

**The World in a Suitcase:
A Collection of Short Fiction**

**Creative Thesis Analysis
by
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Fall 2011

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TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for _____,

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

Thesis Advisor

Date

Précis

College students consistently rank study abroad experiences as valuable and inspiring. The collection of short fiction “The World in a Suitcase” is a product of this inspiration. This creative project contains twelve selections of short fiction, one from each country I visited on my study abroad in fall semester of 2010 with the program Semester at Sea. Additionally, a nonfiction prologue and epilogue serve to place the stories in context and give my perspective on the adventure as a whole.

This essay analyzes “The World in a Suitcase,” and how the stories inside illustrate a connectedness between the importance of setting and theme. While placing a story in Ghana or Japan creates distinctive visual details, the humanity of universal struggle or relief remains similar. One does not escape human problems by simply crossing a border. The aim of the collection is to ask readers to consider this balance of place and humanity.

The collection stands within a specific genre of writing: the short story. Many authors from around the globe have tackled this nuanced form of fiction. Borrowing from this wealth of knowledge helped me to form the stories in the collection, especially pieces by authors from the countries written about. Research also included general advice and instruction from books on writing and craft.

Writing of “The World in a Suitcase” began on the Semester at Sea voyage itself, and continued through the spring and summer of 2011 with editing taking place both concurrently and in the fall of 2011. Specific times for writing were not set due to my writing preferences, though deadlines were self-imposed. Reading other author’s selections of short fiction and meditating on place and theme occurred between actual stretches of writing.

In addition to adhering to the academic framework exploring setting and theme, each story carried some commentary on a world issue. Everything from stifling the creativity of

children, to environmental concerns, and the human cost of war is touched upon in the collection. This mix of content creates a global connection beyond the simple concept of travelling the world.

Overall, I hope to inspire and excite readers with “The World in a Suitcase.” My goal is to preserve and share my memories of a journey within the context of unique places that still bear universal humanity. The ultimate culmination will be to publish the collection. Whatever the case, it must stand within the genre of short fiction as a worthwhile addition with an interesting concept.

Please enjoy the collection, as well as this piece of analysis for what it is: a glimpse into my experiences and mind; a glimpse of the world in my suitcase.

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Introduction to Short Fiction and the Creative Project

Storytelling connects humans around the world in a fascinating way. Very early in human history, oral tradition began explicating and dramatizing the occurrences of life, forming a bond between a storyteller and his or her audience. With the advent of written language, these storytellers became writers. A more recent occurrence is the resurgence of short fiction in the literary world. But every language and culture has developed a unique way of shaping their world through writing. Simultaneously, the themes existing in fiction transcend the differences of most people in a global context.

From the magical chalk of Japan's Kobo Abe, to the African representation of manhood purported by Chinua Achebe, and the dry humor of living as a modern American Indian like Sherman Alexie, short fiction has attempted to explain the human experience. There is the interesting dichotomy of the innate importance of place, complimented by the thematic issues that transcend a country's borders. The relationship is comparable to the concept of yin and yang: two parts creating a whole. In short, a setting is the pivotal backdrop of a story, but what is said about humanity within that place is also of interest to an author or reader. This can be tackled through a collaboration of both realms of thought, welding a need for place with the humanity of togetherness. But what sets apart the short story as an art form?

Some view writing short fiction as an easy way out compared to the volume of writing a novel requires. On the contrary, literary technique becomes paramount in short stories due to the issue of brevity. Former American author and fiction writer Rust Hill explains that "The story writer won't use any of the aspects of fiction technique loosely, the way a novelist does. In a story, everything's bound together tightly" (Hill, 3). As such, the genre takes more discipline,

though comparably less time, than crafting a novel. This means the focus can be on showing the world, rather than filling up pages.

Within short fiction, one tends to focus less on some elaborate plot, and more specifically on one driving moment or image. Broad storylines reaching thousands of pages catalogue an entire life or history. Short fiction takes a few dynamic points of a life and pulls them to the forefront. The events of a short story are those that change a life dramatically. This could be as simple as a daily routine interrupted. Readers are given a glimpse and then shut out again so they can reflect on what the short moment means contextually.

Why would anyone choose to write short fiction? The answer returns to the history of telling stories. Author Steve Almond claims he writes short fiction “because I believe the short story is the purest form of what we commonly refer to as storytelling, by which I mean the most intuitive, satisfying, and elegant of our narrative possibilities” (Almond, ¶ 1). There is an innate power in short fiction to take a place and theme and forget about the bonds of a lengthy plot.

So what does a writer of short fiction focus on? More specifically, how do they balance characters, setting, and plot in a way that might capture the reader while exposing an absolute human truth? Two options arise for anyone writing within the context of a specific culture. They can write from within the culture looking out, or from the outside scrutinizing the culture within.

A writer’s own country becomes a pivotal starting point. This is where they learned to write and how to think. Culture and education separate a vast majority of literary minds. There needs to be some context for the story beyond being on earth. Is the reader exploring the urban heat of Mahasweta Devi i’s India or the rural upheaval of Africa shown by Ngugi wa Thiong’o? Here, the concept of place becomes paramount for the reader’s understanding. However, these two authors are concerned with a similar issue of the fervor of globalization and the loss of a

cultural identity. From this perspective, location means little. Both stories can provide an understanding of the issue. Readers can feel this thematic pressure no matter the actual setting of the story. What results is an amalgamation of the two concepts. Authors fill a specific backdrop with universal themes. Place and theme work together for an author in conveying a complete message to the audience. A complete yin-yang.

To understand the literary process and the identity of place juxtaposed with universality in thematic issues, I wrote a collection of short fiction framed by my travels abroad on Semester at Sea. Each country I visited is represented in a story which showcases the individual nature of a particular culture compared against a global human issue or theme prevalent in a universal context. There are twelve stories in all, as well as an introduction to the literature, and an epilogue wherein I reflect on my journey.

The Writing Goal

During the fall semester of 2010, I left the rolling wheat fields of Eastern Washington for a study abroad program called Semester at Sea. Joined by hundreds of students from around the country and the world, I embarked on a journey that circumnavigated the globe in just over one hundred days. The ship stopped in fifteen ports along the way in twelve different countries. The experience changed my outlook on global citizenship, and shaped my future teaching goals to include stints abroad.

While aboard the M.V. Explorer, the floating classroom that brought me around the world, I attended a class on short fiction. The concept of the class stood out. The literature we read and analyzed came straight from the countries we visited. The class culminated in writing our own stories, influenced by our travels.

Once home, I wondered how I could retain the memories of so many countries and experiences. A journal with several entries offered a realistic look at my own adventures; however, the feel of the countries and people were missing. So entered the creative thesis project of writing a story about each country I visited.

The overarching goal of this collection is to provide a glimpse of each country through the eyes of an outside observer. Moreover, I wish to present a relationship between the importance of place complimenting the universality of humanity. In effect, a story must be grounded in a particular setting that is pivotal in plot and imagery. However, the human themes of struggle and growth, love and hatred, can be portrayed anywhere. One does not lose a sense of humanity by simply crossing a border. For example, there are instances of confusion concerning sexuality in two of the stories from the collection. While India and Spain provided very different backdrops, this same theme persisted. Shows of manhood and dominance appear on both Table Mountain of South Africa and Lantau of China in the collection.

From my writing, I hope to show this duality of place coexisting with themes prevalent universally. Another goal of the collection is to discuss or criticize current global problems and policy. An in-depth analysis of this is provided in the “Thematic Review” section. In short, there are many hypocrisies I wish to expose with this writing, albeit subtly. Simply creating interest or thought on the subjects involved would prove the collection a success of my own goals.

Finally, the lasting goal for this collection is its inclusion in the realm of short fiction. By that, I mean for it to stand as a worthwhile piece of literature alongside and compared to other works. Author and poet Raymond Carver said “Every great or even every very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications” (Carver, 32). I hope to have achieved this. The

collection must find a place in the history and prevalence of work in short fiction measured by the comparative writing of past and current authors.

Influences and Comparisons

Most writers draw much of their style and inspiration from the influence of authors who told a particularly poignant story. It would be remiss not to analyze at least some of these contributors in relation to my collection of work. Each writer I looked to for inspiration added some framework for the understanding of place or theme, and the juxtaposition of the two as major facets of stories. Also, simple convention and discipline techniques pass from one author to the next, and I attempted to take advantage of any type of lesson learned from reading selections of short fiction.

The audience understanding the plight of each character in a story is pivotal in creating a connection with the reader. To explore the intricacies of characterization I read a number of pieces from African author Chinua Achebe. Well known for his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe balances manhood with powerlessness in many of his stories. The encroachment of modernity on custom and the bureaucracy of new government policies such as “egg-rashers” in “Civil Peace” are prevailing themes in Achebe’s work (Achebe, 4). I tried to capture this feel with my own look at attempted democracy in “The Brown Grass,” and took the characterization of the manly yet helpless in “Sinking.”

While trying to create a truly captivating sense of place, the work of Beryl Markham stands out as a strong influence on my fiction. Focused on the landscape of Africa, often told from flying above the savannah, Markham paints scenery with words. An interesting concept of hers that carried through to my work is the concept of traces of humanity in a landscape. In her story “The Stamp of the Wilderness,” Markham makes the presence of humans felt with the

appearance of smoke in a tight column. She calls it a kind of human footprint, or “matchstick in the sand” (Markham, 37). I tried to bring out the same sort of identification for humanity in my own writing, such as traffic, pollution, or noise, since the settings of most of my stories were urban. This connection between place and humanity plays perfectly into the academic framework of the collection.

Because of the nature of the collection, cultural norms and attitudes played a major role in the exposition and actions of character. While American Indians did not play a role in my own writing, their spirit portrayed by Sherman Alexie influenced some of my own representations of cultures. The wry humor and stark realities presented in the adventures of Victor and others on a reservation in Spokane showcase the flashes of dissent with a cultural identity. Meanwhile, that very dissent is opposed by a hatred of the dissolving traditions in the reservation. This internal struggle transferred to some of my own work, though I attempted to be gentler with sarcasm and pessimism.

A bold contrast to the realism of Alexie is the fantasy of Kobo Abe’s “The Magical Chalk.” Often compared to the likes of Kafka or Ionesca (Solomon, 315), Abe creates skewed realities to present engaging plotlines and thoughtful thematic choices. In the story of the chalk, a man finds his fantasies come true by simple drawing what he desires. Sadly, he fails to control his own creations, and is ultimately faced with the complexity of sheer creation. “He had to draw the whole world all over again. Discouraged, Argon collapsed onto the bed” (Abe, 324). This creative dilemma shadows my own pieces “Fading Dreams” and “At the Cost of Creativity.” Interestingly, it also follows the struggle an author has when creating everything from nothing. Like the man with the chalk, writers must create the world over again in the minds of readers, making the story an excellent allegory to writing.

To further explore how similar themes can permeate stories of two very different, yet meaningful, settings, I looked at the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Mahasweta Devi. In Thiong'o's story "A Meeting in the Dark," a teenage boy primed to leave the rural villages of Africa for a proper education is faced with the dilemma of fathering a child. The pressures get the best of him until he kills his girlfriend in a spate of anger, and realizes that "Soon, everyone will know that he has created and then killed" (Thiong'o, 110). In Devi's selection "Dhwoli," a woman is raped and carries the child of a man who is in a higher cast. The same public shame overtakes her as does the boy in Thiong'o's piece. Also, creeping modernity has taken hold of both places, threatening a cultural ideal and way of living. Some characters embrace this, while others reject it vehemently. Ultimately, while the two stories take place half way around the world from each other, the human struggles mirror and compliment. My own story from Ghana, "The Brown Grass" takes a cue from this comparison, as the modern Vodaphone takes over shacks in Takoradi. A woman who is used by the men of the town attempts to make changes, but is shamed into obscurity. The parallels shape a combined human experience I wish to convey with the collection.

Overall, I took thematic and craft direction from a number of the stories I read. However, there are marked differences in some realms. For one, my stories stick to a shorter form than some of the past works, such as Yukio Mishima's fifty-three page "Act of Worship." Also, I wrote a few stories from the perspective of a visitor to a culture, something I never ran into when reading other short fiction. Finally, I toned back much of my dialogue in any piece where I felt I did not have a perfect grasp on speech mechanics, something the native writers easily portray from experience.

Writing Methodology

The method for writing short fiction varies drastically from author to author. As such, my strategies for creating the stories in the collection differ from many of the authors discussed in the last section.

Creating and analyzing my short fiction involved five concurrent processes. This methodology allowed for creative exploration within the genre of short fiction, while supplementing my knowledge of writers and craft. The five concurrent stages were: the actual writing of short fiction, preparation and journaling of creative thoughts, analysis of the craft of writing short fiction, reading other short fiction pieces, and editing.

The bulk of the creative work occurred while writing the actual pieces of short fiction. The ideas in the stories pulled from my experiences abroad and any creative thoughts during the other methodology, such as a thematic thought borrowed from another piece of fiction or an image in everyday life. Writing occurred primarily during times of creative thought, not forced by deadlines or structured scheduled writes. This indicates one of my own preferences not always associated with the traditional writing discipline. However, as Author Damon Knight points out, “you must learn to write your own way, or you can never learn at all” (Knight, 9).

To supplement the stories, I reflected on image and place and copied this down in a notebook. This is not so much journaling as it is the short thoughts of everyday life and a brief captured image. Other preparations for writing included research on language and mannerisms to add realism to the pieces. This encompassed my experiences as well as documented linguistics and customs of the region being written about.

Short fiction is undoubtedly different from other forms of writing. As such, I considered advice from several sources that taught the genre. This included books on writing such as Hills’

Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular: An Informal Textbook, and analysis of the short fiction of authors like Isaac Babel and Ha Jin. I focused on how these authors balanced place and theme. Basic storytelling rounded out the analysis.

Understanding the form of short fiction would be impossible without gleaning ideas from past writers. During the project I read a number of short stories from a wide array of authors. These authors were chosen based on their importance to the genre, as well as how they utilize place and theme in a larger context. Authors from the regions I am writing about were of particular interest. My findings are included in the previous section “Influences and Comparisons.”

Finally, a vast majority of my time was spent editing my pieces of fiction. This involved several drafts styled in accordance to suggestions from Professor Goodrich as well as my own tastes. General grammatical and typographical editing took place after each new draft as well. Often the editing process spanned a great deal of time, as reflecting on a piece was difficult too soon after its first creation.

Ultimately these five stages of work allowed for a complete and polished product of fiction.

Thematic Review

The culmination of the creative work rests largely in the thematic content of the stories. Each country presents a particular issue and theme relevant to their society, as I saw it, but also to the world as a whole. This global perspective with a flair for place fell neatly into the academic framework of the project. More importantly, each story stands alone in its telling of a purported human truth.

An enduring theme of the collection begins in the introduction with the idea of packing the world into a suitcase. In effect, people see the world based on the physical objects they can return to. Sometimes these items represent a holistic memory, whereas a picture may not conjure up the same recollection of smell or sound. As such, each story has images and objects that represent the overarching theme. Coral in the story of Mauritius or soap from Morocco spell out the issues of conservation and trust, respectively. Of course, this long form metaphor of the suitcase is the basis of the title of the collection.

In addition to the thematic choices of the collection, I also focused on current issues I see prevalent in the United States, presented around the world in caricature. I find the ideas behind standardized testing to be deplorable on student creativity and true learning. Because of the heavy impact of grade rankings and testing in Japan, I utilized the story “Fractured English” to comment on the failings of this educational standard. In addition, keeping in tradition with many African authors such as Achebe and Mohammed Naseehu Ali in his story “The Manhood Test,” my story from South Africa, “Sinking,” features a struggle with gender identity and what it means to be a real man. Other pieces of the collection have similar subtle satire in my aim to show universality in theme, despite the variation of setting.

Lessons from the Project and Future Steps

Many obstacles face a writer on the precipice of creation. What haunts many is the sheer multiplicity of options presented by fiction. The ability to create virtually anything overloads the mind with ideas. I faced this challenge on several occasions, compounded with the restrictions of writing about every country. I wanted to represent the region in so many ways; a single story hardly scratched the surface of what is there. The amount of inspiration and material afforded to

me by the project actually became an obstacle at times simply because I was anxious to include as much as possible.

Another roadblock presented itself when choosing the descriptors for various countries. Small details became pivotal. A sign in Ghana differs from a sign in China, but how? Both are bold and blunt in what they say. But the former is attached to a rusted pole rising above shacks, and the latter is emblazoned along a glass skyscraper. These distinctions did not always come easy, and distinguishing the heat of Singapore from the heat of Morocco became an obstacle in the creative process.

A final issue with the project arose from the academic framework and how I could incorporate the details of place while preserving universal themes sufficiently. Assuring the reader an accurate feel for each country, coupled with a thematic consideration, proved difficult at times. This often resolved itself once the story developed, but the initial concept often held me back from writing until I was faced with some storyline epiphany. Ultimately, I learned this method is not always particularly forgiving and caused a lot of stress.

Of course, struggles lead to the maturation of any art form. While I found some aspects of the project difficult, I ultimately enjoyed the process and took away a lot of valuable information regarding myself as an author, as well as the discipline of writing. My previous love of overbearing dialogue disappeared, imagery taking its place. Subtlety became paramount over my past preference of spelling out everything for an audience. I felt my writing improved, but more importantly, my confidence in telling stories and tackling complex issues with a literary critique blossomed.

Author James Best once pointed out the most surprising thing about writing is “How it’s never done. When I think I’ve got it just right, I print it out and find all kinds of things to change. I relate writing to restoring an antique car. There’s always another nook or cranny that needs to

be polished” (*Fascinating Authors*). I would agree, and this collection will continue to change until I have exactly what I want. This will include revisions, edits, and complete overhauls.

However, the real challenge is getting the final product out to those who might be interested. Self-publishing through a company like Createspace is one option for the collection. But simply having a book to hold is not the ultimate goal. My next step is to find publishers of literary magazines and send individual selections of my work to them. From there, the collection may have a greater chance of being picked up in a very competitive market. This thesis process may also open doors for interested readers.

Conclusion

Short fiction has power. Some of this force comes from place and theme. Neither takes immediate precedence over the other. This collection stands as commentary on the importance of both facets. The premise of the stories hinges on the physical place described, yet the challenges and issues faced by the characters could happen anywhere. This balancing act is part of the craft of telling stories, and causes readers to think beyond the text.

It is presumptuous to assume the quality of a creative work. What stands out as a spectacular piece to one person may be dry or boring to another. As such, I wish to conclude not with accolades to myself, or even an attempt at rating my writing. Instead, I wish to discuss the implications of the writing.

The inclusion of so many places in one collection has decided implications on a reader. What is quickly perceived must be the similarity seen in the struggles of the characters. This is where the universality of theme becomes prevalent. This collection was written, in part, to show the interconnectedness of a global community. Countries cannot separate themselves from this

new universal consciousness. While customs and traditions set us apart, modernity is closing the gap aggressively.

Also, I hope to impart a sense of adventure to readers of this creative project. Very few authors explore the reaches of so many cultures all in one anthology. Anyone interested in travel writing, narrative explorations of exciting and strange culture, or a simple story of human will should find the collection worth their time. Writers catalogue the intrinsic qualities of living in a specific context, and I wish to add to that collective knowledge base. Simply put, this collection is my world in a suitcase. This is what I brought home.

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Extended Reading List

The following is a list of short fiction not analyzed in this piece, but which helped shape my own understanding of the craft.

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Tsushima, Yuko. "The Silent Traders." *Other Voices, Other Vistas*. Ed. Barbara Solomon. New York, N.Y.: New American Library, 2002. Print.

The short story collection associated with this research paper is available in its entirety for purchase online at:

<https://wwwcreatespace.com/3657838>

OR

http://www.amazon.com/World-Suitcase-Collection-Short-Fiction/dp/1466379227/ref=sr_1_sc_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1322672707&sr=8-2-spell

The following story is just one in the collection. It is based in India, and is representative of the styles and themes prevalent in the book as a whole.

Enjoy!

Eyes of the Beholder

My mother tells me the woman I am to marry has the most enchanting eyes in Madras. My brother says they are a bright emerald color, with swirls of blue like the sky. These are just words to me. Colors may have well described the blood in her veins or the muscles letting her dance the Bharatanatyam: underneath and invisible, the way I perceive the world. Being blind in India means the spectacular colors people speak of in the market are no more than terms. Taunts.

Truthfully, I should count myself lucky for the simple fact that I am to be wed. No family in India considered such a farce for most of my early adult life. Of course, my mother was convinced someone would stumble upon the sheer epiphany that my lack of sight would make for an excellent husband, even if she didn't believe it herself. All she believed was that a man as handsome as I should have a wife. She often bragged of my looks to friends. And of course, our family's wealth and status didn't hurt.

In life, however, I am a constant failure to my mother and my family. Unlike the majority of blind people in India, I was not put into darkness by some terrible act of violence that set a scar upon my face. I could not illicit the sympathy of boys with eyes burnt shut or war veterans with half a face. I could not procure a job readily or take traditional schooling. I know most of the world simply by what I'm told.

I first met Jigisha on a Tuesday morning in a café near the Semmozhi Poonga. Our mothers sat at the table with us, whispering hints under a table that felt sticky from foam. My mother assured me the establishment catered to affluent international businessmen and families of a higher caste. If so, I wondered, why do the chairs sigh and squeak under my weight? Why is there no shade from the rising sun?

“The gardens are lovely this time of year,” my mother offered with a commanding voice. The fragrant waves from the Semmozhi Poonga transported her words along to the other side of the table.

“Yes. Perhaps Jigisha and Darshan could walk among them today after our meal?” said Jigisha’s mother with a wispy, unsure quality of voice. I held in a woeful howl and plastered a crooked smile over top of it. All that saved me from this unfortunate event was the waiter bringing out our tea.

Heat radiated from the teapot, tugging at my senses. A faint minty smell wafted around the heated pot until it split into four separate cups. My hand crept along the sticky table until it found the ceramic cup, so small in my massive palms. I could cup the heat and mint inside with my hand and then take a deep breath, opening my sinuses. Another smell charged in, however. Thicker. Heavier. Something like a mystical fountain or spring. The waiter’s cologne blanketed me for the briefest moment. Then it was gone.

“I would enjoy a walk,” Jigisha said flatly. Pulled back to reality, I burnt my tongue on the tea and put down the cup with a noticeable clank. I imagine my mother was furious with my minor outburst, but one of the advantages of never seeing her expression was the ability to pretend she had a warm, round face full of love and acceptance. What a dream.

“Sorry, the tea is hot,” I responded, lamely. Another prick in my mother’s side, I’m sure. A muffled laugh came from the other side of the table. I doubt Jigisha knew I heard it. Perhaps people think that if you can’t see their lips move or their mouth quiver you must not be able to hear them. People speak loudly at me. Maybe I should just stop listening?

The formalities ended abruptly when the meal ended. My mother hurried me away from the table as I stumbled to find footing. I imagined the other two women sitting at the table, staring at us in wonderment. There’s no doubt in my mind that my mother and I are a spectacle, her dragging me around like a goat on a tether. In any case, she pulled me onto a hard metal seat with fumes of gasoline

climbing up into my face. The rickshaw rumbled to life, jostling me a bit, and we were off. I wouldn't see, or rather hear, my wife to be for another month.

On the day I was to meet Jigisha on my own, my morning routine took me longer than usual. Someone, likely my brother, moved the shirts in my armoire. He often borrowed my good clothes for dates with young women or job interviews. I suspect the latter was merely a cover for the volume of the former. He'd often come home from these interviews with a sad story about how the boss was unfair. All the while, his collar smelled of jasmine.

When I finally did lay my hands on the silk buttoned shirt I was groping for, I realized it had a few rough patches in the material along the side stitching. I teased the fabric through my fingers for a few seconds and then called out to my brother.

Heavy breathing. My younger brother always breathes through his mouth. His breath smelled of cardamom. At 26 years old, my brother should have been getting married. Instead, he defied our mother and custom by dating young women from the university. Often, he pretends to work there or be enrolled just long enough to "get what he wanted." I'm not quite sure I know what he means by that, but mother yells at him for it.

"What is it, Darshan?" he asked with a hint of boredom and a dash of frustration. I turned the shirt over to try and show him the area of rough cloth.

"Is there something wrong with my shirt?" I asked, trying to be as diplomatic as possible, not accusing him or making claims to which I had no evidence.

"It's fine. Just a little fraying." He stomped out. I started to retort but his mouth breathing and heavy footsteps were already down the stairs. This was quickly followed by the swifter steps of my mother, who was wheezing and moaning her way up to me. Her lungs were getting progressively worse ever since she got rid of our sixth servant and had to do more things around the house.

I felt a tugging at my shoulder as she sidled up next to me, catching her breath. These were the moments she felt most fragile. The scratchy breath and aching hum in her would disappear in seconds. The real mother returned.

“You will be late. Put on your shirt,” she said, pushing my arms out to the side so she could drape the shirt on me. Her hands worked around me, giving little tugs at my body from time to time until the shirt was buttoned. I resented the fact that she wouldn’t let me do it myself, but I was in no mood to argue. I still wondered about the rough patch.

“What is on your shirt?” she exclaimed, rubbing at the side seam.

“Brother said it was nothing.”

“Your brother is a lazy goat,” she replied, spitting loudly. I felt a little damp circle on my side now as her fingers stroked the cloth with her spit. Seemingly satisfied, she moved off without another word. I finished dressing myself after groping for shoes, and then slowly made my way down the stairs. I’ve only fallen once.

Jigisha and I met on one end of Marina Beach and sat on some stone benches. My hands gripped the bumpy edges of the bench, somehow hoping that would make the time pass more quickly. We sat in silence for an eternity, the quiet trickle of waves and children playing droning out the screaming awkwardness of it all. Quite bluntly, the beach smelled terrible and I don’t know why she would pick such a place. Everything in my nose was fish guts and garbage.

“Have you ever walked a beach?” she asked quietly. Something in her voice led me to believe she already knew the answer. Beaches in Chennai, and especially Marina Beach, were notorious for the dangers lurking in the sand. My mother told me of broken glass, used syringes, and little plastic balloons hiding in the sand.

I shook my head in response to her question. The silence returned. A hand squeezed my shoulder. I could imagine my mother was there with a grip like that. The hand wasn’t rough or wrinkled

like hers, but it had an authority about it. In fact, most people had hands like that. My brother, the girls at market who used to help me around, and especially the police the one time they thought I was a blind beggar.

Only two people have ever had gentle hands. My friend Lal, and the man at the post office. Anytime I went to get letters for mother, he would take my hand and lead me to the box. The post office was quiet when I went, mostly because it was late at night, and I felt serene. The air wasn't as blanketing, the smells not quite as strong. And the man at the post office had the most soothing voice. His words would bend around my ears and sneak in without the invasive attack of my mother's shrill demands or my brother's gruff frustration.

But it was his hands that really made a mark. Never a single bump or callous. The hair on the top was fine and smooth. The fingers didn't grip tight or scratch with unkempt nails. They simply led me to my box. After we were back outside, he would tell me to come back at the same time next week to pick up the mail. He said it gently. His hands, his words: they all felt so safe. Mother stopped letting me go about a year ago without any explanation. I miss those nights.

Jigisha moved her hand over to my chin and tilted it up. I felt her stand and scoot closer toward me. The heat of her body mixed with mine. And then I felt her lips. They brushed across my lips, a slightly salty taste as she moved away. I felt a little trace of saliva left on my lower lip and wiped it off, quickly.

"How dare you?" I asked, blood rising into my hot face. "We are not even married yet. And in public!" My last few words rose sharply. A lurch deep in the pit of my stomach made me feel sick. How could I let this happen? This strange taste lingered in me as I gasped for air.

"No one saw," she said, exasperated. "But it's obvious now. I'm telling our mothers the wedding is off." I threw my hands in the air in confusion as I heard her footsteps turn away.

“Because I believe in the Lord Vishnu?” I exclaimed, merely citing custom and tradition for my lack of acceptance of a kiss.

“No. Because you don’t feel anything for me. You don’t feel anything for anyone because you can’t experience life.” Her breath held for a moment, as if she was embarrassed by what she said. Then her breath was gone. The earthy scent of her body oil dissolved into the watery stench of the beach. The stinging of blood in my lips flowed out.

Of course, this was only a minor outburst. Jigisha’s mother convinced Jigisha that it was for the best, and that many women go through a momentary stage of worry about their future husband’s ability to love. I resented that really. Men can love. Their love is perhaps more pure, because it’s deeper. You don’t earn it right away.

A week before the wedding, my friend Lal invited me to his house for tea and congratulations. The chairs at his house were very uncomfortable. I sank into one until I could no longer stand without assistance and he laughed his deep, hearty laugh. Everything about Lal is hearty. Even his voice runs deep with some kind of passion, as if the sound waves are thick with cologne like that waiter. When Lal talks, people listen.

And so we sipped tea. The minutes bubbled past as we discussed the wedding, the call center where Lal worked, the movie *Endirhan*, and everything else. The liquid became a little cooler with every story, the rich, grassy flavor fading into the air. Our stories stopped, only the tapping of Lal’s foot against the floor breaking the silence. He called it a nervous tick. I was usually the only one who ever heard it or noticed.

“I’m going to miss you, Darshan,” he said slowly. The words jostled around in my mind, a confusing cacophony until I split my lips to respond.

“What do you mean? I’m not going anywhere.” A long silence. Lal put his hand, his smooth, gentle hand, on my shoulder. He left it there for ages. My mouth went dry, thinking about how Jigisha

had kissed me after placing a hand on my shoulder. I half expected my friend to do the same and started to laugh.

“Darshan, why are laughing at me?” Lal asked, amusement trying to cover up a shade of sadness. He took his hand off my shoulder and his chair swallowed him up with a whooshing plop. I heard him wrestle around with it. Then we were both standing in an instant.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just have strange feelings sometimes.” His hands closed around mine. We stood there, two men, two large men, embraced. I felt so embarrassed. Men don’t do that together. I wouldn’t even do that with Jigisha.

“Your mother will be very proud of you next week,” Lal said. I felt the sensation of a tear down my cheek, and his gentle hand wiped it away. Then he kissed me.

I walked home that day. Some young boy eagerly led me around with a tugging hand. I promised him 50 rupees for taking me to the right place. My stomach hadn’t lurched like it had with Jigisha. Instead, I had melted, in a way. I felt something, my blood rushing all through my body. *I felt something.* Jigisha was wrong.

My wedding day danced to life before I could even catch my breath from that kiss. Either kiss, really. I’d never kissed someone before. And I guessed I still hadn’t, seeing as both took me by surprise and I didn’t kiss back. I wondered if I would have given the chance to do it over. Would things be different?

My mother fussed with my clothes a lot. She wanted it to be the perfect wedding day, perhaps because her own had been interrupted by reality. My brother mouth-breathed in and out of the room, making comments about the people outside, ready for the Kanyaa Daanam. When mother left the room for a moment to check that everything was ready, my brother came up right next to my ear, so close I could smell the cardamom on his breath again.

“The flower bed looks lovely. Shame you’re still a child.” The words left a wet film on my ear. He walked away chuckling. I wanted to retort. I wanted to remind him I was the older brother. But I’m not sure that’s what he meant.

The flower bed weighed heavy on my mind. I knew little of what I had to do there, but my mom said it was where I am to consummate the marriage. That sounds difficult. When I asked her what it meant, she just squeezed my hand. When I asked Lal a day later, he started his hearty laugh, but then got very quiet. I wish I could have read his face. All my life, people have kept visual secrets from me. My mother taught me everything, but I worry she left some parts out.

And then I was in the ceremony. My mother pulled me along slowly. It wasn’t tradition for her to be in the threshold ceremony, but my wedding was unusual in many obvious aspects. Jigisha’s mother took my hands, blessing them gruffly. The officiating priest chanted in the background, filling the air with a palpable buzz of Hindi and Sanskrit. Then I felt the cool dab of the tilak on my forehead. The smell of turmeric flooded over me and, in a sense, Ganesha removed the obstacles to the union. Except, perhaps, those in my heart.

The rest of the wedding flew by, a mix of my awkward stumbling and the excited chattering of the guests. We skipped the Vara Prekshanam, though it agitated the priest. The day passed as everything else was done ad infinitum. Hours of long rehearsal and recitation paid off. I faltered only once in my speeches.

And then I felt her hand again. Jigisha still gripped too harshly. Her hands felt like tight bonds around my fingers as she led me in the sacred fire ceremony. Fragrant herbs snapped in the fire, releasing pockets of explosive smells and tastes. I imagined what it all looked like, with the fire and colors and people watching close. Heat overtook that thought. The fires wafted coals and cinders disguised by fragrances. The temperature suffocated me.

Jigisha finished the sixth ring of fire. We both hesitated. I grasped her hand now and led her, my feet shuffling against the scraping stone floor. At times she gave little tugs to make sure I didn't lead us straight into the heat, the rings. The burning sensation of my toes usually saved us, regardless. My ring, the final and seventh, took much longer than any Jigisha made. Our shaky path must have created the most atrocious ring to ever bless a marriage. But blessed it was.

And so I had a wife. The entrapment of the fire soon replaced itself by the deafening, overwhelming mixture of voices congratulating us. Even my brother sounded faint in this sea of praise and adulation. My mother broke into the fray to kiss my cheek, a sharp, fast peck. Even so, I could feel the tears on her face. I could practically hear the tears in her heart. Her son, the blind boy who couldn't get a job and never went to school, married a beautiful woman.

More cacophony. My favorite curry and fish plate. Hugs and handshakes. Bollywoodesque music. A sensory overload. Had I seeing eyes, I may have blotted them out simply to understand all the other sensations.

Then it disappeared. Jigisha and I sat on the flower bed alone that night. I slipped a petal between my fingers. Silky and soft. It reminded me of Lal's hands. Or the man at the post office. Jigisha took it away from me gently. Gentle for the first time. Did marriage change the touch of a woman? Does she become more cognizant of that simple thing? My heart settled for the first time that day.

"What do you think I look like?" she asked. I heard that question a lot. Many people tried to get me to outline their face with my hands. I would lie and say I knew what they looked like after that. Fact is, I could only tell things like softness and shape. Nothing of beauty. Hardly even whether they were a man or woman. Men have stronger faces. More interesting, perhaps.

“My mother tells me you have the most beautiful eyes,” I replied. My mother told me that women love compliments about their eyes. She said you can look into someone’s soul through the eyes. I had to take people’s word for what their soul might offer.

“That is very kind of her,” Jigisha said with a sigh. I felt bad. My compliment didn’t work. I wanted so much for her to be happy, I really did. But how well can you make someone else happy when all you want to do is curl up and shrivel into a husk? I did the one thing I thought might work. I trailed my fingers up her side and to her face. Taking her face with both hands, I drew her to mine. Our lips touched for the second time. This was my first real kiss, I was sure of it.

Maybe I was wrong. I heard stories when I was a child about how the first kiss is so magical. All I felt were cold lips. There was no rush of blood through my body like with Lal. And then it hit me. A kiss was only special if shared by both people. I gave her a kiss, but we did not share in it. I could not find the happiness I was supposed to feel.

We lounged around on the bed for a long time. Her fancy body oil rubbed off on the silky sheets and filled the room with an earthy smell. Jigisha’s finger traced along my arm and chest slowly, tickling me. It made my stomach lurch a little, just like the day she kissed me.

“We must consummate the marriage,” she said. Her voice was low, almost pleading. I nodded, my head ruffling the pillow.

“How do you... with your sight and everything...” she trailed off. This tugged at my heart. My breathing quickened and I felt like throwing up. The feeling transformed somewhere inside me. I felt rage well up through my throat instead of nausea.

“One does not need sight to love!” I exploded.

She took in a quick breath. The tenseness from my shoulders released and I fell next to her. Tears dribbled onto the pillows. Her hair slid across my face. She kissed my forehead and sobbed a little.

“But you don’t love me, do you?” she replied. Her voice was no longer sad. It was stone. It was sand. No longer living. Unfeeling. Cold.

“No. But I must try.”