

HELICONIA LANE

Valsolem Beach is located south of Goa, two to three kilometres away from the more popular beaches of Rajbaga and Palolem, and about an hour's drive from the tourist-packed beaches of the North. It's a little-known, unexplored, fine-as-baby-powder-slip-through-the-fingers sand beach. One can walk for miles along the beach—the thick, wild sea on one side and the soaring, vegetation-cloaked cliffs on the other—and not see a soul in sight. The reason, partly, is that it can hardly be seen from the main road given the barrier of grass, boulders, and palms in between. A rutted track leads down from the main road to the beach, but not many know of it. After a fifteen minutes' drive on it, the track falls into a circular clearing from which the shore can be glimpsed. A bit farther down... and rearing its head like a dragon from the sea... is a grassy, peculiar patch of heaven called Heliconia Lane.

Heliconia Lane is three hundred meters of a cobbled pathway, flanked by well-tended lawns and shaded by palms, jackfruit, and banana trees. The sides are bound by a profusion of Heliconia: tubular orange flowers with petals outlined in yellow and hanging like clusters of firecrackers. Entering Heliconia Lane is like setting foot into an explosion of colours and trumpety, yet it's not overpowering. Instead, one feels

buoyant and lightheaded. The sea air is soft on the face. The sun comes in filtered through a canopy of leaves and isn't as troublesome. The smell of Heliconia, jackfruit, and coconuts blend together into a heady concoction.

It's a blissful place to stumble into. You'll never want to leave.

Until you discover the secrets that linger behind the closed doors of the three houses that stand on it, that is.

From left to right, the houses are in blue, yellow, and white. They look like parts of an organism, as if attached together by invisible hooks. Arranged in a descending order of size and grandeur, they share little architectural harmony, yet fit neatly together. Like cohesive parts of a whole.

The first is *Casa De Primavera*, or House of Spring, the most ostentatious of the lot. Its façade is a royal blue, which was grand once but is now replete with cement sealed cracks. The walls are made of thick laterite stone with carved lintels. The roof is terracotta tiles set on coconut wood rafters. The floors are oxidized stone. Windows are brightly coloured stained glass with flower-shaped iron grills. White colonnades line the circumference of the two-storeyed, six-bedroom mansion. A well-maintained garden with a canopy, some hammocks, and servants' quarters are outside. An Acacia tree reaches up to the top floor.

Filip and Zabel Castelino live in this villa. Filip, fifty-five, is the retired deputy director of Goa's tourism board, this being the other reason no one knows of Heliconia Lane; he likes to keep it that way. His wife, Zabel, five years younger, is a Reiki master, although everybody, in particular, she, has forgotten all about it. These days, she spends most of her time in bed watching TV or on the phone with one or the other member

of her sizable, far-flung family. They have one son, Anton, who is twenty-eight years old. He left home when he was very young and has barely called or visited since.

The next house on the lane is the recently refurbished *Constellation*. Winged granite dragons guard the front gate that opens into the landscaped garden bursting with fruits and vegetables. A long covered *balcão*, or veranda, extends across the front and sides. It has built-in seating, open to the garden. The windows have oyster shells inserted into their wooden frames that make the light coming through look as if filtered through lustrous tissue. The house is painted in sunny yellow with a red-tiled sloping roof. Inside, the house is a single floor of four bedrooms and a reception hall. Beautifully done.

Varun and Rakhi Salgaonkar lived here for over twenty-five years before passing away in a freak boating accident a year ago. They were fifty-seven and fifty-five years old respectively. The house stayed empty for half a year after that and was only recently done up in the hopes of attracting well-heeled travellers who preferred a chic stay over the tumble-down North Goa shacks.

The Salgaonkars' have a son and a daughter.

The daughter, Vidisha, is thirty-four, married and settled in Mumbai. Five feet four inches tall, she is tolerably comely to look at and is the one who thought about turning her parent's cottage into a tourist homestay. She used to be their favourite and is certain they would have wanted this new identity for their beloved house as well.

The son, Gaurav, whose name means pride, is anything but. Thirty-years-old, six feet tall, and stocky in a hard-ass military way, he believes in living a life of ease and dissipation. He'd just about managed to pass high school, stopped studying soon after, instead preferring to loiter in beer shops, whistle at local girls, and ogle at tourists. He had several cases of harassment and petty thefts registered against him at the Panjim police station that his father, along with his friend Filip, had managed to hush up in the past.

Gaurav moved to Gurgaon a couple of years ago to work as a real estate broker, but the offenses only escalated: shady property deals, gambling debts, goons on his heels to collect them, the works.

Vidisha hasn't told Gaurav about the house—that it was ready and she was interviewing potential lodgers. The idea to convert the house to a tourist lodge had been originally his, but he had since changed his mind. And now she doubts he'll ever come around again. And he'll fight every step of the way if she tried to do it. A troublemaker is always going to be a troublemaker.

The last house on the lane is the prim and staid *Sea Swept*. Its walls are painted a church-like plain white, the door a bright cobalt blue. Whilst the smallest of the three houses, its porch has a clear view of the sea. Two love-chairs sit on it, their surfaces tarnished by years of disuse and saline wind. The lawn is bare: a coconut tree, a flowerless rose bush, that's all.

Inside, the house is only slightly better preserved but not without its redemptions. Four rooms open out to a central courtyard whose one wall houses a spectacular work of art. It looks as if it's made up of pieces stolen from a medieval mosque. The wall is inlaid with shiny ceramic tiles that have stylized landscapes, cypress trees, flying birds, geometric figures, calligraphic bands, quotations from the Qur'an. It's exotic.

The wall perpendicular to it has a teak wood shelf with an ancient black rotary dial telephone. Two wooden benches and a wickerwork divan are arranged under it.

By 2009, the year of the events in the story, Paritosh Nandkarni had lived in this house for twenty-two years, most of them on his own, after his wife Farideh disappeared one night. He'd used only about a quarter of the house since, and mainly only the master bedroom.

The bedroom has a clear view of the sea from one window. The room itself is decadently proportioned. It has a four-poster

HELICONIA LANE

bed, an imposing teak study table, an intricate Persian rug—the last, a gift from his wife. A large photograph of the couple embracing in front of the Taj Mahal hangs over the bed.

But the room is in a state of disorder. A heap of clothes, papers, and other scraps have been pushed under the bed as if after accumulating them day after day over many years Paritosh finally decided he wasn't going to take the trouble of cleaning up.

This is the room Darya Nandkarni steps into one hot May afternoon after the untimely death of her uncle, Paritosh. She hopes for it to be a time of *some* labour but mostly quiet contemplation by the sea. She imagines it would take her a week or two at most to get rid of her uncle's effects. After that, she plans to meet some of her childhood friends, with whom she'd played during her summer school breaks. Heck, she's even considering swinging by the North to lounge in a beach shack or two. Soak herself in *feni*. Crash a rave party. The opportunities appeared sweet and endless.

But what she isn't expecting at all is to play detective and solve the mysteries lurking in the shadows of Heliconia Lane.

SEA SWEPT

Soon enough, Darya realized cleaning up after her uncle wasn't going to be as easy as she'd imagined. Her father had told her it would take her a day, two at most, a week at worst and that was *stretching* it. But while it was only Uncle Pari's room that had largely been occupied in the house, it was still a *mess*. There were piles of paper, photographs, ripped books, bills, clothes, stacks of old medicines, product pamphlets, cassettes with their loops unwound, newspapers, and newspaper cut-outs—some decades old. And in between were also pieces of broken furniture, nails, duct tapes, scissors, stapler, stapler pins, a wrecked pair of slippers, and some *ugh, what's that?* A floor mop thick and crusty with a dark liquid. She dipped a finger and smelled it—*was it kerosene?* — then pushed it away to a corner with her feet.

What's happened to this place? How am I ever going to sort this out?

Not that she was short of time, she thought to herself. There was no job to go back to. No love interest. She had quit both and thankfully so. She was going to have to make a fresh start, a new beginning. But before that, she had some serious thinking to do.

How had it come to this?

Six months ago, she broke off with her boyfriend of three years, Spandan Gupta, the man she thought she was going to

spend the rest of her life with. She'd thought he was the one, as soon as their eyes met, their hands touched. Something electric passed between them. As if they'd touched a charged wire and branded each other for life.

This notion had solidified so wholly in her heart that dislodging it nearly cost Darya her life.

Two years younger, suave, well-travelled, and blessed with a glib tongue that swept everyone off their feet, Spandan was also very aware of his charms. He was the only son of rich business folk, a natural heir to his father's business, who grew up spoiled rotten. It also helped (or not) that he was gifted: knew several languages, did complicated mathematics like he was eating cereal, and looked like an Olympic swimmer.

They'd met at a work meeting. Darya and her boss had paid a visit to Spandan's father and team—which included Spandan—to sell one of their services. In an earlier life, Darya was employed in a workplace consulting firm, the kind that advised enterprises on how to make their offices more efficient. After the meeting was over, he asked her out. Then again. Said he was smitten. Couldn't take his eyes off her. *Endless legs, rap star confidence, a gorgeous sardonic smile...* She had been seeing someone else then, but it took her little to cut that off and collapse into Spandan's arms.

Her friends warned she had fallen for the glitter. Inside the tall, smooth exterior was a deeply troubled and insecure man. There was too much show, not enough core. Narcissistic Personality Disorder, one announced, noting the symptoms from social gossip and common friends. His need for admiration and lack of empathy was cited as proof.

But Darya did not hear them. That Spandan paid her attention, sought her out amidst the bevy of young and beautiful girls clamouring for him, was validating and wonderful enough.

It was a whirlwind, not a rollercoaster. She was sucked into the vortex of the relationship with a force of her own making, and after the initial headiness of romantic love began to fade, she stared at the bottom of a pit.

The jealousy, the anger, the need to control, the impulse to beat down anything she said... she was never good enough, no matter what she did or how much she tried. Only what he said mattered. She was a foolish child who needed minding. And he was the one who had to do it.

The last year of the relationship was the worst. It was every few months of on-and-off and back-again because of no-other-choice and cannot-let-go. She began suffering panic attacks. Palpitations and breathlessness. Stayed depressed for long periods of time. Drank and drank, more than was normal, more than she could bear, egged on by Spandan.

Her friends noticed, and one took her to see a therapist. But when Spandan heard of it, their fight was massive. *Why was she telling everyone about their problems?* he demanded. *Did she have no shame? No regard for their privacy? His reputation?* They had a showdown in the middle of a busy shopping street. He flung her bag to the ground, shoved her, broke her phone. A crowd gathered, watching as she wept.

The next day she told him they were off. Thank God for the scrap of self-respect that remained.

The past few months had been anything but easy for Darya. She felt abandoned mostly, and inadequate. Edgy. A nervous wreck. Self-blame and doubt played see-saw in her head. And some days were so dark, she cried the whole time, refusing to leave her bed to even go to work.

One day, convinced she was having a heart attack, she begged her roommate to take her to a hospital. Then—and why she'd thought to do it, she never fully understood even later—

before the doctor arrived and when her roommate stepped out for a pee, Darya decided to end it all. One stroke, all gone. The pain. The recrimination. The memories.

In that one moment of madness, she'd thought of no one. Not her parents, her friends, her life minus the broken heart, a life that was once awesome, her dreams for herself. Nothing.

She hadn't spoken about it to anyone since, except to her roommate who had been sworn to secrecy. She had helped Darya hush it up. Darya would never be forgiven if her parents got to know. *Damn*, she could scarcely forgive herself.

Darya returned home from the hospital carrying a few palliatives and a resolve to turn her life around. No more drinking or drugs. She'd fight off her depression. She was going to reinvent herself. Meantime, Spandan hadn't stopped calling, texting, or showing up. It was not so much that they weren't together anymore—he could have found anyone—but the fact that she had dumped him and moved on that rankled him. But she ignored him. She was going to scrub him off her life.

Weakness for violent and unsuitable men, Veda, her roommate, and closest friend, had told her. Darya hadn't spoken to her for a month after that, and again now. But she was right. No daddy issues or anything—heck, she had had a wonderful childhood, and yet... unsuitable men, unsuitable job, unsuitable everything. It was as if she enjoyed walking towards a pit full of snakes and dancing over it.

Fucking hell.

Her life had reached a really low point, and she hoped this was the lowest it would go. At the moment, staying rent-free in Goa seemed to be an indication from the "one above" that He hadn't totally abandoned her. She had begged her father to let her be the one to come. Of course, a lot of bad things had to happen for this to transpire and Darya was sorry for them.

Uncle Paritosh died. Her father suffered a heart attack not long after. Her father's indisposition was the purported reason she was sent to wrap things up. He had acquiesced only after much convincing and giving her precise instructions so that she didn't mess anything up: "*Send back all important papers and antiques, sell or dispose of the rest. Get rid of anything to do with Farideh—not the photos, but her things. It's like a tomb up there.*"

Maybe not a tomb, but the room was definitely decaying. She was taken aback when she saw the house again this time, after many years. She knew her uncle used to stay away from the house for months on end because of his job; he was some sort of fish salesman, though as far as she knew, he never really carried any fish, only glossy pages of catalogue. Come to think of it, she had never seen these catalogues nor found any in the house. He had long since left the job and might have chucked them all out. *But why hadn't he thrown the rest of this shit?* Darya shook her head in exasperation, discovering a thick stack of flyers advertising local fairs, water purifiers, and engineering entrance tuitions under the bed.

She had always loved the house, which was now only a sad reminder of its heyday, even though it had been two decades since *that incident that no one talks about* took place. In the initial years following Aunt Farideh's disappearance, Uncle Pari still had hope. He had tried to keep up appearances for as long as possible, thinking that when (and not *if*) the police found her and brought her back, she'd have a tidy home to come back to. Their lives would be pieced back together seamlessly as if nothing had happened. The needle would be set back to the start. Of course, that never came to pass, and now the house looked comatose, a creature sucked dry of the last dregs of its vitality.

She heard the furious waves crashing onto the shore, the sound echoing in the otherwise quiet summer evening. It lifted

her spirits. The tedium of the house and the shadows lurking on the walls mattered less than before.

Yeah, in any case, it's not like I have a choice.

The comfort of her mental chatter was interrupted by a knock, diffident at first, then louder. She lifted herself off the floor and walked to the door.

“Filip Uncle!” she cried, spotting him through the half-ajar door, hastening to open it.

Filip Castelino stood in front of her, his eyes squinting delightedly behind old-fashioned, round-rimmed glasses. Nothing had changed, Darya thought, looking at him, but it seemed like everything had. His face was the same uniform dark, smooth, and round, giving the impression of a polished walnut; small, narrow nose; thick, bushy gray eyebrows; tufts of gray hair on his head and peeking out of his ears; thin; loose limbs; jerky movements. The same but with more gray, more age, more... weighed down. Tired.

“*Koxem asa?*” he said, using Konkani to ask how she was. Searching her brain and to her surprise remembering, she replied, “*Boro.*” I’m well.

“Myna, my child, why didn’t you come to meet Aunty and me?”

He had called her that—*Myna*—little bird—ever since she, at six years old, asked him what the odd, bouncy, yellow-beaked bird was. *Myna, little, brown and black and cute like you*, he had said. They used to love her—the resident parents of Heliconia Lane. Their children were growing up and turning unruly and Darya agreed to be the obedient object of their affection. Every time she and her parents visited during her school’s summer break, the neighbours would swoop into Sea Swept with armfuls of chocolates, homemade treats, storybooks, and anything pink. The children loved her too. She was the city girl armed with city tales, and they spent hours listening to her stories and marvelling at her *swell* life.

Uh, look at me now.

She was going to turn twenty-nine in another month. It was time to start living up to those stories.

“Not a myna anymore, Uncle. See how tall I’ve become.” She raised her hand over her five foot eight-inch height to support her case.

“Still brown and frail and so thin,” he said, pulling the skin of her forearm. “Your mother doesn’t feed you or what? Zabel Aunty will fatten you up in a week.”

“I have a disease, Uncle, I forget to eat,” she said with mock seriousness on her face.

Filip laughed. “Wait till you eat what your aunty has made for you. Remember the *Kulkuls* you used to love?”

Darya nodded, then wondered if Filip wanted to come in. She didn’t remember if she’d asked him.

As if sensing her confusion, he said, “I’ve got to go. I told Zabel I was only going to see if you’ve arrived. She’s looking forward to seeing you. Things are not going so well... the last one-year...” He shuffled his feet and blinked, focusing on something behind her. “I am sorry that Pari passed away so soon. He was so young. Only forty-seven...”

“Forty-six,” Darya corrected automatically.

“Yes, so young, so young...” he shook his head. Looked despondent. “Zabel cried her eyes out for days.” He pronounced the Z in his wife’s name in a prolonged, lazy way; Darya had come to associate it with a kind of grudging affection.

“Are you cleaning up? Taking away his things?” he asked.

Darya said, “Yes, Pa asked me to.”

“Pity your father had a heart attack, that too right after the cremation. He was feeling sick before, he told me so. The news of his brother’s death must have added to the stress.”

Darya nodded. “Yeah, it was too much for him to take.”

“It must be difficult for you too,” Filip said.

The man Darya recognized as her uncle was long gone. He’d hardly kept in touch over the years, and she didn’t remember much about him. But she replied dutifully now, “It is, of course.”

“How many days are you going to be here?” Filip asked.

“One or two weeks,” Darya replied. “After I clean everything up, Pa said he’d take care of the house.”

“How?”

Darya shrugged. She had no clue.

Filip shuffled his feet again, a nervous tick that seemed to have developed in old age.

“Ask him to call me,” he said. “Best to have discussed when we met, but where was the time?” He paused. “How’s your mother?”

“Not so good. Missing me and complaining loads about it,” Darya said, pulling a face. The last few years had been especially tough with them moving back to Nagpur and Darya insisting she stay on in Mumbai. She wanted to follow her dreams, she told them. Five years had come to naught; she was not even close to achieving what she had set out to do, but she wasn’t about to confess it to them... or anyone. She hadn’t told them she’d broken up with Spandan, who they’d met a couple of times, or that she’d quit the job they imagined she was very good at.

No, she wasn’t going to talk about it to anyone, not even the man in front of her who was now scanning her face expectantly.

“Are you alright, Myna?” he asked. “Your eyes dropped like you were off to sleep.”

She smiled at him. “I’m fine, Uncle. It was a long drive and I haven’t slept well.”

“How did you come?”

“I hired a car to get here,” Darya said. Then clearing her throat, she added, “But I’m going to be driving the Djinn around Goa.”

Darya was amused to note that Filip reacted just as her father had—surprise followed by indignation. *No way, young lady*, her father had said, *that is no vehicle for a girl.*

But you taught me to drive that thing, Darya countered. *How am I to get around in Goa?*

Hire a car.

You know perfectly well we don't get only a car for hire. I'll need to hire a driver. Where will he stay? And you do know how much it will cost.

And so, the arguments went on. Her father could do nothing about it, she knew. These were only token protestations. She had found the Jeep's keys in the house and was going to drive that thing around, no matter what her father said.

The Djinn was the name given to the Mahindra Classic four-seater jeep that her father and uncle had purchased, one of each, way back in 1996 from a friend in the Indian army. Her father, Vikas, had a brown one and Paritosh owned one in green. The brothers had been passionate racing fans when young and drove reasonably well as adults. Vikas had hoped the vehicle would distract Paritosh from his other and less healthy obsession, and it did help for a while. Vikas himself used his own less often, teaching Darya to drive it instead. She took to it quite effortlessly, managing to turn quite a few heads on Mumbai roads. But when her father moved back to Nagpur, he took the jeep along with him, claiming he needed it for himself.

"But..." Filip started.

"It's okay, Uncle, I'll be fine," she cut in.

"Not so good for a young girl... that dangerous, big vehicle... you should be careful, get a smaller car. You can take ours." he said, looking worried. Darya softened, feeling a fondness for the old man.

"It only looks dangerous," she said. "Anyway, I drove Pa's for years. That too in a city like Mumbai."

Filip shook his head again, but less vehemently this time.

“Be careful,” he murmured. Then after a breath said, “Come to visit us soon.”

Darya nodded.

He continued, “Shout if you need help. Zabel has spondylitis, but these arms,” he raised his scrawny, weathered arms, “can still lift heavy dumbbells.”

She smiled. “You were always the strong one, Uncle. The guardian of the lane.”

He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again. With a soft sigh, he turned to leave.

Darya descended the steps along with him. When they reached the bottom step, he turned to her, adjusted the glasses on his nose, and murmured, “Constellation will be out on rent soon. Vidisha is turning it into a tourist cottage.”

Darya looked at him, surprised. “And you’re okay with that?”

He shrugged like he’d tried to prevent it for as long as he could but had now given up. Darya marvelled at how much he had changed—a far cry from the chirpy, energetic, almost crassly animated man she used to know. *Growing old sucks*, she thought, feeling gloomy. Her nearing thirty was a particular source of anxiety for her, being addressed to copiously by her current therapist. Unresolved yet.

“She promised to look carefully before she allowed anyone to stay,” Filip was saying. “Plus, how long can you prevent fate? What will happen will happen. See how Paritosh died. He had tried to fight this thing—this loneliness long enough, but finally it took its toll, no?” He turned to look at her, blinking behind his glasses with sad, rheumy eyes. “Find a man and marry soon. Don’t let this get to you as it got to Pari.”

“Uncle Pari was married,” Darya said resignedly.

Filip pointed a finger at her and said, “Myna, acting smartass like always.”

Darya decided to change the subject, as she was prone to do when this particular topic came up.

Luckily, she found a ready diversion.

“Who’s that?” she asked.

A harrowed-looking woman was pottering about in the neighbouring garden. She was all in yellow: yellow pantsuit, yellow stilettos, and yellow bangles. Her hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail accentuating an angular, pale face. A leather folder was tucked in the crook of one arm. She had been standing there for as long as Darya and Filip were talking, looking in their direction every now and then. One time, a few stray weeds caught her eye, and she bent to uproot them.

Filip replied, “Vidisha’s architect. She did the insides of the house. It’s looking nice now.”

“Interior designer, you mean?”

“*Hoi*, that. Speak to her. She’s from Mumbai too, your big, bad city,” he said. Then looking at Darya, he said again, his voice soft, almost pleading — “Come to visit us” — and scuffled out of the gate.

Once he was out of sight, merging into the line of palm trees and Heliconia bushes, Darya turned to face the woman who was now looking at her.

“Hi,” Darya called out.

“Hello,” she said, her voice deep and throaty. The woman seemed in her early forties, and as she came closer, Darya saw she had a nicely aging face only somewhat marred by thick laugh lines.

“It’s hot,” the woman complained. “I don’t know what people love about Goa and the sea.”

Darya resisted the urge to pass a rude comment on the pantsuit and pumps. Who in their right mind wears an outfit like that in Goa?

Aloud, she said, "I hear Vidisha hired you to do up her house?"

The woman placed the folder she was holding on the low fence separating Constellation and Sea Swept.

"Her husband's an old friend," she said.

"Is it?" Darya said. "Which firm do you work for?"

"I freelance," she replied. "Sorry, I would've given you my business card but I left them at the hotel."

"That's alright. Only curious," Darya said. "Are you staying at Panjim?"

"At the Red Tulip," she said. Then screwing up her eyes as if deeply troubled, she added, "Goa is such a crazy place. So busy and yet so slow. Never seen the two together quite like this. Waiters take a year to bring food. In fact, all service is slow. But the beaches are overcrowded. Even in the heat of May!"

"The south is peaceful," Darya murmured. "Valsolem is nice."

"I don't mind the crowds. I like water sports. But not for long. And this heat... *ufff*..." she wiped the back of her neck.

"Use an air conditioner. Or wear looser clothes," Darya said, feeling miffed by all the complaining.

Luckily for Darya, the woman seemed not to mind the barb. Or maybe she hadn't heard. Or understood.

"I don't come so often now," she said. "I came here today because the plumber said he'd come to check the faucets. There were some leaks last time." Then glancing at her watch in irritation, "It's been over an hour and he hasn't shown up."

"Call him," Darya suggested.

"Tried again and again. Damned idiot. Will have to take it out of his advance." She dialled a number on her phone. No one picked up.

Darya asked casually, “So, how’s Vidisha?”

The woman shrugged but did not answer. Stared at her phone in annoyance.

“Can I see what you’ve done to her place? The Salgaonkars had really let the place go, huh? Especially after Vidisha moved out and Gaurav, as you know...” Darya said and hoped the scowl on her face showed what she thought of him and whose side she was on.

But there was no response. The woman picked up her folder, shifted her feet, and glanced at her watch. Her eyes focused on the far distance as if she were deep in thought.

Weird woman.

Thinking she knew what the problem was, “Paritosh Nandkarni is my uncle. He used to stay in this house,” Darya said and jerked a thumb towards Sea Swept.

“Sad to die so young,” the woman murmured. Then training her eyes back on Darya, “My name is Bobby, by the way. Vidisha is coming to visit in a few days. She can take you around. I can’t do it, you know, without her permission.”

Darya had a hard time imagining the limp-haired, sad-eyed Vidisha being friends with the likes of Bobby. Darya remembered Vidisha as an erratic, moody girl prone to melodrama and exaggeration, a snitch, a cry-baby, whom the other kids, especially her brother Gaurav, teased to no end. She knew Vidisha had married well; her husband was an indulgent, rich simpleton with an uncanny sense of business. She lived in suburban Mumbai now, a large bungalow, two children, loving in-laws, parties, pujas, and the annual European holiday being among her many achievements.

And to imagine, Vidisha’s parents had once pointed to Darya and told Vidisha to *be like her*.

What would they say now?

Darya sighed. “How’s Vidisha?” she asked.

“The usual,” Bobby muttered. Darya got the impression she didn’t think much of her.

“When is she going to rent the house out?” Darya asked.

“It’s ready to be let out,” Bobby said. “I don’t know what her plans are.” Glancing at her watch, she said, “Can’t wait any longer. I’ve to go.”

“Back to Red Tulip or back to Mumbai?”

“Red Tulip and then Mumbai. I’ll need to be back again soon anyway.” Then with a cheerful —“See ya!”—she turned to leave.

“I’ll phone you to do up Sea Swept,” Darya shouted to her retreating back.

“Don’t count on it,” Bobby replied, waving her red-painted fingernails in the air.

Odd woman. Odder encounter.

Darya watched as Bobby got into a blue Toyota Corolla and sped away. Then as she walked back, she wondered if her father would be open to the idea of giving Sea Swept up on rent. If Vidisha could show her how Constellation looked now, and tell her how much she had spent and what plans she had for it... She hoped Vidisha no longer remembered their choppy childhood relationship, that there would be no awkwardness between them.

She stopped at the balcao and stared at her reflection in the window.

Oval face. Olive skin. Large, down-slanting eyes, a nose she’d always thought was too sharp for her face, a tumble of thick, black hair down to the waist, overgrown fringes on a narrow forehead. Every day, she looked more like the Roma Gypsy Spandan used to say she was. She needed to take better care of herself.

Sighing, she stepped inside the house. She was loath to resume her task. *How can a house by the sea be this depressing?*

Glancing up at the crumbling walls, she muttered to herself.
Precisely in this way.

The memory of her uncle had faded considerably since the last time they'd met... over twelve years ago. Recollections of her aunt was akin to a mangled reality which smacked of being high on dope. Darya wasn't sure how much of it was true, and how much of it had really happened. How old had she been? Eight? Nine? For over twenty years, Uncle Pari had lived in this frozen tomb, trying to preserve the memories of his wife inside.

Darya lowered herself and sat cross-legged on the floor. She had swept the room earlier in the day to avoid being bitten or climbed upon by suspicious creatures. Thank God she hadn't found any. Tomorrow, she was going to spend the day disposing off stuff. Try and bring a semblance of order to the mad-house.

Leaning over, she lifted a photo album to her lap; it was the only one she had found in the house. Wrapped in richly textured, brown velvet, two butterflies stuck to a corner of the front cover, one of whose wings were chipped. The pages inside were of soft black paper, bound together with string. There was one photo per page, placed inside corner mounts, the ends of a few beginning to curl.

She paused at the first page.

Words in Persian. Right to left. Cursive. Beautiful. Underneath, possibly, the paraphrase in English.

Darya read aloud:

*Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultán's Turret in a Noose of Light.*

While Darya made no claims to literary mastery, she knew that the lines were poignant. They held a deeper meaning. The

script suggested Aunt Farideh had penned them. In any case, her uncle was hardly the poetic kind.

Did her aunt make up these verses?

Darya wouldn't put it past her. She'd heard a lot about her aunt's abilities, especially from her Pa, more so when he was drunk.

Farideh Qumza... a creature of such beauty, poise, and intelligence... as if raising a toast to her. Surprisingly, it never made her Ma jealous.

If only they had found the body, it would have ended his pain, her father used to say. Knowing why and how she died, giving her a proper cremation... that would have made things easier for all of them. It was important to have closure, and no one knew it better than Darya. Since her aunt died twenty years ago, her family had lived under a cloud of doubt and grieving. It was as if a veil was wrapped around their beings, preventing any sort of real intimacy.

Darya remembered her aunt in the soft stepping of her feet on the marble floors, in the swish of her *kaftan*, in her lilting laughter ending in a soft gurgle, her gentle hand on Darya's head, the warm twinkle in her eyes.

Fading snapshots. Much like the photos in the album she held.

Darya turned the pages. Flapped away clouds of dust. A few photos slipped from their corner holds. She tucked them back in.

As Darya rummaged through the pictures, she lost track of time. Afternoon passed, dusk fell, but she didn't let go. The stories in each of those pictures seemed to her like living and breathing beings. They talked to her.

Her father and Uncle Paritosh holding a glass of wine in intertwined hands.

Farideh, her mother, and Zabel Aunty cooking in the Primavera kitchen. (How young and carefree Ma looked!)

Paritosh and Farideh smiling next to a newly purchased Onida TV. (Where was it, by the way?)

The three couples of Heliconia Lane gathered on the beach for a picnic and another one with them holding hands around a bonfire. (One of the kids must have taken these.)

Happy stories sprang up in her face, page after page.

Darya had expected to find more albums in the house; her father kept so many. And she hadn't found any with her or the children in it. It would've been nice to see snapshots of the summers she had spent here. She didn't remember half of it. She had been twelve years old when she visited last. Her uncle visited them in Mumbai after that, whenever he could or wanted to.

With some effort, she brought her mind back to the present, to the task at hand. She realized she needed to organize everything into folders and boxes and she would need to go to Panjim to buy them.

Her father's instructions came to her mind again.

"Be practical when you think about what you need to get back, not nostalgic." Nostalgia, according to her father, was the root of all human problems. *"Make new memories,"* he said. *"Anything in the past is dead. Rotten."*

Darya decided to give him an inventory of all the things. He could choose. It was a pity she had left her laptop behind; she could've mailed him. But then again, where was the Internet connection? Her mobile was connecting sporadically too, not that she minded that. She was ignoring all calls and texts anyway.

She stretched her feet on the floor, flattened her toes, hoping to shake the unease out of them.

Then she picked up a bunch of newspaper cut-outs. Counted eight of them. Began to read.

And as she read, her chest tightened.

As she'd suspected, they were reports of her aunt's disappearance in the days following the incident. The coverage had been sensational in the first two days, then trickled down to a hundred-word paragraph in the following months, tucked in the inside pages.

She read the first one that had appeared in *The Goa Times* along with a colour photo of Farideh's smiling face, cut out from a picture of the couple taken on their wedding day:

Woman disappears from Valsolem, feared kidnapped or drowned

By Harriet Gonzales

Published: 22 May 1989

The Panjim police are looking for a woman reported missing from her house at Valsolem. The disappearance was reported by her husband Paritosh Nandkarni, 26. The missing woman, Farideh Nandkarni, 23, was supposed to meet her husband and a group of friends for a birthday party at Evolucion, a shack recently opened up at the beach. When she did not show up even after the designated time, her husband went to look for her and found his house ransacked and wife missing. Her clothes, jewellery, and shoes were on the floor, indicating that a struggle had taken place. A source familiar with the matter said the police are registering a case of abduction.

"All evidence leads in the direction of kidnapping," the source told The Goa Times.

Farideh is an Iranian national who made India her home after marrying her husband. They met while studying in New Delhi. Her husband works in seafood sales and marketing. The couple lives at Heliconia Lane on the secluded Valsolem Beach.

"We are shocked and deeply saddened by the incident. We hope and pray the police are able to bring Farideh home. We ask for privacy as her family and friends go through this difficult time," her neighbour Filip Castelino said.

Two days later, another piece appeared in the *Goa Herald*:

Kidnapped woman now feared dead

By Vimal Waze

Published: 25 May 1989

The search continues for the missing Valsolem woman who disappeared from her house on the night of 22 May. The Panjim police have organized a nationwide search but are losing hope.

In a statement, the police said "We cannot rule out foul play in her disappearance. We are following up some leads. Divers are searching the sea for a body. Police dogs have sniffed around multiple areas... yet nothing has revealed any information about what happened to Mrs. Nandkarni."

"A few of her things were scattered on the beach," a source close to the police said. "It was high tide that day. She could have drowned."

Farideh's family and neighbours describe her as a kind and gentle soul who loved India and Goa. They are appealing to members of the public to come forward if they have seen or heard of something that may help with the case. Farideh is twenty-three years old and of very fair complexion. She is thin with long brown hair and light brown eyes. According to her family, she is 5-feet, 6-inches tall, and weighs approximately fifty kilograms. She has a tattoo in Persian of her husband's name, Paritosh, on her right forearm.

Darya scanned through the other cut-outs quickly. There were news articles of unidentified bodies washed up on the beach, abandoned in a hotel, found by the police or by tourists, but nothing mentioning her aunt specifically. Darya sighed, feeling pity for the man. Her uncle had kept up with his obsession for years after the death of his wife.

Nostalgia and hope, those were mankind's problems.

Wait—

What was that?

A soft scrape. A snap.

The hair on the back of her neck rose. Goosebumps broke out on her skin.

She'd heard something. A noise. Out of place.

She held her breath. Put the papers on the floor. Looked around.

Nothing.

Somewhere, in the margins of her consciousness, she heard the sound of the sea... the waves lapping against the shore... then... the sleepy whirr of the ceiling fan above. She noted that the yellow bulb made the room look dull and wet, like phlegm.

Nothing seemed to have changed. It was the same as before...

...yet, she felt it in her bones... something was not quite right.

Someone was there.

She turned her neck to scan the door. Nothing. The windows were closed. All but one. She turned to it. Behind the four-poster bed.

Heliconia Lane stretched at the back of it like an indolent masterpiece. Dark silhouettes of the neighbouring houses alternating with streetlamps that threw yellow puddles on the street.

She waited. And listened. Heard her breath accelerate. Rise and fall.

Nothing. No one.

She tried to shrug it off, but couldn't. The air around her felt stagnant.

Why was her heart thudding so hard? She'd heard something, but what?

She got down on all fours and crept closer to the window behind the bed.

Froze.

She saw the chequered balaclava first. Then the pair of eyes over it. Bloodshot and narrow. Staring back at her.

Darya gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth.

What... who is that?

What the hell!

The face ducked.

She scrambled to the window and shouted, "Hey!" Heard the sound of feet scurrying over grass. "Hey! Stop!" Darya shouted. Leaned out.

A loose blue *ganji* flapped in the wind over a workman's beige trousers as the man slipped past the main gate and sprinted down the street. He was tall and lithe and seemed to skip rather than run. He stumbled once but otherwise looked like he knew his way around.

Pushing open the front door, she dashed out after him. Ran outside into the garden, towards the front gate.

But... where was he? He had just run out. How far could he have gone?

But she was staring down at an empty road.

Some rustling. Then silence.

What the...

Had she imagined it? Who... where was he?

Nothing stirred in front of her. No creepers. No trees.

The three streetlights gazed down at her like sentinels.

Had there really been someone? Had she really seen a man? Her mind in overdrive and her breathing ragged, Darya tried to think.

Who was that man? A thief? A tourist?

The possibilities were too frightening for her to even contemplate. She wished she had taken care to latch the front door and shut the windows. Not that the man had come inside, but he could have!

Darya had always known Heliconia Lane to be one of the safest places in the whole state—wasn't that what Filip Uncle said? But he was growing old and was retired now, and Goa wasn't the same as it used to be.

She would have to be careful from now on and perhaps talk to Filip Uncle about getting some security for the lane. There had been too many casualties already.