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Man of the Tiger House

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Man of the Tiger House

As beads of sweat grew on my grandfather's forehead, I wrung out a damp cloth. His thick brows furrowed in concern and I wiped the thin layer of perspiration from his skin. Even in his old age, he was handsome. His blue-brown eyes were a blend of the sea and the earth, the day and night skies. But somehow, they were sad; they spoke of hunger and deceit and violence and death and all the other sad things in this world.

We lay in silence for what must have been an hour, my fingers overlapping his broad knuckles as we held hands. His wrinkly eyelids blanketed what was beneath as he napped for the fourth time that day. I wondered if he was dreaming about his father or his old house, or perhaps about his wife, who had died last spring. We lay in silence, just like that, until I heard his stomach grumble. I stumbled out of the rock-hard bed and walked to the kitchen to fix dinner.

The kitchen in my grandfather's house is like an old book. Upon opening the French doors, I am enveloped in a scent that teleports me to my childhood days here—splashing sink water at my brother, devouring my grandmother's Ramen, my near-death experience with an Indian scorpion. The cracks along the walls and the leaky faucet have been there since I was a child, and are trademarks of this small kitchen. As I placed the raw *naan* in the oven and the leftover curry on the stove, I wondered how my childhood passed so quickly, without even asking permission.

I slid my fingers across my grandfather's heavy ivory food tray that had once belonged to his father. When I was a child, he would tell me bedtime stories about the time he lived near a forest full of elephants. His eyes would sparkle as he talked about his father, the King of the Elephants, who supposedly communicated with the large beasts. He had made the tray out of the tusks of a large elephant, laboring over it for a month and smoothing it to perfection. Over the

past week that I had been looking after my grandfather while his house servants were on leave, I had been petrified that I would drop the tray on the ground and watch it shatter into a million pieces. How terrible it would be to tell him that he could no longer eat out of his ivory platter, the only item he had left of his *Baba*.

As I turned down the narrow hallway to the television room, my shoulder grazed a small shelf that my grandmother had always kept her prayer books on top of. Heavy thuds interrupted the rhythm of my footsteps, and I turned around to see three books on the ground, two of which I recognized as hers. I felt that I had to pick them up right away—that's what my grandmother would have done. I set the platter on the ground and picked them up, one by one.

The book I did not recognize immediately caught my attention. It was a small leather-bound diary, with my grandfather's name written on it: *Gian Chand*. It felt smooth, as if it had been thrown in so many pockets that the tough outer-skin had eroded. As I opened it, I noticed that the pages in the front were torn off. The diary started at page four:

14 September 1947

Some-o-clock: *Today is a Wednesday. Do not know the time as it is dark in this hay truck. I am hiding underneath bales of hay with my younger brothers and sisters. We are all told to keep quiet in case a Muslim police officer hears us. Mother is still at home in Lahore collecting her jewels and valuables before she flees. Who knows if she will survive or even if we will survive?*

Later-o-clock: *I am bored. It seems like years that we have been staying in this hay truck—it has only been one day. Maya and Renu are both asleep and have not been making noise. Neil has begun to fidget now because he has to use the bathroom... I also have to but we*

are almost at a vehicle checkpoint and we can do nothing but sit still... I am tired of sitting still...

15 September 1947

Morning-o'clock: Right now, I am fairly certain it is morning as I can see a glint of light in between bales of hay. It was very strange leaving Lahore yesterday. We used to live on the biggest hill, in the Tiger House. Guards patrol the house day and night because Mother is afraid that a thief will rob us. Mother patrols the house day and night because she is afraid that the guards will rob us. The children of the neighborhood called me and Neil the Tiger Boys and Maya and Renu the Tiger Girls. Once when I tried to play cricket with a neighborhood boy, Mother came to me and yelled loudly.

I am not allowed to play with neighborhood children. I think she is afraid they will try to rob the house.

Two nights ago, we heard bombs. Mother put Neil and the girls in the basement and explained to me that from then on everything was going to be different. I was going to take care of my siblings in a hay truck. She would not be there. We would meet in India, passed the border, in the refugee camp for Pakistani Hindus. She should not arrive more than one week after we did. The next morning, I did what I was told. Now I am no longer the Tiger Boy.

I placed my grandmother's prayer books in their normal place and took the diary into the television room. As I read the diary on the large couch, I forgot about the *naan* and curry.

16th September 1947

One-o-clock: *I wish father was still alive. I am only 15. I know father would have done something, he would not have been a coward like I. I tried to help them but I couldn't; the officer had a gun on my head. If I died, my siblings would all die.*

Neil is shaking and I know it is not because it is cold outside. I gave him some food but he will not agree to eat. He feels sick, as do I.

Mother is going to be very disappointed in me. Mother is going to tell me I ruined our family.

Six-o-clock: *The men are very bad.*

When we reached the border the night before, the truck was still and quiet. I heard the hooves of an officer outside of the truck. As we waited anxiously, I fed my sisters rolls of coconut bread.

I heard the officer's voice. He asked the truck driver if he carried any refugees. The truck driver replied saying he was only transporting hay for a farm just across the border.

After this, I believe the officer bribed the driver. Without a warning, the driver, who Mother had paid to keep us safe until we reached India, lifted the hay bales from above us. Maya screamed in terror. Four more officers came to the truck. I did not know what to do or if they were going to kill us. They spoke in Farsi, a language I could not understand. A few minutes of terror passed before one of them asked me for a favor. Yes, I replied, shaking. They asked for the girls.

This is when I tried to stand up and protest. Said no. Another one of the officers put a pistol to my head and told me to give them or they would shoot me. If I gave them, they would let me and my brother cross to India. I did and now we are here at the refugee camp across the border waiting for Mother. If she comes.

17th September 1947

Two-o'clock: *This world is very unforgiving. This morning, Neil and I saw Mr. Raj from the neighborhood below the Tiger House. He greeted us with small eyes and a sad face. "You boys are too young to know of the evils in the world." These words I remember he said. For now, I will hope my sisters and mother are safe but until then I must take care of Neil. Mr. Raj's wife has asked us to live with her and her husband inside her refugee hut. She said she does not have children so she will love to have us. Tomorrow, I will start to sweep the floors of a man in a nearby village so I can buy food for Mrs. Raj to cook.*

23th September 1947

Six-o'clock: *Mother came today. When she knocked on Mrs. Raj's door, she did not hug or kiss me and Neil. She looked ten years older and did not talk for the rest of the evening. Mrs. Raj said a few prayers and put her feet in a tin full of steaming water. I fell asleep on the dirt floor, but in the middle of the night, I was woken up by Mother. She had tears in her eyes and she told me that the girls are dead. She said she found out from an Indian officer after she asked him about her children.*

There is a film I saw with Neil once in the theater down the hill from the Tiger House. We were fascinated by the white ladies and the slick cars. In the movie, the man finds that his wife and children are dead when he comes back from the military. He cries and cries until he is drenched in his own tears. I do not feel like that now. I cannot bring myself to cry.

29th September 1947

One-o'clock: Today we are going to my uncle's house. He lives in New Delhi. Mother was able to get in touch with him by letter and he has come to pick us up in the train.

I have never been to India. I hope I enjoy it. Mother says we Hindus will be safe here.

Neil stays quiet. He misses the girls. I try not to think about them but I know I will feel guilt for all of my life. Mother has not spoken with me for a few days. Maybe everything will return to normal when we go to live with our uncle.

I think wars are terrible. People kill each other because they don't believe in the same things.

I closed the diary. Tracing over my grandfather's messy cursive handwriting with my finger, I tried to imagine my grandfather as a young boy. Perhaps his past experiences were the cause of his quiet, passive attitude.

As I stood up, guilt washed over me. Wasn't there a rule against reading someone else's diary? And I had left the heat on... the food was probably burnt. I rushed to the kitchen to retrieve his platter, my brain occupied with thoughts about my grandfather, about his guilt, about how I had inherited that guilt.

Flustered, I hurriedly poured the boiling curry into a bowl, tossing the dark, overcooked *naan* beside it on the tray. As I exited through the kitchen's French doors, the platter slipped from my hand and crashed onto the tile.

Curry seeped like blood across the cold floor. The tray was cracked into three pieces—unlike the million that I had previously envisioned. My heart sank and I felt its pulse through my

legs, making my skin hot. My stomach felt heavy, as if it was holding bricks, and I clenched my fists in anger.

Stepping over the platter, carefully avoiding the curry puddle, I walked to my grandfather's bed, where his eyes were still closed, where his breathing was still even. I put my head on his chest, listening to his synthetic Pacemaker heartbeat. A drop fell from my eye and landed on his plain shirt, a single polkadot of gray in a sea of white.

"I'm sorry," I croaked.

He didn't hear me.