

LITTLE FLOWER

TED OSWALD

To: The Apostolic See,
Bishop of Rome,
Supreme Pontiff,
His Holiness,
Holy Father,
Pope Francis
At the desk where he sits
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

From: His lowly servant
Sister Immaculata
Mother Teresa Home for Disabled and Abandoned
Children
New Delhi
India

Re: The Miraculous

There was a time not so long ago that I was very afraid, and I told Sister Shanti as much. Why? she asked, and I explained. But fear is nothing, a passing thing, she said. It doesn't feel like it, I said. Even if I am put to death, I will wake in the land of my Lord, she said. And I wanted to have that same sense of safety, and courage, and to someday join her in that place of eternal wakefulness. And then Sister Shanti went on and faced all I feared. In doing this, she set me free.

Holy Father, I have a story to tell. I hope you have ears to hear.

It comes with a demand: the canonization of our dear, departed Sister Shanti.

While certain celebrities of our age (e.g. Mother Teresa) have the masses demanding their ascension to sainthood, I fear our Shanti has none but me to plead her case.

Others would see Shanti vanish among the ranks of little-known suffering servants. She would be first to accept that she was not much liked. She was hard. And stubborn. But I submit that she loved well, but her love was misunderstood, and her humility mistaken for pride.

You may ask why I would write you directly. ‘Why not follow the canonical law, with its exhaustively enumerated steps, and undertake a process that probably won’t be completed before you or I die?’ I hear you question. The reason, quite simply, is that I am an impatient person.

You may also ask why my petition arrives as a personal letter rather than a coldly-stated reporting of fact: ‘John said this’, ‘Mary said this’, ‘The prostitute screwed this many’. But that would be a catalogue of the trivial, and I am a person too easily bored.

No: Sister Shanti’s story could not be risked to a lengthy journalistic, fact-finding project. The output, whether a 100-page report, a documentary film, or a glossy magazine feature, would do half of what a well-told story can.

And so, dear Francis, the story of a soul I shall write.

It will be a mystery, simple yet mind-boggling;

Of untold Joy wrapped in staggering Sadness;
Of Weak Lions and Crafty Lambs;

Of Miracles – approximately 141. I mean, 142;
Of Deaths – approximately 5, few natural;
Of the Sacred and Profane laying down side by side,
often several times a night,
always for a pittance.

And so the accuracy of names of people and places has become a relative thing to protect the innocent. Slight and inconsequential modifications of fact have been made for dramatic effect and parsimony. What is most important is the truth that underlies the story. And this tale I tell, if nothing else, is the truest form of truth.

Understand. This is an invitation to come and see. For words to be made flesh. For you to incarnate a story and touch the souls captured inside.

Entering is not for the faint of heart, but if you choose to do so, I believe you will be transformed by the life of Sister Shanti of Delhi, as have I.

Ah. I'm happy to see you're still reading. I take this as your informed consent.

Our travels will be confined to the country of India, the city of Delhi and its environs.

Have you ever been?

On a globe my city appears an infinitesimal pinprick, yet it teems with cosmic significance. This choking, sprawling, urban cesspool is full of the marvellous: nearly 25 million bodies, all imbued with souls. It is obvious that the world values some lives less than others. This is a heresy. Their lives tremble with significance, pulsing with the potential for love, for each reflects the image of our loving Creator.

We begin in the old city, Shahjahanabad, and not so very many years ago. The streets are awash in fresh sunlight and lined with a hundred thousand enterprising captains of industry, ancient architectural wonders, and a multitude of pavement dwellers. On these roads have walked kings, rajas, viceroys, the Mahatma himself, and defecating dogs. And I love it despite itself. Just watch your step.

Pope Francis. Francis!

Don't just stand there gawking at it all. You'll have to keep up with me. I wait for no one, the Holy See included!

Just a turn of another corner and...we arrive. Knock twice at the outer gate. You read the sign: 'Missionaries of Charity Mother Teresa *Shishu Bhavan* Home for Abandoned and Disabled Children'. That's right, it's a Missionaries of Charity outpost, an MC home, a convent of sorts. Don't forget to greet Ebenezer the gateman; a respectful handshake will do. Politely decline to see pictures of his grandchildren. Come

along...yes, yes. That oval window there looks in on Sister's office and if you stand on tip-toe just *so* you can peer in as Shanti reads her newspaper.

Pope Francis, you needn't duck out of view. She can't very well see us.

Yes, you are correct. We are *here* but you must understand, we are *not* here.

Think of the hundreds – *thousands* – of people you might pass on the road every day of whom you never take note. The two of us are of those people. Unseen – unless we're meant to be seen.

Where were we?

Right. While the other Sisters tend to wet bedclothes and prepare breakfast, Sister Shanti, the superior of the MC home, sits in her office, reading her newspaper.

It is not as though she shrugs off her responsibilities. Whereas the other Sisters rose at 4:40 a.m. at the first stroke of the bell, she was up at 4, already in prayer, both desperate and needful. Mass followed at 7 a.m., and the visiting father, quite new to his priestly responsibilities, enlivened the proceedings when he, to the gasps of the nine Sisters prostrating themselves before the altar, accidentally spilt the cup and sent the Host – Christ's body! – tumbling to the floor.

Shanti chuckles at the memory. Good Lord, she remarks to the open air.

She unfolds the paper and squints, having to adjust her heavy-framed glasses. She hates them. The lenses have only grown thicker over the years she has passed in the religious life, and she fears a new prescription is in order. She sets to reading with a sigh.

Having recently attained 69 years, Sister is comfortable in her late-life routines. Fixtures include starting with the day's paper, *The Indian Express*, gifted by R. K. Dharanipragada (retired accountant and busy-body neighbour), and her enamel cup full of chai, a dribble of donated non-fat Mother Dairy milk, and a teaspoon of sugar.

One article in and a coo outside draws her attention. A pigeon visits a bird feeder just beyond her small oval window before a crow descends and frightens it off. Sister bristles at the scene, but does nothing about this intruder. Her eye drifts to the edge of the rooftops and she slips into reverie, staring absently just past the crow, just over the wall, and at the distant, outside world.

The bell sounds. She rises. We follow.

Sister Shanti climbs to the second floor, touching the spot on the wall she always does, the one where it is painted 'DO WHAT HE TELLS YOU'. She passes the singing and dancing cartoon characters in the corridor, checks the ward for TB-stricken children, and ascends to the third level. The morning apostolate duties are underway. The other Sisters, paid assistants from the neighbouring slum, and a pair of Swedish university-graduate volunteers clean, wipe, change, launder, clean, discipline, play, cook, and clean. She paces among the bassinets and cribs and small beds, among the cries and giggling and cooing, as she confers with the overnight matron who nearly nods off mid-sentence. Sister thanks her and tells her to go home. Sisters on all levels of the building bring her problems throughout the morning: 'Rakesh had seizures again this morning'; 'Toilet is again overflowing'; 'Milk has gone off'. She makes calls, inspects, assists. Rakesh is a particular burden on her; doctors have been able to do

nothing for the 4-year-old. She tasks Sister Neepa, a recent arrival and the only Sister not finally professed, with watching Rakesh.

The air is heavy at the day's start and brutal by midday when lunch is served. It's as if the sluggish ceiling fans are resigned to failure. The children, those who are well, end their games long enough to sit and be served their plate of rice and dal with boiled egg crumbled on top. Then come the mats and naps. Sister Shanti joins the other Sisters for their meal and half-hour of rest before leading a spiritual reading, a chapter from St Thérèse of Lisieux's autobiography, one of her favourites. Then chai, 'proof of God's goodness', Sister Becky mutters under her breath. Little Arjun, a hellion by any definition, has given Sister Becky much trouble today. Sister Shanti very nearly smiles as she sips.

The afternoon follows the morning. The pair of plumbers Sister has called may or may not be resolving the toilet situation. Their looks portend further problems. Rakesh falls into seizures again, and Sister joins Sister Neepa who is terrified in holding him down and protecting his tongue from his clenching jaw. After the episode Sister begrudgingly sends Ebenezer, the gateman, to buy some milk for the children before they sleep this evening. No time to beg it, as the Sisters are meant to.

The sunlight slants, afternoon turns to evening. There is adoration, and they return to the chapel, that same rectangle of a room where they pass so much of their lives. Sister takes up a place on a stool at the back while the other Sisters kneel. Christ is there, perpetually hanging on his cross. And the words Sister has read a million times painted by his side: I THIRST. She puts her head in her hands to pray:

*Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice.
Let Your ears be attentive to my voice in supplication.
If You, O Lord, mark iniquities, Lord, who can stand?
But with You is forgiveness, that You may be revered.
I trust in the Lord; my soul trusts in His word.
My soul waits for the Lord more than sentinels
wait for the dawn.
More than sentinels wait for the dawn, let Israel
wait for the Lord,
For with the Lord is kindness and with
Him is plenteous redemption;
And He will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.*

And now begins a curiosity.

While recreation hour is at hand, the younger Sisters wheel in cribs until they form an arc around an old piano. Older children are seated on a blanket in the arc's hollow. Sister supervises this quietly.

When the last child is placed Sister Shanti watches the other Sisters step out and close the door behind them.

To God alone be the glory, Sister says, her eyes closed. She seats herself at the piano and plays.

You can hear its beauty. To say Sister is an accomplished musician is to say Sachin Tendulkar is a reasonable cricketer, Gandhi is an OK Mahatma, or Jesus a ho-hum Christ: understatements, all of them.

Sister is enraptured. The poorly-tuned piano turns into a heavenly instrument. Watch Sister as she plays, giving herself to the music. She never improvises. You might imagine with a prodigious talent she might break from those lines of notes

and momentary rests to compose her own melodies. She does not. She never allows herself to move beyond her dotted instructions on the page.

You can see it in how her body moves. There is some pain underlying all of this, buried and undisclosed, voiced only through these notes that leap to life, reverberate, and disappear without trace. Much like a prayer.

Sister never permits others besides these children to hear.

Mother Teresa, the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, of which I am also a member, told us to 'See Jesus in his distressing disguise' of the broken, abandoned, and impoverished. In playing for them, Sister plays for Him, offering the most beauty her fingertips can muster for the ears of children incapable of ever appreciating it intellectually. Nevertheless, their jitters settle and crying ceases.

The recital lasts as it always does, for half an hour. When she stops, the Sisters enter to take the children and tuck them into their beds, bless them, and bid them goodnight. Sister touches each child as they leave, a rare smile on her lips.

Dear Francis: Sister Shanti is a complex woman with a complicated story, one of billions of such stories with new chapters written in daily accretions of hope, misery, joy, despair, love and hate that make us who we are until our final page is reached and we are no more. For an old, troubled nun with a regimented life like Sister's, these chapters feel achingly monotonous, but events are in motion that will ensure Sister Shanti's story will never be the same.

Ah, I've lost track of the time. We must be on the move; we have the first killing to attend.

II

Ram Kumar sits sipping chai and wondering whether today is the day he will die.

He looks at the street, and back to his watch, and again to the street. He struggles to bring the small glass to his lips without another tremor of his hand.

A robust Muslim man, the chaiwallah, proprietor of the tea shop in which young Ram sits, watches him from the corner of his eye. Shifting his weight from where he stands behind his simmering pots, the chaiwallah looks out on the narrow, darkening lane outside. A trio of *Jamnepari* goats eat discarded rice. His grandsons kick a neon-coloured ball back and forth. A sad seller hawks shrivelled radishes. A man on a motorbike threads his way among them all. Nothing seen through this small window into the world through which this Delhiite has watched for 36 years seems strange. What disturbs the chaiwallah is this young Hindu in his shop in the Muslim quarter of Old Delhi as night descends, dressed in a tailored suit and very much resembling trouble.

The young boy who mops the shop floor with a rag stares openly at Ram. The child has a strange lip, a cleft palate rejoined indelicately. Ram tries to avoid looking at him; surely some urchin or the chaiwallah's nephew from a desperate Bihari village, and this wondering is Ram's mistake. His restless leg gets the better of him and shakes the table until his tea takes a leap and meets the floor. The glass shatters, the tea spills.

So very sorry, Sir, Ram mumbles, bounding up from his chair, surveying what his nerves have wrought. He gulps. The chaiwallah grimaces. The small boy, unfazed, moves to pick

up the broken glass and wipe milky tea from Ram's shining black shoes.

Another chai? Ram asks. He fumbles through his suit and pants pockets in search of his billfold. Upon finding it he takes out an impressive wad of notes. Ram moves from his table to where the chaiwallah stands and holds out a thousand rupees. Any change? he asks, feebly.

Up close, the chaiwallah now seems formidable. His flowing orange-dyed beard. His furrowed brow. The calloused obeisance mark in the middle of his forehead, staring like a third eye.

You should go, he says.

B-but I insist. I broke the glass. Let me at least replace—

The chaiwallah throws down the rag he holds and crosses his arms.

Ram swallows. He knows what is best. Besides, Ram thinks, the appointed time nears.

He steps down the tea shop's few steps, out of its jarring fluorescent light, its blue-and-white chequered tiles, its walls decked with the symbols of Islam. Ram notices the mopping boy still watching him. He waves to the boy, not precisely sure why, and looks both ways.

Off to Ajmeri Gate. Off to Garstin Bastion Road, G.B. Road for short.

Let's follow, Francis.

Everything seems ghoulish to the young man as he walks under snaking power lines and looming shop overhangs. The light escapes the road faster than Ram can. He shudders every time he steps into the shadows where the small lane makes sharp, elbow turns. He wishes for the comfort of a weapon: a gun, a pipe, even a trusty, pointed Reynolds pen.

The decision to leave Delhi was rushed, set upon him by circumstances outside of his control. He had lately failed to visit the temple in his neighbourhood near Jahangirpuri – not intentionally, he tells himself – and he worried that his failure to make an offering, ring the bell, and appease the goddess Lakshmi had brought about this sudden turn in his fortunes. Forced to abandon his apartment, he now flees with the TAG Heuer watch on his wrist, the cash in his billfold, and the suit on his person. His only real consolation is a pair of railway tickets in his inside suit-pocket.

As he reaches the Mughal-era gate the surrounding streets are marked by ordinary chaos. A steady stream of autorickshaws vie for pole position as they circle the roundabout. Honking horns call out in uneven chorus. Bored vendors sell seasoning packs, packed snacks, and fresh juice, hoping for a few extra rupees to close the day. Ram feels at ease merging into lines of anonymous pedestrians at the street's margins, hearing their unhurried, unworried chatter. He glances up at the well-lit billboard picturing local Congress Party lackeys and barely dodges a cycle-rickshaw. Distracted, he stumbles onto a seated street barber taming a customer's ear hair.

Watch where you're going!

S-sorry, Ram mutters, trying to regain his balance.

He sweats. The heat and pollution mingle, making the air gelatinous. His tie suffocates like a dog collar, and he paws at it. He had thought of dressing down since his Western-cut suit is not inconspicuous, but his jacket hides the bulging package tucked into his waistband.

Of course! The package. Preoccupied by imagined threats, the tickets, departure times, and the one who would

accompany him, the envelope has slipped his mind. Ram reaches back, his fingers running over the delicate paper's edges in hopes it will impart instructions as to his next steps. Time is short, but there is still enough to deliver it. It may be his last chance.

G.B. Road can wait, he decides. With a wave of his hand, he hails a passing cycle-rickshaw and names the address and a price. They set off. So must we.

Pope, flag that rickshaw down! That one with the barefooted driver of shabby dress and ill odour over there! No, the *other* one!

Ram's driver, taciturn, exhausted, doesn't talk with him; Ram appreciates this as Delhi, tinged by orange-hued street lights, passes by at a leisurely pace of 10 kilometres an hour. The ride's pulsing rhythm matches the driver's pedalling and sends Ram off into musing.

Ram is not unacquainted with fearing for his life, nor with avoiding those who would end it. The ability to disappear, often by finding ever darker and more dangerous places to hide, has served him well. That he is out and about instead of in a dingy hole confirms the prognosis that, yes, he must be insane. Love will do that.

They arrive, and so have we. Ram takes in the familiar sign above the gate with its cross and heart set aflame, its serene portrait of Mother, and the words:

MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY
MOTHER TERESA HOME
SHISHU BAVAN
HOME FOR ABANDONED AND DISABLED
CHILDREN

I'll only be a minute, Ram says to the driver. Then we go straight back to Ajmeri Gate.

The driver answers with a nod.

Ram knocks at the gate. The night-watchman answers.

Sister Shanti, please.

Not available.

It's very important.

Not possible. Sister is playing for the children. The others are in recreation.

Please. I need to see her.

She's very clear about these things. Not to be disturbed.

Ram considers handing over the envelope to this man, but he spies a nun walking past. (You know her to be Sister Neepa, Pope.)

Sister! he calls. I have an important message for Sister Shanti!

I told you to leave them be! the night-watchman hisses, but Sister Neepa approaches anyway, carrying a tray of short plastic cups emptied of their milk. Her lips purse.

Ram forces the envelope through the gap in the gate. I would most appreciate you giving it to Sister Shanti at an appropriate moment, he says in English. Tell her this is from Ram. And that I have gone away.

She hands her tray over to the watchman and wipes her hands on her apron. She hesitates before taking the envelope and depositing it in her apron's pocket. She nods and takes back her tray before disappearing inside the children's home.

Dhanyavaad, Sir, thank you very much.

The watchman tuts and slams the gate shut.

Ram stands up straighter, breathes easier. That this task is completed is a tremendous relief. Maybe, just maybe, this would make up for his remiss offerings to Lakshmi, he wonders.

Back to G.B., he mutters, sliding back into the rickshaw's vinyl seat.

And back we go into ours, Francis. Follow, driver! Follow!

As his rickshaw stirs back to life Ram feels the warmth that came with doing good get extinguished: a distinct chill courses through him, swirling down about his toes. He takes it to be a sign: is his planned detour down G.B. Road a mistake? Should he push on to the railway station, flash his ticket, and leave this sorry city behind?

He pays the driver for the short trip with a thousand-rupee note, an exorbitant sum beyond what had been agreed. The surprised man touches it to his lips, then to his forehead. Ram slicks back his greasy hair and smiles, sadly. He can see the railway station from where he stands. Just a brief nip through the underground Metro station and he'd be standing safely in front of its gleaming, colonnaded entrance.

But G.B. exerts a gravitational pull on him, just as it always has. More than the place he first had sex – first *paid* for sex, really – G.B. is where he met Meeta.

It is where she is this very moment.

And leaving her is impossible.

He plunges in, and so do we, Pope.

G.B. Road runs along the railway tracks. Its brothels, known as *kothas* here in Delhi, are open night and day, stacked above reputable street-level shops. Columns support the multi-floor buildings and provide a covered walkway. The

girls – caked in make-up, bedecked in cheap jewellery – call from barred windows and balustraded balconies.

Ram starts down the street and is set upon by touts. These are the grimy young men in soiled clothes with floating eyes, still high from sniffing glue. These are the women of a certain age, with their sagging jowls, henna-dyed hair, foreheads dotted with smudged bindis in a poor pretence of piety, who can just as easily whisper gracious enticements as lash out with the foulest of tongues.

Nice girls here, Sir. Just up the stairs.

No, thank you, Ram says, brushing the first woman off.

He continues on his way. A young, shovel-faced man appears from behind a column and tugs at his sleeve.

Hashish? Here for *laundi-bazi*? Nepalese virgins are waiting for you.

I know where I'm going.

They're young. Good price. The best price for you. Just down the road.

I *said* leave me alone.

Ram shoves him a bit and the young pimp bristles. He pulls a knife from his pocket, exposing it just an inch or so, and Ram holds up both hands. There is recognition there, on both their parts.

Sorry, Pinku, Ram says. Another time, maybe.

Pinku lets him leave, but not without a curse.

Ram loosens his tie again. He steps into the street to avoid more touts and looks up towards the faded stars, just visible through the smog and cloud. Guilt descends, so sweepingly he nearly collapses in the middle of the road. He gasps, trying to focus on his good deed just completed, and on Meeta:

lovely, beautiful Meeta. It is not the honking cars or angry shouting that make him stir, though.

His eyes latch on to those of a stout, sauntering policeman, known widely as Constable Singh. Singh's gaze falls on Ram and his suit and his apparent means.

Ram gulps.

If the officer chooses to pounce on Ram, Ram could easily lose every rupee in his pockets, and, even worse, embroil himself in a dreaded 'police case'. A passing car's side mirror brushes the constable, and this distracts him just long enough for Ram to slip away and disappear in the bustle.

I apologize if you're winded, Pope. This is quite the pace we're keeping! Worry not. A chance to rest is at hand; Ram has finally reached the stairwell to *kotha* No. 201.

Unfortunately, another obstacle positions herself in young Ram's path: Latika floats near the stairwell's entrance.

Though working girls usually remain upstairs – purportedly for propriety's sake, really to keep them from running off – this woman is on the street. She immediately presses herself up against Ram. Her touch makes his head light.

Ram gulps again.

Back for something special tonight? she whispers in his ear, groping him down low. Or are you just here for your *normal, boring*, usual? she chuckles.

Conflict is writ large on his face. He has used Latika before, not infrequently, and close in time to his visits to Meeta. He isn't pleased with the fact. Not because Latika didn't satisfy his fleshly desires – quite the opposite. This particular moment is not so ideal to contemplate his lies.

L-later, he says.

Latika pouts like a spurned lover and leans towards him. Don't stay away too long. Secrets have a way of escaping. She peers over his shoulder, sees an older man eyeing her from a few columns away. Nice suit, she whispers to Ram, and glides away. Ram shudders and climbs, grateful to escape from the world of harsh streetlights and storefronts that sell copper pipe fittings, electrical cable, water pumps, and tiles by day, into a realm much more aligned with who Ram knows himself to be.

The steps are steep, lit only by ambient light from the six *kothas* that branch off at the passage's three levels. He grips the chain running along the wall, there to support those who rise with wild anticipation and leave spent of money and body.

It takes 21 uneven steps to reach the first level, and 23 to reach the second. The air in the passage is dank, smelling unexpectedly of aniseed. As he lingers outside the cracked door to No. 201 he gulps the air in. He checks his watch. Each movement of the seconds-hand is a new imperative. He knocks, pushes in the door, and is greeted by an old woman, Ginna, listening to her clock radio.

She is a tubby old thing, and sits leaning against her side-table while smoking a bidi cheroot and waving a small hand fan. '*Laila, O Laila*', a classic, fills the room. On the wall, out of her view, is the portrait of a beatific, white, blond Jesus.

A smile slithers onto her face on recognizing him. Smoke pours from her nostrils.

Ah, my *son!* My *Ram!* You've *returned*. She struggles to stand, and, finding it too great an effort, falls back into her seat. Here again for my treasure?

Ram takes a small step forward. Girls start peeking out from behind curtains along the corridor, just off the gallery. Yes, Ginnaji. But tonight is a little out of the ordinary.

Ginna looks Ram up and down, notes his incongruous suit. Oh?

I hoped to pay extra. Like before. For a whole night.

Outside.

Ginna's eyes narrow. She sucks her cigarette and exhales before a smile again visits her lips. Which hotel?

The Rose Garden. Just down the road. Like before. He winces at his repeated phrase.

She leans forward, her thick make-up no longer hiding her face's cross-cutting trenches. She sniffs. He keeps his eyes fixed on hers, even as new beads of sweat slide down his face.

It will take more than the last time, she says. The night's just starting. So how much?

That *is* the question. Ram knows the balance is delicate. Pimps like Ginna are anxious about prize girls running off with boyfriends. If he offers her an amount too high, she might suspect he aims to take her away. If too low, she will keep him from her. His calculations have been iterated all evening. And yet:

I received a bonus at the call centre this week, Ram says. You name the price.

Ginna grabs his hand and pulls Ram even closer. She searches his coal-dark eyes again, whispers in his ear. He hides his grimace from her. As you wish, he says. The small dark hair protruding from a mole on her neck makes him blanch. He finally pulls away, but not before she gives his cheek a maternal pat.

Ab. Ginna extends a finger. One condition. Adiba joins you.

A new wave of worry sweeps over Ram.

Adiba. Adiba! *Adiba!* Ginna screams. A door near the entryway opens slowly, and from behind it steps Adiba.

The man, Ginna's son, is of indeterminate age, though not old. His heavy limbs and flab are poorly hidden by his unbuttoned shirt. Sounds – tinny explosions, *dishooms* and machinegun fire – stream from the film he watches in his room.

Wha? Adiba slurs. He sweats profusely and scratches at his days-old stubble, then his balls.

You must go with Meeta and this one. Get ready.

Adiba licks his lips, appearing indifferent even though this assignment means he will be adrift in Delhi the whole night. He lumbers back into his room. When he reappears his shirt is still unbuttoned.

Adiba is a lout, Ram knows, and stupid. Meeta has told Ram how Adiba sometimes forces himself on the girls, on her, when his mother is out. Losing him on the street will be a challenge.

You may *go* to her, Ginna says with grandiloquence. Grab *condoms!* No pollution of the girls! *This* is a *clean* establishment.

Ram gives a deferential nod and moves towards a sink jutting out from the corridor wall. He takes a few rubbers from a box there and placates the old woman by depositing them in his suit-pocket.

Down the short hallway he goes.

He reaches for the handle of the hallway's single door when a stroke of vertigo disorients him. His heart beats like a tabla.

This is love. It has to be. His hand planted on the unpainted wall comes away with a powdery dust. He wipes his hand on his trousers, tightens his tie.

Ram knocks.

Come in! is sung from inside.

Entering the room, he is transported.

One first notices the burst of fluorescent light. Then the walls, papered with a collage of Bollywood models, true brassy *chhamak-challos*, in a catalogue of come-hither poses. The room has the illusion of spaciousness owing to a large, full-length mirror, and the flannel-covered floor is cleared but for cushions and pillows should a customer enjoy reclining for a dance performance before doing the deed. Her cot is in the corner, a thin cushion for a mattress, and with relatively clean sheets. A singer's professions of love spring from a small radio and bounce off the walls.

Amid the impressive spell cast by these surroundings sits Meeta.

She is before the mirror, combing out her luxuriant hair. Her jewellery glints, hooped earrings and a golden stud in her nose. She can see Ram's reflection without turning around. Meeta rises, smiles widely. You've come!

I have. And it's time. The, uh, *the* time.

She nearly drops her comb. It's here?

He nods.

I have to pack!

He rushes to her, kisses her. There's no time, my sweet. Ginna thinks we're going to the Rose Garden for the night. If we take much of anything she'll get suspicious. And besides, Adiba is to follow us.

Her angelic features are tinged with the infernal; she looks more like the petulant child she is than the womanly image she projects. Ram should not be too surprised; after all, she is but 17.

Meeta begins changing. No one on the street wears a close-cut choli like she has on now.

Avert your eyes, Pope, just for a moment.

She's in a respectable salwar-kameez now, covered from shoulder to ankle. She sweeps the cosmetics off the bureau and into her faux-designer purse. She adds an undergarment.

Anything else you want to take? He cups his hand to whisper: *This is the last time you'll be here.*

This is all I need, she says, definitively.

Though it is night, on go her 'Guchi' sunglasses, a most-prized possession. A quick check of the mirror turns into an assortment of poses, an adjustment of her hair, as if 'desperate runaway' has its own look. Ram, his eye torn between the face of his watch and of Meeta's, finally grabs her by the hand.

As they lock eyes, the moment registers: Ram, resembling a film actor in his suit; Meeta, appearing as a starlet; both stepping into a vast unknown. They could be cast as heroes in a Hindimovie; this is not lost on them.

They step into the hallway. Meeta slides her arm into Ram's and they stride past the watching eyes. Meeta holds her chin high while the other girls curse her.

Ginna grabs hold of Ram as he passes and whispers, *Just* remember: I have people who have people who kill people.

Not to worry, Aunty. Meeta will be returned safe and sound tomorrow morning, 7 a.m., sharp. Like before. His voice trembles on the last syllable. He smiles.

Ginna looks him over with just enough of a probing eye to make his knees buckle. She turns to Meeta. Be *good*, she says, her hand tightening into a vise around Meeta's wrist. *A-di-ba!*

He lumbers out of his room. At last most of his shirt buttons have become acquainted with their holes.

You can nearly see the question doing backflips in Ram's head as the trio descend the stairs: *How...to...escape...him?*

They enter the street awash with men, men, men: confused, lonely, bereft. Onward towards Ajmeri Gate, the subway, the railway station, and freedom – *if* Adiba can be lost.

Oh, what an evening we'll have! My love and I, on our own! What glory! What rapture awaits! Meeta sows her florid hopes to the pimply youth trying to look at ease, the tout with a ghastly tumour fastened to her chin, the pervert pleasuring himself in the shadows.

Ram is mortified. They already draw too much attention. He looks to Adiba who shuffles along unfazed, either pondering one of life's greatest questions, or why his anti-dandruff shampoo is so ineffective.

Maybe speak a little more quietly, my flower? Ram hisses. He checks his watch. Only 15 minutes remain. He looks up and nearly collides with another man.

Sorry, sir—

He first sees the man's dark suit. Then his face and the thin, familiar scar running down its side like a worm. They stand looking at one another as volumes of history are recalled. Ram's eyes glisten. His body quakes. The ManInSuit's presence is a message sent and received: he is here to kill Ram.

Ram renews his pace and Meeta laughs, like all is a game. Excuse us! she calls, giggling. She kisses Ram on the cheek. Ram does not kiss her back.

Moments ago, Adiba posed a serious problem. This ManInSuit represents a crisis. Ram doesn't need to look back to realize he is now part of their caravan.

You worry too much, Meeta says. She has no idea, Ram thinks. Visions like shots in a film play in his mind: a bullet entering the back of his head; Meeta, covered in his blood, letting loose a scream; his corpse falling to the ground in exquisite slow motion as the soundtrack soars—

Oh! Meeta exclaims. I've lost my shoe!

Ram pauses, infuriated.

What are you—

Meeta silences him, her finger on her lips. Adiba, my dear. *Dear*, dear, Adiba. She saunters towards the lump of a man and thrusts out her chest. Could you go and get it for me? I can see it right back there.

Adiba licks his lips. She takes his hand, giving it a gentle rub. He half-smiles, turns. Meeta shoots off into the street, one foot bare, and signals to Ram to run. Once inside a parked autorickshaw, she shouts, Metro! Now! *Now!*

The driver, shocked, drops his half-eaten roti and obeys.

Oh, how Ram loves this petite treasure! He peeks out the rickshaw and sees Adiba back where they left him, a shoe in his hand, utterly confused. The ManInSuit is nowhere. Relieved, Ram feels a keening sadness. The ManInSuit represents more than mere fear, and not a word of it can he explain to Meeta, not ever.

She talks a mile a minute, casting a vision of their shared future: beautiful children, fabulous wealth, regular promotions at his work, a grand home; the size and heft of her dreams stagger.

Ram nods absently, his eyes fixed on the oval window at the back, scanning for signs of pursuit until the application of the brakes throws him forward.

They burst forth, down the stairs, and into the tile-lined Metro corridors, running – no, *flying* – to the railway station, hand-in-hand, weaving through families with grumpy children and professionals returning home after long days at work and bedraggled *mazdoors* with their tools, dodging ATMs and orange cones indicating renovations underway, past the cautionary Metro signs and watchful CCTV cameras and the suspended clock, gleaming like a moon, seen in a blur: eight minutes till their train departs.

Meeta loves this freedom. She runs ahead, remaining shoe in one hand, her other hand trailing behind to keep hold of Ram. He reaches, struggling to weave through the crowds with the ease her small form allows. New blisters form on his heels. He can't help peering over his shoulder for pursuers. Terror makes his insides wobbly, and her wagging hand feels like a wisp of what could be, just beyond his grasp, just *barely*.

Up the stairs they go, exiting into the night air and a turbid river of parked yellow-and-green autorickshaws. They move among them, Meeta still running ahead, and arrive: the New Delhi Railway Station. Past the columns they go, absorbed by another crush of coming-and-going commuters. Nearly doubled over in need of breath, Ram scans the ominous departure/arrival board as letters and numbers flutter and *chk-chk-chk* into place. Meeta cannot help but smile.

So...where are we...going? she asks between gasps.

Ram marvels that this girl, who really knows very little of him, is willing to escape with him to any quarter of India without hesitation. He points to the bottom-most listing,

even though he knows that the letters are as indecipherable to her as little black squiggles on a page. Bangalore, he says.

Bangalore? She is full of wonder. More dreams spring to life in her eyes.

He finally catches her hand. Come on!

Up a staircase they go. Just before flashing their tickets to a disinterested railway employee and passing a barricade of wire and police signage, Meeta stops abruptly, touching her face.

What is it? he asks, fearing the worst.

I need to visit the toilet. The washroom.

Now? But the train—

I need to.

Meeta, this is ridicul—

I will *not* enter our new life looking like what...what I am.

He looks anew at her face, past the flared nostrils and set jaw, to the gaudy bursts of colour.

You mean a...*whore*? The word is uttered under his breath.

She needles him with her eyes. I need to redo my face.

There's no time!

Then go without me! She crosses her arms.

StunnedShockedTerrified, Ram is all three. Go. *Go!* His voice cracks. He steps to the side of the line, scanning faces in the crowd, looking for ManInSuit. You have a minute! he calls after her as his watch's seconds-hand starts another lap.

She smiles curtly, already feeling around in her purse before stepping inside the nearby washroom.

A minute, even less! he says, unable to hide his worry.

Peering down a level at the crowded platform he sees their train has already arrived. Passengers climb aboard, coolies haul luggage, sellers hawk snacks, beggars beg, pickpockets

pick. He looks back, and what he sees, who he sees, brings a cry: *Meeta!*

ManInSuit, huffing and puffing and searching, looking as if he doesn't want to do what he wants to do. He reaches inside his coat. Ram cannot wait. He sprints towards the ticket checker, shows his ticket again. *Run...* thoughts are...*Run...* impossible and he...*Run...* pushes on through...*Run...* the throng until...

A thought flashes into his mind: the presence of others will protect him!

He scans faces: the older woman with kohl-darkened eyes, the sinewy coolie with his red cap, a spindly man with a plastered comb-over. But Ram has never entrusted his safety to another soul; doing so now is against his every instinct.

His pursuer has somehow worked his way past the checkpoint and follows, his face set. The reluctance Ram glimpsed on ManInSuit's face only a moment ago has evaporated.

A calm voice blares over a loudspeaker: *Attention. Train Number 5609 inbound from Chandigarh will be arriving shortly on Platform Number 3. Please stand clear.*

He considers jumping onto his train, but knows there will be no escape there. Ram continues to run until nearly out of platform. He tries to summon cries, but they are stifled by his stupid fear. He stumbles back into a column. Amongst all the commotion on the platform, Ram feels he is without options, utterly alone in his hopelessness.

Finally, confronting him squarely, the suited man pulls out a knife as he snarls, advancing on Ram. Ram shouts, the sound swallowed up by the screeching brakes of the arriving train.

When Meeta exits the washroom, her allotted minute long since passed, she looks for Ram. He is nowhere. Could he have left her behind? she wonders. Impossible!

There seems to be a commotion down towards the trains but the ticket agent won't let her pass.

What's going on? she enquires. The agent shrugs.

People clamour to exit the platform and head up, up, up, past the checkpoint.

In the crush, she slips past the distracted agent and forces her way down, down, down.

An older, turbaned fellow stands watching on the edge of a group of other sober men who stare at the prematurely stopped train.

Please, Miss. He holds up a barring hand. This is not for your eyes.

But what has happened?

A man was just killed. I saw it happen.

Killed? But how? She looks past the man again and sees porters and railway staff preoccupied with something caught under the railway engine's wheels.

The killer threw the young man on the tracks, just as it was arriving. Then off he ran.

Off he ran, she murmurs. A man extricates half of a bloodied suit-coat from the tracks.

Her hand leaps to her mouth. The truth finally descends on Meeta, and her body, her whole being, is stricken:

Ram, her love, her saviour, is no more.