,” muttered Amma.

I thought he was going to caress her too, the way his hand went out, but then I saw he was pinching her, clamping down on the fleshiest part of her waist, right above her hipbone, the strip of bare skin between the top of her petticoat and the bottom of her blouse. She flailed, her mouth open without screaming. One of her hands caught Munna on the side of the head, and she kicked a stray coal so close to my foot that I could feel it scorch my toe. I drew my foot back and waited for Munna to cry, but he didn’t.

When Appa let go, there were two semicircles of bright red on Amma’s hip, the skin slightly puckered. She was moaning softly but did not let the rotis burn. She picked them off and put them on the newspaper. She was breathing hard through her teeth.

“Supriya, you know what problem you have? You don’t smile enough,” Appa told her. “You should smile more. A woman who doesn’t smile is ugly.”

Then Amma’s gaze traveled beyond the coals, beyond Appa’s prone form, and I turned to see

Siju standing at the entrance of the tent. He looked fresh. His hair was combed, of all things. He stood there, watching us, and suddenly I could see us through his eyes, the picture we presented, me with my toes curled in, Munna swaying with sleep in my arms, Appa reclining on his elbow, Amma hunched over the coals. I saw what he saw, and then I wished I hadn't seen it.

"What you think you're staring at?" Appa said. "Sit down."

Siju picked his way to an empty spot between Appa and me. As soon as he sat down, the tent felt full, too full. We were too close together, fear and anger flying around like rockets.

"Where did you go today?" Amma asked Siju. To my surprise, he didn't turn away like he usually did but looked at her with a distant sort of sympathy, as if she were a stranger he had made up his mind to be kind to.

"Hospet," he said.

"Hospet," Amma repeated gratefully. "Is it a nice place?"

With the same careful kindness he said, "Actually, I've never seen a dirtier place."

"What the hell you were expecting?" Appa said, trying to provoke him. "All cities are dirty. You want to eat your food off the street, or what?"

Siju ignored him, and I could sense Appa stiffening.

"How many trips did you get?" Amma asked.

"Trips!" Appa snorted. "He drives that bloody lorry ten kilometers to the railway station. Ten kilometers! How do you call that a trip?"

Siju began to massage his feet. Amma put another roti on the coals. Appa glared at them both, their exclusion of him causing the pressure inside to build and build.

"So? How many?" Appa said. His head swiveled slowly in Siju's direction. "How many *trips*? Your mother asked a question, can't you hear? You're deaf or something?"

"Three," said Siju curtly.

"Don't talk like I'm some peon who cleans your shit. Say it properly."

"Three," repeated Siju.

"You're listening, Supriya?" drawled Appa with exaggerated awe. "You want something to smile about? Your son got three trips to the bloody railway station in a bloody lorry. *Three trips!* What you want a daughter for? With a son like this?"

His glassy gaze never left Siju's face. Amma laid the last roti over the coals.

"Bloody lorry driver thinks he's a bloody raja," muttered Appa.

I pinched Munna under the arm, hoping to make him cry, hoping to create a distraction, but he wouldn't. I pinched again harder, but he sat still, a soft, surprisingly heavy weight on my lap. One of the coals popped, and my heart jumped. I remembered the way the manager of the thermal station had come to our house after Appa's accident. Spit flew from the manager's mouth as he screamed, landing lightly on Appa's face, and I remembered how Appa didn't wipe it off. I remembered the way Appa had said, "No, sir. Sorry, sir. No, sir. Sorry, sir," like he didn't understand the words. Like they were a poem he had memorized. That night he went and lay down on the road, and when Amma went to bring him back in, he said, "Supriya, leave me alone! I deserve this." And I remembered the way she held his head, speaking to him softly until he dragged himself up and followed her back inside.

Now he waited to see what Siju would do.

For a second I thought he would hit Appa. Then he shrugged. "Being a bloody lorry driver is better than hammering bloody pieces of iron all day." He looked at me as he said this, and I looked away.

Amma used her finger to smear the rotis with lime pickle, rolled them into tubes, and handed them to us. She held her arms out for Munna, slipping her blouse down her shoulder, baring her slack breast with its wine-colored nipple. Munna latched on, his black eyes shining in the semidarkness, unblinking, gazing at us. The roti was warm and tasted of smoke, and the pickle was tart, the lime stringy and tough. I thought only about the food, about how it was filling my mouth, sliding tight down my throat, unlocking something. It was always this way. The food loosened something in all of us, a tightly wound spring uncoiling. I felt myself starting to relax. Food could do this, and warmth, and the approach of sleep. There were these moments of calm, when no one spoke, and there were only the coals and the insistent flapping of the plastic tent and the mumble of other families and the sky hanging low.

Then Siju, leaning toward me, spoiled it all by saying, "I have something to say to you."

I swallowed quickly. "I don't want to hear anything," I said. We kept our voices down because Appa seemed to have fallen asleep. He was snoring lightly.

"Listen just one second."

"Oh-ho, Lorry Raja wants to say something," I said.

"Don't—"

I put my fingers in my ears and chanted, "Lorry Raja! Lorry Raja!" I knew it was silly, but I wanted to keep this fragile peace, to clutch it tightly in my fist like a precious stone.

“Guna, listen!” Siju said, louder than he had intended.

“What’s the racket?” said Appa, coming out of his doze.

“Nothing,” said Siju.

“Nothing,” I repeated.

Appa closed his eyes again. Amma was still breast-feeding Munna, her head bent in contemplation of his placid sucking.

“That monkey woman called Manju a *soole*,” I said quietly.

Siju picked at a scab on his knee.

“What are you two talking about?” Amma asked.

Before Siju could reply, I said, “Manju. *His* girlfriend.”

“The girl whose mother is sick?”

I nodded.

“Poor thing,” Amma said. “Maybe I should go see if I can do something.”

But then Munna fell asleep, still making halfhearted sucks at her nipple, and her eyes went soft. She brushed her hand against the tuft of hair sticking up from his red-stained forehead.

“Don’t bother,” Siju spat. “*She* knows how to get what she wants.”

“I’m going to see if she’s okay,” I said, standing up. To my surprise, Siju stood up too.

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

“No!” I shouted.

“Yes,” said Amma. “Both of you go.”

“Siju,” Appa said. He was still in that reclining position. His calves under the rolled-up pants were like polished cannonballs. I remembered the way I had seen him earlier that day, bare chested, bent at the waist, his long-handled hammer making smooth strokes, crashing against the ground. He was not a big man or a tall one, but he was a man who broke iron for ten hours every day.

Siju looked at him for a long moment, then nodded and reached into his pocket. He brought out a set of folded notes and pressed it into Appa’s outstretched palm. Appa tucked it into his

pocket, where my own wages nestled. He hummed something tuneless and closed his eyes.

Amma was watching us both. "Here," she said. "Take something for them." She made me wrap two rotis in newspaper. "Come back before it rains."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to," I told Siju as we picked our way through the maze of tents. "I won't tell."

Instead of answering he was quiet, which made me nervous. A rat the size of my foot ran across our path and disappeared into the blackness to our right. The rats were a problem in the camp. They got into our food, chewed holes in our blankets, bit babies as they slept. Last year a baby had died from a rat bite. I thought of Munna asleep, of the whole camp silent, a ship of blue plastic afloat on these hairy black bodies that moved and rustled under it, restless and hungry as the ocean.

Manju wasn't in her tent. From inside came the loud, ragged breathing of her mother. Siju raised his eyebrows at me and jerked his chin in the direction of the tent's opening. I shook my head; I could just make out the shadowy figure wrapped in a blanket, smaller than a person should be. Then Manju's mother coughed, a colorless wheezing cough, like wind passing through a narrow, lonely corridor. I took an unconscious step backward.

"She's not there," I whispered.

"Smart fellow," Siju whispered back.

"So now what?"

"We go back to our tent."

"*You* go back," I said. "I'll wait for her here. She must have gone to the toilet."

Siju gave me a long, searching look. "Guna," he said. "Just forget her."

"No!" I almost shouted. I felt the start of tears, burning in the ridge of my nose. Before I could stop myself, I said, "She wants me to take her to China."

"What?" His voice was flat.

"In my lorry," I said. I knew I was babbling. I squeezed the rotis and felt the warmth seep through the newspaper. "She said if I could drive a lorry, I could take her to China. To see the Lympic Games. I asked Mr. Subbu, but he said no. He said if I work hard I'll get what I want."

Siju let out a long breath. "You asked Subbu?" he said. "That fat bastard? You asked him?"

"Yes," I said.

“My god.” My brother shook his head. “Come with me,” he said.

Mr. Subbu’s Esteem was still parked outside his aluminum-walled shed. The shed was directly under a single lamppost, whose light cast it in a liquid, silver glow. The lamppost was connected to a generator, which growled like a sleeping dog. We crept up to the backhoe loader, which was just outside the shoreline of light.

Siju put his hand on my shoulder. “Not too close,” he said.

“Why are we here?” I asked. He put a finger on his lips.

We waited, partly hidden by the massive machine. I leaned against it, and the cold of its metal body was a shock. Siju was standing behind me, very close. There was a strange calmness to the whole scene, the glowing shed, the purring of the generator, the still air.

And then, with a movement so smooth and natural that I forgot to be surprised, Manju stepped from Mr. Subbu’s shed. She stood there for a moment, her uniform and thin legs perfectly outlined in the light of the lamp, her face lifted like one of the deer on the back panel of Siju’s lorry. Then she turned and looked straight at us. I jumped, but Siju’s hand was on my shoulder again.

“Be still,” he whispered.

But Manju had seen us. Her uniform seemed even bigger on her frame than it had earlier in the day. She was floating in it as she came over to us. Her feet were soundless in the dirt. As soon as she was level with the backhoe loader, Siju stepped out and pulled her behind it. She put her hands on her hips and looked at us for a long time without speaking. Behind her, the lamppost snapped off, plunging everything into darkness. Then the headlights of Mr. Subbu’s Esteem came on, and the car floated away, as if borne on an invisible river.

“So,” Manju said. As my eyes adjusted slowly, I noticed that her eyes were swollen. She had been crying. I thought of the shed, of Mr. Subbu’s hands kneading each other, of the cold bottle of Pepsi, of the way he’d put his hand on the shoulder of the girl with the braids. I thought of the woman with one eye saying, *That girl is not nice.*

“How long have you been standing here?” Manju asked.

“Relax,” said Siju coolly. “Guna felt like taking a walk.”

“A walk,” Manju repeated. She looked at me quickly, accusingly, and I felt a spike of guilt. “And you just walked this way,” she said.

Siju shrugged. “That’s how it happened.”

I said, “We came to give you these rotis.” I pressed the newspaper-wrapped rotis into her hand. She looked at them as if I had done something meaningless.

“Let’s go back to the tent,” I told Siju. I wanted to get away from Manju’s raw, swollen face. Her tears had made clear channels in the red paste on her cheeks.

“Just one minute,” Siju said. He leaned in close to Manju so that his face was barely inches from hers. He smiled. It was not a nice smile.

“Guna told me you want to go to China,” he said.

Manju looked at me, puzzled. I closed my eyes. “What?” she said uncertainly.

“Still want to go?”

He had made a copy of the lorry key. In Hospet. He had waited in the lorry while a shopkeeper fashioned a new one, which was raw and shining and silver. It made me uncomfortable to look at it.

In the lorry yard, the smell of grease and diesel strong in my nose, I whispered, “Mr. Subbu will throw you out if he finds out. Appa will kill you.”

“Shut up,” Siju said in a normal voice. “Mr. Subbu! Appa! You think I care? Come with us or stay here and shut up. Your decision.”

He climbed into the high cab of the lorry. He reached over and held a hand out for Manju, who held it indifferently, as if she were being asked to hold a piece of wood. He let me struggle in by myself. When I had shut the door, he inserted the shining key into the ignition.

“They’re going to hear us,” I said.

“No, they’re not,” he said grimly. He turned the key and started the engine.

It sounded like thunder rolling across the plain. I closed my eyes and waited for a shout, a light shining in our faces, the relief of discovery. But no one came. The city of tents stayed dark, except for the glimmer of burning coals. The sky answered with thunder of its own.

Siju did not turn on the headlights, and the lorry drifted out of the yard, past the weighing station, past the permit yard, rounding the perimeter, the camp turning silently on its axis like a black globe, the dirt road invisible.

“On your marks,” I heard Siju say. He sounded calm. “Get set. Go.”

And then I felt the pressure release, the lorry pick up speed, and we were driving downhill, and there was wind rushing in through the windows, filling my lungs. I could feel Manju’s shoulder against mine, and there were Siju’s hands curled on the wheel, and the floorboard thrummed under my feet, and I was suddenly awake, wide awake, filled with the cold night air.

Siju flipped on the headlights, and I saw that we were no longer within the boundaries of the

mine, we had left it behind, and trees flashed by, their lowest branches scraping the sides of the lorry. There was no time to feel anything. All I could do was keep my balance, keep my shoulder from slamming against the door. We hurtled past rocks that were big enough to jump off. Siju drove leaning forward, without slowing for anything, and the lorry bounced and jostled, and its springs screeched, and in the yellow beam of the headlights I saw the ground jump sharply into focus for an instant before we swallowed it. The hills in the distance were getting closer, and I wondered if Siju intended to drive to the top of them, or even beyond. I wanted him to. I wanted him to drive forever. As long as he kept driving, we would be safe.

But then he stopped, let the engine idle fall into silence. We were in the middle of the plains, far enough away from the mine to seem like a different country. The ground stretched away on every side. The trees provided no orientation. They simply carved out darker shapes in the darkness. Siju took his hands off the wheel and ran them through his hair. Manju's chest rose and fell under the uniform. She stared straight ahead, through the grimy windshield, even after we had been sitting there in silence for minutes.

"Gold medal," I heard Siju whisper.

I opened and closed my mouth, each time to say something that crumbled and became a confused tangle of words.

"You shouldn't have brought Guna," Manju said. The sound of my name made me shiver, as if by naming me she had made me responsible. For this, for the three of us, here. As if whatever happened here would be because of me.

"Why not?" Siju said. "He deserves to come, no? You know, he even went to Subbu today and asked if he could be a lorry driver. All because of you. Sweet, no? Bastard said no, of course. I could have told him not to waste his time; Subbu has his fat hands filled with your—"

"You think I like this?" she said. She spoke to the windshield, to the open plain. "Begging for money? Sir, please give money for medicine. Sir, please give money for surgery. Sir, Mummy's coughing again. Doctor says her lungs are weak. Sir, please give money for doctor's fees. You think it's nice to stand still and let him do whatever he wants? And he gives too little money, so every time I have to go back. You think it's a big game?"

I could tell that Siju was taken aback. "You could work—"

"Fifty rupees per day!" Manju said. "Even if I work all day and night, it would not even be enough for food. Sometimes you're so stupid. Even Guna is smarter than you." After she said this, she seemed to collapse. I could feel her shoulder sag against mine.

"Manju," I said. For no reason other than to say her name.

Siju sat in silence for a while. Then he made a strangled sound in his throat, like he was coming to a decision he already hated himself for. He opened his door and jumped out.

“Come on,” he said to Manju.

I made a move to get out.

“No, you stay here,” Siju said.

“But—” I started to say.

“Guna, just stay here,” Manju said. She sounded tired.

I bit down on my lip. Manju put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. I could smell metal in her hair. It was the most vivid thing I had ever smelled. It was a smell that had a shape, edges as solid a building. And then for no reason I thought of our neighbor’s wife, the one who survived after her husband tried to burn them all. She lived in the temple courtyard after that, and the priests fed her. Sometime she would take dried pats of cow dung and put them on her head like a hat and stare at passersby, the skin of her cheek rippled pink. I don’t know why I thought of that woman just then, but I did. And while I was remembering her, Manju was sliding away from me, into the driver’s seat, her legs stretching to the ground. She dropped with a little grunt.

I heard them walk around the lorry, heard the clink of the chain and the rusted creak as the back panel was lowered. I felt the vibrations of their movements come to me through the empty lorry bed. A scraping noise, and I knew Siju was spreading a tarpaulin sheet across the back. Through the metal, through the fake leather of the seat, through the cogs and gears and machinery, I could feel their movements, the positioning of one body over another. I heard Siju say something in a low voice. I don’t remember hearing Manju reply.

And then I didn’t want to hear any more, so I listened instead to the whirring of insects in the bushes, the nighttime howls of dogs from the villages whose fires hung suspended in the distance, the wind that traveled close to the ground, scraping dry leaves into piles. The darkness made it vast, vaster than the mine, which in the daytime seemed so large to me. It was different in every way from the camp, where the sounds were either machine sounds, lifting and loading and dumping and digging, or people sounds, eating or snoring or crying or swearing at someone to shut up so they could sleep.

A light wind brushed my face, carried the smell of rain. Tomorrow the work would be impossible, the ground too wet to dig, the ore slippery and slick, the puddles swollen to ponds. The men would slide around, knee-deep, and curse. The children would push each other, making it into a rough game. The lorries would get stuck, their wheels spinning, flinging mud in all directions, and we would have to spend an extra hour digging them out. There would be red mud in the crooks of our elbows, in our fingernails, in our ears. The coals, in the evening, would refuse to light.

For a second I couldn’t move, as if the coming days and weeks and months and years were piling on top of me like a load of ore, pinning me against the darkness, and then I found myself slipping into the driver’s seat and taking hold of the shining key, which stuck out of the

ignition like a small cold hand asking to be grasped. I tried to remember what to do, what I had seen others do. I carefully pressed the clutch. I needed to slide forward to the edge of the seat to do it. I turned the key, and the lorry rumbled to life. I waited for a second, holding my breath, and then in a rush I released the clutch and stomped on the accelerator. The lorry bucked, then jumped a couple of feet, and my temple hit the half-rolled driver's-door window. I put my finger to my skin, and it came away wet with blood. The engine stammered and died, and everything went back to silence.

Siju wrenched open the door and dragged me out of the cab. He grasped two handfuls of my shirt and shook me.

“What’s wrong with you?” he said. “What kind of idiot are you?”

When I didn’t answer, he let go of my shirt. His pants were unzipped, and I looked at the V-shaped flap that was hanging open. He saw me looking and said, “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Just say it, Guna.”

“Nothing,” I said.

He zipped his pants.

“Then get inside,” he said. “We’re going home.”

“What about Manju?” I asked.

“She wants to sit in the back.”

“It’s going to rain,” I said. “She’ll get wet.”

“Just get inside the bloody lorry, Guna,” Siju said. “Don’t argue.”

Inside the cab I hugged my body and tried to stay awake. The cold air was still coming in, and I wanted to roll up my window, but Siju had his open, his elbow resting on it, head leaning on that hand, the other guiding the lorry. He was driving slowly now, taking care to avoid the bumps and dips in the uneven ground. We passed a rock, ghostly white, that I didn’t remember from the journey out. From the corner of my eye, I looked at him, my sullen brother. Not a raja but a fourteen-year-old lorry driver in a Bellary mine.

“What’s going to happen now?” I asked.

He drew his hand inside. “What’s going to happen to what?”

To everything, I wanted to say. But I said, “Manju’s mother.”

He let a few moments go by before answering. And when he did, what he said was, “Come on, Guna. You’re smart. You know.”

“We could have given her the money from my school fees,” I said.

“For what?” He sounded like an old man. “So she can die in three months instead of two?”

After that we didn’t talk. The trees fell away, and the ground became smoother. The camp came into view, almost completely dark, just a few remaining fires that would burn throughout the night. Siju parked in the lorry yard and jumped out. I stayed sitting in the cab. A few drops of rain fell on the windshield and created long glossy streaks as they traveled down. The camp would wake to find itself afloat. The rats would come looking for dry ground. Munna would need to be nursed. Amma would put her hand behind his soft downy head to soothe him. Appa would bail out the water that pooled in the roof of our tent. Amma would tie an old *lungi* of Appa’s to two of the bamboo poles to create a hammock for Munna that would keep him above the reach of the rats. Manju’s mother would shift to a more comfortable position and wait for the rain to stop. There didn’t seem to be a reason for any of it, a logic that I could see. There was repetition and routine and the inevitability of accident. Tomorrow Mr. Subbu would drink a Pepsi, and we would dig for iron.

I heard Siju say my name, and I heard the panic in his voice. It was raining in earnest now, the windshield a silver wash. I pushed open the door and nearly fell out. My feet sank into the soft mud. Siju was standing at the back of the truck, the back panel open. His hair hung draggled around his face, and drops of water clung to the tips. He pointed wordlessly to the lorry bed. I forced my eyes to scan the entire space for Manju, but she wasn’t there.

We stood there for what seemed like an hour, though I knew it was less than a minute. I pictured her walking across the plains, her face directed to some anonymous town. She would walk for hours, I knew, and when she got tired, she would sleep exactly where she stopped walking, her arms shielding her face from the rain. I imagined her curled up on the ground. I imagined that her hair would plaster her cheek. I imagined that her uniform would be washed back into white, a beacon for anyone watching, except no one would be.

Over the following months Siju began sucking diesel out of the lorries and selling it back to the drivers at 20 percent below pump prices, and by the time the monsoons ended, he had earned enough money for one year of school fees for me. He gave it to Amma without telling me, and I never thanked him directly. We had spoken very little since the night of the lorry ride. I watched him closely for a while, worried that he would disappear too, but he came back night after night, sometimes after we had all fallen asleep, never smiling, never saying much. I knew he took the lorry out sometimes, but he never took me with him again. He stopped swaggering, and the lorry cleaners seemed disappointed. I went to school in the mornings and returned to the mine afterward.

The next August, after the flooded pits were starting to dry out again, Mr. Subbu arrived at the mine late one afternoon and announced that he was giving everyone the rest of the day off. He smiled at the responding cheer. Then from his Esteem he brought out a small color television

and a white satellite dish and hooked them up to the generator, setting them on a rickety table with the help of the one of the laborers. He fiddled with the antenna until a picture flickered on the screen.

We all gathered around to watch the magnificent round stadium in China fill with color and light and music and movement. We watched graceful acrobats and women with feathers and children with brightly painted faces. We watched glittering fireworks and slender athletes in shiny tracksuits and flapping flags with all the shades of the world. We watched as the stadium slowly filled with red light, and thousands of people arranged themselves into gracious, shifting shapes in the center. Thousands more gathered in the seats, their faces reflecting the same awe we felt. We watched, all of us, in silence, stunned by the beauty of what we had created.