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The Gap

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Author Bio

Nathan Storey is an Anthropology major in the class of 2010. He has had the fortunate opportunity to work as an editor in the Mercury staff all four years at Gettysburg, and it has been a great pleasure to act as co-editor-in-chief with Jen Bray this year. He is also the Co-Editor-In-Chief of The Forum, the college's independent online news source. He hopes to continue to study and work abroad after college.

Nathan Storey

The Gap

Shanti's coughs and moans awoke Deepak. His wife shuddered next to him, the pain causing her body to spasm periodically. She gasped and ran for the bathroom, clutching her stomach. The light flipped on in the bathroom, usually dull and flickering, but seemingly blinding at this hour. Their small bedroom was dark, except for the shadows that were now cast about the room by the light that spilled out from under the door.

A short time later, Shanti returned, moving slowly and slipped back into the bed. Deepak put a hand on her shoulder, it was clammy.

"Shanti, what is wrong?"

"My whole body hurts, Deepak. My stomach feels as if it is all twisted, and my joints ache. I don't know what is happening. This happened so suddenly."

"Will you go to the doctor tomorrow?"

"It has only just started, it will probably pass. It is only difficult for the time being." She grimaced but smiled up at him.

Deepak sighed at his wife's stubbornness. She had always insisted on being strong as long as he had known her.

"Let me know if you need anything at all."

Even though the night passed without another rushed trip to the bathroom, Deepak could feel her tossing and turning well past dawn.

The next morning, Shanti left for her job in Vasant Vihar in South Delhi, and Deepak took the car on towards the SIT program center. Deepak loved his job as the coordinator for trips, activities, host families, speakers, everything really, for a study abroad program which brought students in from colleges throughout the United States. It was a thrill for Deepak to gradually get to know them as he did his job, organizing programming and listening to them take Hindi lessons across the hall, answering their questions during breaks when they wandered in. On group trips, he would spend time with them, teaching them cricket, how to bargain and which items in the shops were cheap knock-offs. By the end of the semester, when they gave their final presentations, he had watched them grow as they adapted to their new homes. One of his favorite parts was sharing music and films with them. Deepak was a film buff, and was very selective and discerning

in his tastes of Bollywood actors. His favorite actor was Aamir Khan, who was more devoted to his craft than any other, both physically and emotionally. Even more, Deepak loved being introduced to American television shows. He had recently gotten hooked on *Lost*, but was also a fan of *Futurama* and *Big Love*, though he knew little about these Mormons it was supposed to be about.

Deepak entered the center through the large black metal doors and down the hallway to his office. It wasn't much of a hallway, being that there were two offices on the one side, and the program center classroom on the other. He was alone in the office for the time being, but soon his boss, the program director, Dr. Mary Gale or Gale-ji, as the Indian staff and the students in the program were told to address her, would make her entrance. Gale-ji was a very imposing woman, especially in India. She knew she was in charge and made sure that everyone who worked for her knew she was in charge as well. She was a woman of contradictions, though. Just walking through the program center, Deepak saw signs of this. The classroom did not have desks but large futons with decadent and brightly colored pillows, clearly an attempt to seem exotic. As if that was how Indians sat. The walls were hung with small paintings, mostly by Ravi Varma, who Gale-ji railed against for trying to cozy up to the British by Westernizing Hindu myths and deities. Yet here were at least a dozen of his paintings on her walls. Her wardrobe was similarly perplexing to Deepak and the Indian staff. She insisted on wearing (and on making the girl students wear) the traditional Indian kurta top, dupata scarf and pajama pants, yet chose the ones that were the most see-through or revealing whenever possible. And again, listening to the way she spoke to the students, Deepak always marveled at how she positioned herself as an expert on all facets of Indian life and customs, fluent in Hindi, and an authority on living in a foreign country. But then, the second she needed train tickets or a hotel or restaurant reservation, she went to Deepak. Still, in the areas that Gale-ji was studied in, she truly was brilliant, but as one student, Molly, from a few years back had said, Gale was a book person, not a people person.

A breeze blew in through the front door and down the hallway, a dry, hot, breeze. It was so hot this time of year that even the breeze was incapable of refreshing people. But this breeze was stiff, and meant one thing. She was here. Trailing behind her several steps was her husband, Guy, a Brit who was everything Gale was not. He loved sports, especially cricket, and would talk bowlers and batters all day with Deepak. Gale brushed past Deepak's office without a glance, her dupata trailing behind her. Guy poked his head in, though.

"India over Pakistan by 30 wickets! What a match!" he said.

"Tendulkar was astounding! I was sitting on the edge of my seat as he hit his second century."

"Deepak!" Gale called from her office.

"We'll talk more about this later," Guy said as he ducked out of the room and slipped into the small program center library across the hall.

Just after lunch, which Deepak savored— he was very picky about food, and his wife often criticized him for not liking traditional "Indian" food—a call came through on his office phone.

"Mr. Nakra? This is Dr. Gupta. I am at the Indira Gandhi Hospital, and your wife was brought in from her office about a half hour ago. She is stable now, but she collapsed while at work. She has been asking for you."

"Of...of course, I'll be there as soon as I can," Deepak said.

Deepak slammed the phone down and all but ran out of his office and towards Gale's. Annoyed, he realized she was in the class with the students, preparing them for a speaker to lecture them on Indian film. He backpedaled and hurried back to the door to the classroom. Putting his ear to the door, he heard that she was nearing the end of her introduction, after which she would leave the classroom.

Deepak paced for what seemed like ages, but his watch told him only a few seconds had passed. Gale slipped out the door and stopped, clearly surprised to see Deepak waiting for her. "Gale-ji, Shanti is in the hospital, they just called; I need to go."

"Deepak, you can't just leave like this without much notice, this is your job...but I suppose that an exception can be made," she said.

At the small clinic, really just a set of tiny rooms off of a cramped reception and waiting area, Deepak rushed in breathing heavily, and was almost past the front desk by the time the receptionist was able to respond and point him to the right room. She caught up with him a minute later with several clipboards of paperwork, but Deepak couldn't be interrupted by that point. He knelt by the bed where Shanti lay, too frantic to look around for a chair and fearing sitting next to her for accidentally cutting off circulation or some vital instrument. She was wrapped in a thin hospital gown and Deepak was disturbed by the tubes which spread out from her arm to the plastic IV bag hanging next to her bed. "Shanti, how are you feeling? That was a stupid question, I'm sorry."

"Deepak, you're here. The doctor was just here a few minutes ago. They're running some tests, but he won't know for sure what is wrong for a few days. It sounded like I could go home though."

"I want to hear that from him, Shanti. I'm glad you're okay, at least for now."

Deepak squeezed her hand, kissed her on the forehead, and stood, walking out the door. He moved swiftly to the receptionist's station, asked for the doctor, and returned to his wife's bedside.

Shortly the doctor entered the room carrying Shanti's charts.

"Mr. Nakra, I am Doctor Gunbir Singh." Doctor Singh was a tall Sikh Indian, and proudly wore a deep purple turban and black beard.

"We have your wife's test results back, and we're afraid that it is cancer. Now, cancer can be difficult because sometimes it can be treated, but it's hard to say whether it will or not. There are a number of options that we can discuss if you'd like."

They sat while the doctor detailed the options to treat Shanti's cancer, and after the doctor left they sat in silence, not daring to say to the other what had to be said.

"Deepak, I don't think we can afford those treatments. We just don't have the money."

"There has to be a way. I can go to Gale-ji and ask for an advance. She's been promising me incremental raises since I was hired."

"Thank you. I hope you're right."

Deepak trudged into the office the next morning, moving slowly out of exhaustion. After he had called the office and let Gale-ji know what was going on and that he would not be back at the office that day, he had stayed at the clinic as long as they would let him but eventually was told he had to go home. Begrudgingly he had left, but hadn't slept much that night, which, given the fact that his wife was still in the clinic, seemed fair. One student, Julie, was sitting in his office, waiting for him. Julie was an art major from Wesleyan University and had bonded with Deepak almost immediately over their love of the TV show *Lost*, which Deepak had managed to find pirated DVDs of in Delhi. "Deepak-ji, I'm so sorry, Gale-ji told us what happened after the lecture last night. How is Shanti doing? Is there anything we can do? We've made a card, which isn't much, I suppose, but hopefully it'll make her smile at least."

Deepak realized that he was smiling slightly in spite of himself. "Thank you, Julie. Shanti is still at the hospital, but she will be coming home soon, we think."

"I'm glad to hear that. If there's anything at all, let me know."

With that she walked out that door and back into the classroom across the hall. Deepak could vaguely hear her telling the others what had happened. He swallowed and then headed up the steps to Gale-ji's office. Her door was plain brown, the same as all the other doors in the center, but somehow it was more imposing than others. He knocked and heard a tired, impatient "Come in" emanate from the other side. As he entered the office, he saw she was in her usual position behind her desk, apparently grading papers the students had turned in about their immersion studies (sitar lessons, history walks, and the like), but Deepak suspected she had just been puttering around on the Internet, answering emails and looking at travel options for the end of the semester. She hid her procrastination well, but she was the worst Deepak had seen (besides some of the students who wrote papers the day they were due). "Deepak, how are you? How is your wife today?"

"I am afraid not well, Gale-ji. The doctor says she has cancer. I would like to ask you: we do not have enough to pay for treatment and I was hoping you would be willing to give me a raise so we can afford it. You've been promising incremental raises for five years now, since you hired me. At least an advance. Anything would help."

"I am truly sorry to hear about her condition. Cancer is such a predicament. I am afraid, though, that SIT cannot afford to give you any extra money right now. With the economy in the United States and the world the way it is, the money just isn't there. I am truly sorry. You could take a loan out from your bank perhaps? Or get another opinion? Maybe the doctor was wrong and there's a less expensive treatment out there somewhere?"

"I'm afraid the doctor was not wrong," he said tersely. "He consulted a number of his colleagues on the matter. Thank you, though, for listening to my request." Inside, Deepak was seething, but he knew that any chance to pay for the treatment rested on him for the time being, and letting out his anger and frustration would take that away from him in seconds.

As the weeks passed, Shanti, while able to return home, remained unable to go to work, finding that her body was too weak to deal with the strain of being on her feet and active all day. A month and a half after the diagnosis, the phone rang for her while she sat at home, trying to muster the energy to do some of the paperwork Deepak had picked up from her office for her to do at home. Shanti answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Shanti, this is Suraj Oberoi."

Suraj Oberoi was her immediate superior at work. He was a thin, small man, who had gone bald at an early age, but maintained a graying moustache. He fell very squarely into the stereotype of the "Pontificating Indian Gentleman," an elder who was very eager to express his own views on political and social matters, but was incapable of listening to anyone else's opinions.

"I'm afraid I'm calling under less than positive circumstances. We were all very sorry to hear about your illness, as you know, and we certainly appreciate and respect your attempt to do work from home, but bearing in mind that you have not been able to come in to the office in over four weeks, and have not been able to do the work load you were depended on for doing, I am afraid we have no choice but to let you go."

Shanti was stunned for a moment, forgetting that she should respond. Finally, she pleaded, "Mr. Oberoi, we're already finding it difficult to pay for treatment for me. Our money combined was not enough to pay for it. If I lose my job, I don't know what we will do. Oberoi-ji, please reconsider."

"I am truly, truly sorry. This was not my decision, and I am sorry to be the one to tell you. If I were in your place though, I would consider

altering my diet. You know, it is very important to eat bitter foods; they are very good for the body and the blood. Also, you should eat cold foods; things that have cumin in them are best.”

With that, Oberoi said goodbye to Shanti, wished her the best in the future and a speedy recovery, and hung up the phone. When Deepak returned home from the program center, he found Shanti curled up on the sofa, weeping. He held her in his arms and whispered in her ear until she stopped crying.

“Deepak, I lost my job! I don’t know what we can do. I know it’s being ridiculous, but sometimes I feel like it would be easier if I just ended it. I don’t want to hurt anymore! I’m so tired of hurting. I just want to not feel anything.”

“That’s not the way, Shanti. There has to be another way. Something we haven’t thought of yet. We’ll find it, I promise you.”

“No, it’s hopeless, Deepak. Hopeless.”

“We have other options. There are always other options.” He paused. “I have an idea. Let’s go visit your parents for a weekend. That will take your mind off of things for a little bit and you won’t be as stressed. It will be relaxing. It won’t fix everything, but it will make things easier.”

“I don’t know if I can travel. I feel so weak.”

“We’ll take it easy. It won’t be bad. The fresh air could do you some good.”

“I guess. I’m really not sure about this, Deepak, but okay, if you think it’s a good idea.”

Their car bumped along the road, which though it was one of the major roads that entered Chandigarh was still filled with potholes from years of no maintenance. Shanti clutched the door handle with one hand to brace herself, while Deepak let himself rock back and forth in his seat with the motion of the car. After about four hours of driving, in which the car had not been as gentle as Deepak had hoped, leading him to yell at their driver repeatedly as he swerved around cars that he deemed were driving too slow, disregarding Deepak’s pleas, the car pulled into a small property. The ground was mostly brown from the dry weather of the season. The land was flat with low-rising hills in the distance, mostly covered by scrubs, with a few trees scattered about. As they pulled up, Shanti saw her parents walk out of the side entrance towards the driveway. They were now an older couple, gray and starting to feel the frailty of their ages. They wore traditional Indian clothing, something that Shanti had resisted as soon as she was able to. They had tried to dress her in the clothes they chose to wear and to make her attend the Sikh religious services regularly, but Shanti favored jeans and t-shirts, and had never felt particularly connected to the faith.

Her parents welcomed them into the house and though they attempted to support her as she walked, they were unable and Deepak swooped in to assist. They had set up the dining table with many of Shanti's favorite foods, all still warm and filling the air with wonderful smells. The steam from a pot of ginger tea drifted up amongst the other smells, inviting the family to sit.

Later that evening, Shanti and Deepak sat in the living area of the house with Shanti's father. He was sitting on the ground with his legs under him, a position he said ensured good digestion. They were discussing options and the future with him. "Shanti, you know what I'm going to tell you," he said. "And you're probably not going to like it, but I'm going to tell you anyway. In all this time, you've been trying to find the money to help you and heal you. But that is not the Indian way. You've spent too much time in the capital around Westerners. Money is not everything. You know now what I'm going to tell you to do, don't you?" He had a bit of a smile on his face, but it wasn't the smirk that usually crossed his face in these talks. "Go to the Golden Temple and bathe in the tank of nectar. Or, follow Deepak's family's faith if you choose. Go to Varanasi and bathe in the Ganges."

"Father-ji, the Ganges is dirty and polluted. The cremated bodies and trash have madethat section of the river septic. It would do more harm than good," Shanti said.

"But you cannot argue against the Golden Temple. It would not hurt you to try. As it is, you are just sitting back and letting the pain take you. You are giving in to the pain. You must try something, and you have run out of other options. So why not try this one. It is okay, even in this day and age, to be religious. Do not fear it, Shanti."

"But that sort of healing is only in myths and old legends. They don't actually happen."

"But they do; these miracles happen every day. You just have chosen to ignore them. Oh, but they do happen. Just give them a chance to happen to you."

Her father's words stayed with Shanti for the remainder of her visit, though she remained non-committal about what her next move would be. She was still tired and hurt, but being in her parents' home took some of the pain away and she felt better than she had in weeks. When they parted, Deepak and Shanti decided that they would not go back to Delhi, but would drive on another four hours to Amritsar, the site for the most holy place for Sikhs, the Golden Temple or Harmandir Sahib. Deepak had watched his wife sleep next to him, shaking and shivering throughout the night. He knew as he sat in bed quietly that she needed something he could not give her—he didn't have the money

to pay for the treatment, which may not have worked at this point anyway. She was probably too far along, he thought. But religion had never made sense to him. He enjoyed the spectacle of it, but had never felt that intangible feeling that his parents were so sure of. They were just interesting stories and entertaining rites and rituals. But what other choice did they have, he reasoned. And so he slipped out of the bed, grabbed his mobile and ducked out into the front yard. Unsurprisingly, Gale-ji did not pick up the phone, though she always assured the students that they could call her anytime or anywhere. It wasn't difficult to guess that this was an empty offer, once you got to know her. He left a short message on her voice mail, telling her that he would be back a couple days later than expected, as they were making a stop in Amritsar. He finished by apologizing for the abruptness of this new development, but stressed that they both felt it was necessary.

When they arrived at the Golden Temple, it was nearly noon. The sun shone brightly down on the massive water tank, a manmade lake, and Golden Temple in its center. All around the tank visitors walked slowly around to the bridge to the Temple itself, covered in plated gold, while others sat on the side of the tank listening to the unending chanting from the Adi Granth, the Sikh holy book. Still others stripped down to their underwear and walked down steps in the water to bathe and cleanse themselves. In another section of the massive complex was a kitchen which served thousands of people everyday; food that was prepared by volunteers to visitors sitting side by side on the ground, regardless of religion, caste, age, or gender.

It was on the side of the tank that Deepak and Shanti now found themselves. They sat together as they went through the kitchen, received food and ate. They walked slowly through the Golden Temple, hearing the reading from the book echo through the rooms. Deepak watched as his wife struggled to make herself step down into the water. Volunteers moved back and forth, cleaning the side to make sure it wasn't slippery. Guards walked up and down the tank to ensure that all visitors were behaving appropriately and no one was disrespecting the site.

Deepak moved to stand just behind her, and whispered into her ear. "This is not the end, Shanti. Even this is not our last hope." He didn't know what made him say these words, but he felt they were the words to say.

She turned and looked at him skeptically, confused, so he added, "What is the worst that could happen?" He took her hand, and they moved to the steps that led down into the water, and with each step, the cold water moved up her leg until she was waist-deep in the tank. She held Deepak for balance, and, looking around one last time and back to Deepak to make sure he wouldn't move, she leaned back and submerged herself in the nectar.