

Heather Duff

Building Her Shrine

The curried fish-heads, pointed in the same direction, await the arrival of the in-laws. According to my landlady Indrani, her mother-in-law, who is a Hindu widow, will be wearing a white sari and won't eat meat (in public) in utter devotion to the bankrupt drunkard that once was her husband. Yes, fish-heads count as meat.

I would rather be a widow.

So would Indrani, though not for the same reasons.

The peach syrup has sunk to the bottom of the yogurt container and I spoon it out, sitting at the kitchen table with my feet up on the plastic-coated chair across from me. I pretend not to notice that the Corningware is lined up by the sliding doors on the floor, *below* the unused wooden counter. Filled with spiced boiled chicken with crumbled bones, vegetable dishes with myriads of onions, chilies, green and red peppers. Oh, and of course the fish-heads.

I am reading choice lines out of Marg Atwood's prose poem "Liking Men," wearing a faded leaf-green housecoat with two missing buttons and held together precariously with warped safety pins. I've got to the part where you're supposed to start with the toes (of men, that is, when you're learning to like them again after a phase of unadulterated hostility). Trying to be half patriotic or something in the thin olive trail of sandalwood incense.

Indrani is wearing "This is only a cheap nylon sari"—white with red sunbursts. It crinkles a delicate whir while she stands stirring hot milk with a wooden spoon. The spoon becomes its own dull tap against the

side of the pot. Then she is a buzz of swirled cloth over to the pile of papers by the phone.

Aja, her husband by an arranged marriage—"which is really a good system when you think about it"—stands perspiring in undershirt and brown knit pants, drying the teacups with a striped towel. His toes, look at his toes, brown, brown. Likable, I suppose, sandalled there, flapping as he walks two steps to the teacup cupboard and two steps back to the dish drainer. And back to the cupboard.

"Be specific," says Indrani. "Do we still need this Master Charge invoice or not? Do not talk. I said, do not talk. Just be specific. I want a specific answer to a specific question, that is all. Just one word. Just one specific word."

Aja clunks a dry coffee mug on the wooden counter. "Only morons answer questions in one word." I am still looking at his toes. *Do not talk. I said, do not talk.*

Obviously she hasn't read "Liking Men" yet. She doesn't like his mouth.

"If you are going to talk on and on, go outside, just go outside. I asked for a specific answer to a specific question. That is all. Be specific or else go outside and lecture to the shrubbery." He talks *at* you, not *to* you, Indrani tells me when Aja is at work.

"The invoice is garbage," says the male mouth.

"Okay then," she says, "that is all I wanted to know." She rips the invoice into even lines of shreds. The shreds flutter into a brown bag of red plum pits. Only Indrani would color co-ordinate her breakfast with her sari. When I stand up, one of my rusted safety pins pops open.

I rinse out my yogurt container and leave it in the sink. Indrani and Aja stare at the vile thing. They seem to come together on household issues. I pick up the damp towel to dry it off, stacking it with other empty containers under the sink. Marking my book with a finger, I slink out of the kitchen and around to the plushy-carpeted spiral staircase. Climbing it makes me dizzy.

I almost trip over Beth, their daughter the computer prodigy, clipping her toenails on the top step. "Penny Lane" peals from her ghetto blaster. "Beth," I state, "according to your father's definition, the man I've been seeing must be a moron."

"Oh?" she says, swaying in euphoria to the music.

"I talk on and on for hours and he—it seems like he sums things up in a word or two." I lean against the walnut bannister, fingering the white velvet flecked wallpaper beneath. Eyes blurring again, woozy.

"But surely he misses all the nuances!"

My Shrine: In my souvenir photograph on the bureau, Indrani sits in a yellow lawn chair on the porch, framed by forsythia, her long black hair pinned into a loose bun. This particular sari is blue silk, with gold bands along the edges, folded around her. A fringed shawl in the June wind, eyes slanted just a touch. Black, black as satin. She is reading a faded orange hardcover book, the cover a delicate pattern of worm-eaten swirls. Even the humble worms that surround her books are, no doubt, voluptuous. It's a collection of Tagore's short stories from the attic back home in Calcutta. After her mother's recent death and cremation, she had smuggled back three beloved worm-eaten volumes of Tagore (Rab?)—all identical, orange, filled with thick black rounded loops, her native tongue. So to reminisce hot sultry days studying Bengali literature.

If Ma hadn't got married, she could have been a politician, announces Beth almost daily at the breakfast table. Every time Beth says this, Indrani takes a tiny crisp bite of her rice cake, sips Indian tea, and rivets her brown eyes to the floor which is sticky. Again. Even though they all wear immaculate plastic sandals in the house, someone has been tracking juice or honey all over the floor. (Me?) She mops it twice a day because she simple cannot tolerate filth. She could have been a politician but for the sticky linoleum, each square flecked with gold.

Aja stands in the family room doorway at 2:19 a.m. in his undershirt, a *Globe & Mail* tucked under his arm. "I want you upstairs for a moment," he says to his wife. "I want to talk to you."

For a moment, because she will only listen for half a moment. It occurs to me that Aja might really be the moron he fears he will become if he answers questions in one word only, although his daily identity is a lecturing chemist. That perhaps he lectures at home because he doesn't know what to say there.

Black hair a static frenzy, Indrani glances up from Tagore, swathed in cloth, a yellow fringed shawl over a pale yellow silk sari. Beige blankets

a woollen nest around her. Canada in June is still too cold. "Aja, can you not see? I am reading."

Her husband sighs and he leaves to go to bed alone (again). His sandals paddle against the linoleum. If sad, it is reassuring to hear them fade away (for Indrani's sake if not for mine). This scene occurs every night as I wince, pretending to read *Bluebeard's Egg* in my blanketed corner of the chesterfield. Being unemployed is a career in itself since Indrani talks to me 'til four a.m. every night so she can avoid sleeping with Aja as long as possible.

"He reaches over to touch me in bed," she says. "I absolutely cannot stand it. All I need is a nice cool corner of the sheets for my toes. You should not wear socks to bed, Shannon. It will make you get pains. My mother. . . ." She glances toward the mantelpiece, at the framed memorial photograph of an old sari-clad woman, cross-legged, the glass cover decorated with painted flowers. Pennies and an Indian rice pudding are placed in front of it as puja. "My mother used to say that feet should never be allowed to sweat or you get sick."

The designs on her mother's forehead seem to dance out into the room—lamplit, dizzy with white painted flowers.

"But my feet always get cold," I say.

"It's ninety degrees!"

"But Indrani, *you're* wearing a woollen shawl!"

We both laugh from the gut, catatonic, then say Shhh to each other, then laugh again even louder. This fractured laughter spins inside porcelain teacups.

"Have some more tea," says Indrani, removing her large ruby ring, then putting it on again. She strokes the ruby with a long sensuous cocoa-brown finger. "My husband says I am too esoteric, not practical enough. But I think it is the opposite. He is not pragmatic and I am." She fingers her molten lace bangles from India with the touch of a Brahmin. "He is the materialist, not I."

I am briefly eclipsed by her heirloom diamond cluster earrings, pulling every thread of light from the reading lamp into them. As if to swallow the whole lamp in liquid points, minute and explosive at once.

The next day, she hires a glass man to install strips of mirror under the banister of the spiral staircase at a cost of \$335.00. She spends the rest of the day, nose-in-kleenex, sniffing, polishing the strips of mirror

with a sea-blue window cleaner. Like a cat pawing the glass. In vertical strips, the mirrors purr.

"It was my idea, the mirrors," she proclaims to the nation. "Aja does not even know about them yet. The mirrors were my idea. I saw them in a magazine."

"You'll have to keep those mirrors clean," says Aja upon his arrival from the office at 5 p.m., black leather briefcase clutched. "Or else the whole purpose is lost. The whole purpose." His sandals paddle up the spiral staircase to the master bedroom.

I am helpless to do anything about the mirrors that seem to deflect them away from each other.

My Shrine: Beside the forsythia photograph, on my bureau in Indrani's house, I've placed a cracked blue mussel shell. I look inside the shell and see that my boyfriend is disgusted with me for being an Atwood junkie. I don't realize how bad I'm getting until we are walking along the beach where I notice him crunching the mussel shells beneath his workboots, without mercy. I suddenly tell him he's the bacterial germ of an incurable disease walking over the face of the earth. That as a man, he's an environmental hazard. All he says is Ha! Now she's Scarlet O'Atwood!

I'll admit Atwood is my attic worm-eaten Tagore. These shields keep us one book cover away from cracking. Book covers behind which to live, in secret. But I am so dense, of course, I read all her books wrong. It is the year I am anorexic that I read Lady Oracle, so the hot dog binge scene only makes me throw up what skeleton of a body I am. It is the year I am "moderately obese" according to my medical chart that I read The Edible Woman so the part about the cake cells seeming to become tiny lungs doesn't repulse me at all, as it should. Instead, I devour whole cakes in a kind of mad, spirit-filled ecstasy, wallowing in all the tiny chocolate fudge lungs I can locate. I hope Indrani is rereading Tagore's works in the right order. It makes a difference. That much I understand.

I am relieved to be alone in the house. Indrani has gone shopping, Beth is at school, and Aja is at work. The silence is just short of pure silence, though it resonates with mythologies. It's hard to believe I'm really alone. I wander into the kitchen in my blue fluffy slippers, the fur matted with dried grease, sticking to the floor.

The glass elephant mobile tinkles.

A brass incense burner falls on my foot, spilling olive green ashes.

I open the refrigerator door, take out my re-wrapped mozzarella cheese and slice neat chunks from it with a paring knife, the way I've seen Indrani do it. Always before I would have merely bitten chunks out of a slab of cheese, without cutting it first. But I can't now. It seems like Indrani makes all the rules now, even when she isn't here.

Curious, I open a cupboard filled with spices, placing a whole clove on the end of my tongue. With their little prongs, you could play jacks with them. The clove seems to pierce a hole in my tongue. A breeze from the window slams the cupboard door. I jump, expecting to be caught with the clove, but no one is here.

Though my unemployment insurance covers the rent for my room, I still feel like a thief. Like I ought to give something back that I've taken, but I'm not sure what. Something so brittle, my being here might overbalance and smash it.

I clean up the spilled incense ashes and carry my strips of cheese into the family room, nibbling. A fist-size brass head of a goddess with black lined eyelids stares at me from the top of the stereo. A cherrywood elephant bookend guards Beth's hard cover edition of *Once Is Not Enough*, its saddle carved with monkeys and birds. Ganesha, the elephant god.

Framed photographs line the room. Beth in a navy blue sari and red spot on her forehead in the Bengali dance-drama at a multicultural event. Beth and her older brother Nehru in his graduation gown. The whole family seated against the cloudy backdrop of a photographer's studio, ivory teeth set in skin a brown even luxury.

I do not want to see what I am seeing: the memorial photograph of Indrani's mother in the centre of the mantlepiece, a dried mauve chrysanthemum and a nickel in front of it. Her dark eyes through the white floral painted glass, watching. The nickel seems to prick my finger when I touch it. Electric pujah, not mine to finger.

"Shannon, could you help me with these groceries?"

My hand darts from the nickel. From nowhere: Indrani, wearing jeans and a gold-embroidered black blouse, hauling plastic-handled bags that burst with carrot tops, ears of corn, watermelon. "My mother always give

us this when it was hot—well 120 degrees or so. Weather like today is cool really. For India."

I wipe sweat from my forehead, still sweltering in the air-conditioned room of 80 degrees. Indrani sets her bags down in the kitchen. "Shannon, since nobody is here. . . . I have something to show you. Follow me."

Dumb, mute, fascinated, I follow her sandalled red toenails through a door I thought was a closet, down rough wooden steps into an unfinished basement filled with sloping bookshelves piled with children's books, legless stuffed animals, dolls missing hair and eyeballs. Aja's Canadian university degrees are framed and hung askew on the concrete wall.

It's life-sized and hidden in the corner behind an old billiard table against the wall. The nose is chipped but the eyes are still vivid—lined with thick black paint, feline, almost Egyptian if I didn't know they were Indian, almost anything. Diamond earrings prickle from long black hair, crowned with a golden headdress covered with red flowers and peaked at the centre. It's wearing a gold sari threaded with black designs—clouds, sunbursts, moons, dancing children and maidens, lotus blossoms emerging from a lake.

"I added them to the deity," she says, pointing to three red floral garlands around the neck, strung from cloth. "I was bored and lonely, so I made them."

If I was a woman in her position, I would indubitably drink, smoke, or eat myself into oblivion.

Indrani: thin, habit-free, strings garlands.

"What is it?"

"Aditi," she says, putting her tongue up to her teeth to pronounce the "d" and the "t" with an authenticity I've been trying to imitate during other lessons.

"A-di-ti," I repeat.

"She is mother of all the gods—free, the boundless heaven you cannot see beyond the clouds. Hindus pray to her for protection, for blessings on children and cattle."

"Why do you keep it—here in the basement?"

"It is the only place with the right temperature and humidity. Lots of people want to buy her, but I will not sell."

My Shrine: Beside the cracked mussel shell and the forsythia photograph on my bureau, is a note from my boyfriend the moron, left in the mailbox. I seem to be setting my treasures up into symbolic groups all over my room, like little shrines. I don't know what the shrines mean or who they're for. I don't know for what I'm petitioning when I offer safety pins, buttons, bobby pins, shells, shrivelled apple cores, crumpled kleenexes, bookmarks made out of ripped scraps from magazines, dried milk chips in the bottom of mugs, run-slashed pantyhose. The note from my boyfriend the moron says he can't pick me up tonight because he has to go to his mother's for dinner. This time I'm not invited. I surmise that all her widowed fat sisters will be there with her, eating miniature sausage rolls and water chestnuts wrapped in bacon. He calls them the congregation of cows. Succinct, as usual. What he doesn't realize is that even cattle need a blessing.

My dog-eared memorial copy of Surfacing is standing upright against the mirror, decorated with painted flowers, framed for posterity, watching me again. To see what I'll do next. The book itself is a graven image. I know that much. But I have stopped apologizing. I revere my fat gilded calves, fashioned out of molten pagan bracelets. I need many deities. I know that now. The book itself, like its theme, seems to stand there on my bureau in still fragility, refusing above all to be a victim.

Indrani stirs hot milk for a rice pudding with one hand, while with the other, she kneads a whole-wheat flour mixture for roti. The thin brown band of stomach between her white short blouse and the tucked-in skirt of her green-on-white sari quivers just slightly as she stirs. According to Hindu mythology, she tells me, Indrani is chosen to be the bride of Indra only because of her voluptuous nature, so she is not held in very high esteem as a goddess. Enraptured, I sit at the kitchen table, wearing my housecoat, drinking tea.

Waving the wooden spoon and her flour-coated hand, Indrani begins to talk. Her voice rises in a lyric moan as the milk begins to simmer, then to boil. She doesn't seem to notice. "Now Aja likes Canadian food but I want to cook just *Indian* food from now on. Since my mother died, I want to eat only the things I ate as a child. We were so content. My mother was 11 when she got married but she said it was not bad. Everyone just expected those things. She used to play wedding with her

dolls in the garden. Then all of a sudden she was a bride herself, and she still played with dolls in the garden. My father was a Brahmin and a politician. Often he had opportunities to work with Gandhi. Shannon, he was such a high-thinking man, so filled with lofty purposes. I look at Aja and I see. . . . I do not see anything there. There is just nothing there."

Indrani begins to pace back and forth, sprinkling flour as she throws her hands about. "He talks and talks, but he does not say anything. Since I come to Canada, I have been so lonely. All I have here is my children. I *have* to read everyday. No matter how much work I have, I always stay up late to read and then I sleep in until noon. What do Canadian housewives *do* early in the morning anyway? Have some more tea, Shannon."

Indrani leaves her cooking and picks up the mop, attaching a sticky tile under the stove. "I just do not understand a man like Aja. I do not understand how he can hold his head up in this world. In this world, you have to have compassion. After all these years, when I tell him to help me, he will vacuum or wash the dishes and I think to myself, now that is a good symptom. That is a good symptom. But you have to do things for others in this world without being told. He would never think to cover me up with a blanket when I am cold. He would never think to. . . . I do not know how men like Aja can live in this world. I do not know why I stay here. I do not know."

She puts the mop in the sink and the handle gets stuck against the ceiling. She pulls on it, trying to shake it free. "What is the nobility!" she bellows, ramming the head of the mop into the sink of water, clinging on to it like a mast. Her black hair is filled with static electricity, jutting into the air.

"What is the nobility! What is the nobility!"

I don't think I'll ever be able to silence this vision of a haunted Indrani clinging to the upright mop in the sink screaming "What is the nobility! What is the nobility!" into the humid June air. Naked-waisted, the raw scream of the woman within a goddess. From under golden headdress and thick black eye-paint, bawling poor English phrases from the gut.

My Shrine: Tonight I dream of Indrani's sensual brown fingers threading the needle for Aditi's red cloth garland as Aja implores her to come to bed. Here is your dowry back, and more. . . .

He offers her coppers, nickels, rubies, diamonds, spiral staircases and strips of mirror, roses, lotus blossoms, cheese, yogurt, tea, spices, and watermelon, trunks filled with multi-colored saris, catalogues filled with Canadian fashions, credit cards embossed with gold, return plane tickets to India or anywhere else for that matter. Curried fish-heads. But she won't be persuaded to come to bed with him. The queen-size bed upstairs is layered with these offerings, pujahs to her, prayers.

In my dream, Indrani finishes stringing the garland of cloth flowers and places it over her head. She falls asleep alone on the chesterfield in the family room. In a hermitage nest of woollen shawls. Her pillow the third attic worm-eaten volume of Tagore.