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## AN EXTRAORDINARY DESTINY

LYING AWAKE IN HIS BED, Sagar listened to the waves break rhythmically on the black rocks nine floors below. His bedroom faced the ocean and, as always, the large bay window was open. It was late, past his bedtime, but he couldn't sleep. In the darkness, the ceiling fan overhead whirred faintly. From his bed, through the window Sagar could see a portion of the night sky littered with stars.

He wondered if the eagles that circled during the day for fish left behind in shallow pools by the waning sea would be out now. Sometimes during the day he would throw pieces of *roti* out his window for them. If they were really hungry, they would tuck in their wings and plunge at hurtling speed to try to catch the falling pieces of bread.

In the hall, the last of the extended family were finally leaving. He could faintly hear them exchanging solemn farewells and best wishes with Sagar's father. Someone remarked that the cremation and all of the ceremonies had been beautifully conducted, quickly triggering a round of courteous agreement from the others. Sagar still couldn't believe his mother was dead. She had been admitted to hospital only two weeks before complaining of stomach pain. He had seen her body burn on the funeral pyre that afternoon; as the only son, he had lit the fire himself, in keeping with Hindu custom. She had died three days ago and during this time, he had managed to keep at bay the anxiety of living the rest of his life without his mother—maybe that's what the constant presence of the extended family had done; with all of them around he hadn't had time to be by himself. But now that the cremation was over and they were all returning to their homes, Sagar could feel a kind of fretfulness take root.

Closing his eyes, Sagar imagined himself as an eagle flying away over the black sea, which shimmered with reflected stars and moonlight, without destination.

After all the guests were gone there was a silence. Sagar noticed that the waves crashing on the rocks outside were much slower than his

breathing. He could hear his father's feet shuffling down the long entrance corridor into the kitchen, then to the drawing room where he opened the old wooden teak cabinet and poured himself a whisky as he did every night.

Shortly after, his father opened Sagar's bedroom door and whispered, "Sagar?"

Sagar's first instinct was to feign sleep but he reasoned he wasn't going to be in trouble for being awake. Not tonight. So he opened his eyes as his father sat on the edge of his bed without turning on the light. A patch of moonlight illuminated the ceiling and provided just enough light for each to make out the other's figure. But they didn't look at each other. His father, who always had the most upright of postures, was now slouched, his head drooping warily. Until now, Sagar had never thought of his father, Varoon Sharma, as an old man, like some of his friends' fathers seemed. Varoon Sharma, the building president, the successful businessman, the man who lived in the largest flat at Sea Face Terraces, was stalwart not only in stature but also in character. People often sought his opinion and were careful to stay on his good side. His sighs were usually laced with exasperation or annoyance but now Sagar spotted in them a sense of defeat.

After some time his father asked, "You know the story of the night you were born? Of your *kundali*, your destiny prediction?"

Sagar nodded; he knew the story well. Whenever he couldn't sleep or had a nightmare, his mother would comfort him with this story. As he lay on his stomach she would lightly trace circles on his back with her fingertip. Only a few months ago he had overheard his father complain to his mother that Sagar was getting too old to be having nightmares, his groan suggesting that a ten-year-old boy ought not to need his mother every time he awoke in the night. Sagar was aware of the insinuation that he lacked courage, but he liked the way his mother's hair smelled faintly of coconut oil—it never failed to soothe him. He liked the way her fingers gently traced over his back while she recounted the story. Most of all Sagar liked to hear the story of how an eminent astrologer had prophesied that he had an extraordinary destiny.

"Well," his father said. "Your mother had a dream about you before you were even born. Did you know that?"

Sagar shook his head and sat up, intrigued. He had never heard about the dream.

His father continued, stroking Sagar's head. "She was going to tell you when you were a little older."

Sagar sat up straight, attentive as his father spoke. The smell of whisky on his breath reminded Sagar of the violet jacarandas and pink orchid balsam flowers in the back courtyard of the building, which gave off a sweet, sticky fragrance at night and in the early morning when the courtyard was sheltered from the sun.

“She had this dream when you were a baby inside her. She had trouble sleeping sometimes with her belly all the way out to here,” his father gestured with his hands. Sagar couldn’t help but smile at the thought of being inside his mother’s belly, but then felt a sudden pang of guilt. His mother had just died; he shouldn’t be happy. But before Sagar could finish wrestling with his conscience, his father continued the story, becoming more animated.

“You were inside, kicking and jumping around like a monkey. It took her hours to fall sleep. That night before you were born, she dreamt that she was running to the temple in her bare feet. It was the middle of the night. The streets were empty apart from a few sleeping stray dogs. Their ribcages went up and down as they breathed.”

Sagar became conscious of his own breathing, of his ribs filling up, expanding and then inevitably falling; not unlike the waves outside, he thought, which always kept crashing on the rocks.

His father went on, no longer slouching. “She heard something—or someone—behind her—faint footsteps; they kept coming closer and closer, and she couldn’t bring herself to turn around to see who or what it was that was chasing her. She was scared. She started running, zigzagging in and out of alleyways, and all of a sudden she was lost. Meanwhile the footsteps were getting closer. The crudely cleft stones of the alleyways hurt her feet and made her stumble. But she ran as fast as her heart was racing and eventually found herself at the temple. She swung open the heavy doors and as soon as she did, a feeling of serenity overcame her. The footsteps disappeared and she was no longer afraid. The fragrance of incense and jasmine and marigold flowers was lingering from the day’s many rituals and prayers. She walked to the far end of the temple, towards the veranda where she could see the ocean. The white marble floors felt cool on her bare feet. She breathed the sea air, and she knew everything would be fine. She knew everything would be fine because you were with her.”

Ruffling Sagar’s hair with one hand, his father sipped his drink with the other. “The next night she went into labour as a monsoon storm was beginning to gather off shore.” Sagar knew the rest of the story and he imagined

his mother telling it to him now. If he closed his eyes he could almost smell the coconut oil in her hair.

“The wind was tossing branches and spraying dust in all directions. After a few hours, you were born. I ran through the storm, which was still raging; even though it’s customary to wait for the seventh day after a child is born to find out its destiny, I went—I was too excited. With sheets of rain flying sideways into my face I ran to the astrologer to find out your destiny.”

Not long ago, Sagar had asked his mother how a *kundali* was determined. It all seemed too fantastic. She explained that God lived in the stars that shone at night, and that only God knew your entire destiny, but over the thousands of years, wise men, vedic astrologers who studied the stars and planets, had learned to read and determine people’s destinies, and Sagar’s was read by one of the very best.

Sagar looked out the large bay window at the countless stars in the sky. He thought of the sanskrit gayatri mantra she had taught him, which all adolescent Hindu boys were required to learn by rote. He began to run the mantra through his mind. Most boys knew the mantra by heart but not the meaning. However, Sagar’s mother had taken the time to explain the ancient sanskrit words: *Om tát savitúr váre ya bhárgo devásya dhímahi dhíyo yó na pracodáyat Om*. Giver of life, Remover of all pain and sorrows, Bestower of Happiness, Creator of the Universe, Thou are most luminous. We meditate upon thee—from all who proceed, to whom all must return. May thou inspire, enlighten and guide our intellect in the right direction.

It provided little comfort. He tried to convince himself that her soul was free and that she was in a better place—it was what uncles and aunts had said. He imagined his mother up in the stars and thought that maybe somehow she might be a part of his destiny now.

But he couldn’t help think it was all a lie. He had burned her body on a pile of dry wood and she was gone forever.

He wanted her next to him, lightly tracing circles on his back with her fingertip.

Maybe a mistake had been made up in the stars. His mother wasn’t supposed to have died. Not now.

He could feel the fretfulness gnaw its way deeper into his stomach. He felt unsteady, a loss of equilibrium, as though he were about to plunge.

Finishing his drink, his father said, “When I came back to tell your mother the good news, she wasn’t too surprised to hear that your chart was

the most extraordinary the astrologer had seen. She held you in her arms and she said she felt the exact same way she did at the end of her dream the night before. She said she knew everything would be fine because you were always with her.”