‘A book for our times – a reminder that respect for women starts at home.’
PIP WILLIAMS

GOOD INDIAN DAUGHTER

How I found freedom in being a disappointment

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This book is a memoir. It reflects my present recollections of experiences over time. Pseudonyms have been used and some characteristics have been altered to protect the identity and privacy of people mentioned in the book. Some events have been compressed and some dialogue has been recreated. While every effort has been made to recall past events accurately, the memories contained within this book are my own and may differ from those of others.

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Just desserts

To be pregnant is to become accustomed to search parties in your vagina. First it's the sperm gunning for its Fabergé egg, each swimmer as lustful and single-minded as Matthew McConaughey on a treasure hunt. Then it's the transducer probe assaulting your innards during an ultrasound.

I had my first extensive ultrasound on a Monday morning a couple of months after I'd turned twenty-seven. 'Do you seriously not care if it's a boy or a girl?' I asked Jake (the husband of English, Irish, Welsh and definitely not Indian descent – oops! – who I chose against my parents' wishes) in the moments just before our appointment.

'Nope. Happy with either.'

'Yeah, me too.' I feigned cheerfulness.

In the hospital's vast foyer, sunlight shone through generous skylights, some bouncing off the smooth grey walls, some being absorbed by the lush indoor greenery around us.

'Okay, for real now. You're not leaning more toward one gender than the other?' I asked again.

'Alright, yes, but only by the slightest fraction. Don't go making a big deal of it.'

'Yes, yes, yes! I won't! Tell me!'

'As you know, I'll be happy with either. But I sort of imagined myself more with a girl, at least for the first child.'

'Oh?' I had not expected that.

'I guess because I don't see myself as a camping or fishing dad. I'm not sure I'd be great at the activities that boys typically expect their dads to do.'

'You didn't expect your dad to do those things.'

'True.'

'Besides, who cares about that? If we have a boy who's into those things, we can just teach ourselves along the way. And he might end up liking baking and reading as much as we do! Regardless, I think you'll be an awesome dad whether we have a boy or a girl.'

'Thank you. What about you?'

'So … I'd be grateful for either a boy or a girl too,' I began, already guilty and aware that this conversation was a luxury in the unpredictable land of the pregnant. 'But I don't think I would be as good a mum to a little girl.'

'Why not?' Jake's brow furrowed.

'Because!' I couldn't put my finger on it. 'So, listen. I have a confession to make before we go in.'

'Yes?'

I blurted it out at breakneck speed: 'You know how I didn't bring the heater into the room where we 'made the baby'? Well,

this stupid website – and you know I don't believe in these scientifically unproven methods but I had to try – this website said that if we kept our bodies cold, we could increase our chances of conceiving a boy. And I know it's ridiculous! Because another website said that doing exactly those things would result in a girl. I just went with the site that was more visually appealing. Anyway, I feel like an idiot and I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Okay?!'

Jake burst into laughter.

'Ruhi?' the sonographer called. It was time to find out if the pretty website was right.

It was proving difficult for the sonographer to locate the private parts of the blob inside me. According to my pregnancy tracker app, my baby, now at nineteen weeks, was the size of a mango and was developing his or her five senses as well as the ability to suck and swallow. The app warned me to expect more changes on my end too, including abdominal aches and pains, dizziness or lightheadedness, leg cramps and maybe even hip pain. Wonderful.

What the app *didn't* tell me was that my brain would start to process my surroundings in terms of food. Looking around at the equipment in the room set off a craving for sweets; the computer and ultrasound machine resembled a tower of marshmallows, while the examination couch reminded me of a creamy glazed entremet. (Can you tell I'd been watching *The Great British Bake Off*?) The downlights created soft, golden circles on the carpet like

slices of candied orange on dark chocolate cake. Beside me, sitting on a caramel fudge chair, Jake was tilting his head, studying the screen to make out his offspring's body parts. The dim lighting made his stormy blue eyes look grey. He was the first and only person I'd known who believed clouds, rain, hail and lightning were as beautiful as clear skies. Perhaps this was what made him so perfect for me.

It took forever to find out the sex of our baby. At this moment, I was blissfully unaware that this would only be the first of a whole pregnancy-worth of failed jelly-on-the-belly scans. Each time, our hermit baby would turn away from the transducer, no matter how much I leaned to the left or right, until the sonographer gave up and switched to an even more inelegant vaginal ultrasound. I shouldn't have been surprised; Jake and I were reserved too. We were staunch homebodies – recluses, even. So, as his or her mother, it was my duty to dack myself, spread my legs and wear the guilt of an entire bottle of ultrasound gel emptied on and inside my body.

The sonographer probed deeper, causing me to dig my heels into the vinyl examination couch and involuntarily push myself upward.

'See these three lines on the screen here?' she asked.

'Yeah,' I replied.

'They're suggestive of a little girl.'

'Really?'

'Just roll away from me one more time. Let's see if we can turn bubs over so we can see *her* heart.'

'So, it's definitely a girl?'

'Well, as definite as I can be.'

'Oh. Cool.'

The obstetrician passed me some tissues – nowhere near enough – to mop up the ultrasound gel on my belly and in my crotch. Instead of receiving the news with joy, some deep-down part of me recoiled at the word the obstetrician had cooed: *girl*.

As I emptied the tissue box, I glanced over at Jake, who was smiling.

A few nights before, we had played Monopoly. Unfortunately for Jake, I acquired the lucrative yellow, green and blue properties and promptly built hotels on them. I used a phrase from family Monopoly games in my childhood to gleefully trash-talk him: 'You're going to sut your kundi!' A mix of Kannada and English, it meant: 'You're going to burn your bum.' In other words, 'This is going to hurt.'

Jake burned his bum *a lot*, and even though he collected $200 every time he passed GO he lost too much money to recover. Shuffling his cards and paper bills into a pile, ready to pack up, he said, 'There's no coming back from this. You win.' Having jeered at each other down to the last moment, I was overcome with childish pity and I refused to let him formally concede defeat.

'No, no, no! Hold on, let's mortgage your properties and see if that helps!'

'Doesn't matter, I'm still going to lose.'

'No, you won't! I'm making a donation to you. Here!' I said in all seriousness.

'Babe! It's okay! It's just a game!'

'No! I have to go to the toilet now and before I do I am going to bequeath all of my fortune to you. Now we both win.'

The emotion that came with giving my wealth away to be able to see Jake 'win', contrived as his triumph was, revisited me in the ultrasound room. I tried to stop the callous thoughts that followed. *Having a daughter is not a matter of losing or drawing!* I told myself, appalled by my gut reaction. *Oh God, can she hear me?* I knew my baby couldn't perceive my thoughts, but could she feel my cortisol levels rising? *Hello?* I called out telepathically. *Just in case I'm wrong and you can, in fact, hear my thoughts, I want you to know that I'm not stressed because of you. It's not that I won't love you or I don't want you. I am just so afraid of messing up your life.*

I tried to focus on Jake, who was grinning at the thought of fathering a girl, and open myself up to the idea. I knew it shouldn't matter if my baby was a boy or a girl – or both or neither, though I'd barely paused to consider that possibility. But I couldn't ignore the feeling of a stalactite protruding from the bottom of my throat downward into the centre of my being, precariously suspended above my baby. Clearing my throat, I directed my awareness back to the obstetrician.

As far as she could tell, the baby looked healthy, so we were to come back in a few months for the next major ultrasound. I thanked her and excused myself. Then I turned to Jake. 'I have to go to the toilet now. Meet you in the foyer?'

'No worries. Take your time,' he said.

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Dharwad

A month before the ultrasound, Jake and I had braced ourselves at our dining table.

'What the ...WHAT?' Maya stood up with such force that she almost knocked her chair over. Tears spilled down her face as she backed up against the wall. 'Guys, don't lie to me. Guys, I swear! If you're playing a joke it's not funny!'

Jake and I just laughed.

'Stop it! You know I'm gullible!'

'Nah, it's true, we're having a baby' Jake said.

I gave my overwhelmed baby sister – twenty-one at the time – a cuddle and because she was slightly shorter than me, I patted the top of her head. Her lustrous satin hair was like our mother's. I, on the other hand, had inherited our father's dense, wavy locks along with most of his physical features: 'mund moog' – blunt nose – as Ma called it, fleshy lips and rounded eyebrows framing big, circular eyes on an almost perfectly spherical head. Everything as round as round could be. He was Jupiter and I, Ganymede.

In contrast, Ma's sharper, more delicate features made her a more eligible candidate for the crown of Indian femininity than me. Maya had all of our mother's daintiness, from actual edges on her face down to her narrow feet: the whole shebang except for Ma's aquiline nose – a fact that Ma and her sisters openly teased Pa about. One thing the four of us did have in common was our smallness, and we all overcompensated for it in some way. Our tiny Ma spoke with volume and gusto that defied the laws of physics. Though I stopped growing upward in Year 6, my unrealistic daydreams unfurled hundreds of kilometres in every direction and kept going, much to the chagrin of my super-pragmatic father. Pa bore cultural and familial burdens as a son, son-in-law, older brother, husband and father that his shoulders and certainly his heart were not equipped to carry. And Maya was in a permanent state of emotional overflow: a waterfall throwing out rainbows, Disney music, smiles and happiness. 'Maya has a wet face again,' we'd always joke, because she processed every emotion through her tear ducts. Sad? Cry. Happy? Cry. Ma and Pa called Maya their 'delicate darling', and though they told her to harden up at times, we all admired the extravagance of her empathy.

'When are we telling Ma and Pa you're preggers?' Maya asked, once the waterworks had somewhat subsided and she was capable of coherent speech again.

'Eventually …' I said. 'You know what it's like. We can't tell Pa and ask him to keep it a secret from Ma. And when Ma knows, all of Melbourne and Dharwad will know in a matter of hours.'

I'd travelled to India throughout my childhood and into my mid-twenties – through Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala – but by the time I was pregnant, it had been more than a decade since I'd set foot in the town where I was born, Dharwad; the town where I spent my first year of life before emigrating to Melbourne.

To my child self, Dharwad was a whimsical, bustling place of dirt roads, sinewy trees, bright bougainvilleas and colourful houses. Paan wallas, coconut wallas and ice-cream wallas were beacons of refreshment amid the ceaseless, turgid flow of people, scooters, motorbikes, trucks and auto-rickshaws. Women strolled around in vibrant cotton and silk chudidhars and sarees, often with sweet-scented jasmine in their hair. Every morning and afternoon, a flurry of students, all in white shirts, spilled out onto the roads like the wind had blown thousands of dandelion parachutes into the air.

During my school holidays at the end of 1998, before I started Year 4, my family left Melbourne summer behind for an Indian winter – hardly an adjustment – and made our way to Ajji's bungalow in Dharwad. Every few years, my grandmother's home became the epicentre to which her children and grandchildren returned from all over the world – a change that was all the more welcome after my Ajja passed away.

My favourite part of Ajji's place was the indoor courtyard, around which the rest of the house was built. Overhead was a vast light well that let fresh air and sunlight in from the terrace.

My parents once recorded me dancing to *Muqabala* under the light well on a sweltering day, wearing nothing but my chuddie. Other recordings catch me harassing Ricky the cat, coddling her to near-death, hoping that my blithe rendition of 'There were Ten in the Bed' would ease her distress. When I wasn't choking the shit out of poor Ricky, I ran up and down the cement staircase that wrapped around the outside of the house with Maya and our cousins. The terrace overlooked a floral part of the town among churches, hospitals and schools. Up there, we made up games in the company of Ajji's palm tree, whose coconut water we enjoyed from time to time before drifting along swells of heat toward our next adventure in the humidity.

During the holidays, the sleepy kitchen below us transformed into a heaving food-manufacturing plant, churning out fresh snacks and meals at all hours for the children and husbands of Ajji's three daughters.

After two long flights between Melbourne and Mumbai, my body greeted the hot, rich air of India like an old friend. It was a physical sense of recognition: of my boundaries – the very pores of my skin – opening to absorb the world around me. That feeling was rare during my childhood in Melbourne, but about fifteen degrees north of the equator, just under the Tropic of Cancer, it was as though my spirit heaved a sigh of repose. *Ah. I was born here.* Exiting the airport's customs area was always a nerve-wracking exercise. I kept my head down and pretended not to see or hear my squealing aunties, Helen and Sybil. But when I finally stood in front of them, my heart would somersault as the

welcoming ceremony began with much hugging, cheek-squeezing and repeated exclamations of 'Ayo! I missed you *so* much!'

My aunties lived with their in-laws in Maharashtra, slightly north of Karnataka. So it made sense for our family of four to fly to Mumbai instead of Bengaluru, then hire a van with Helen, Sybil and their three kids for a riotous Dharwad-bound road trip. Most importantly, Ma wanted to inject her biennial stimulus package into Mumbai's retail economy before she faced the more limited shopping options in Dharwad (not that this stopped her from going shopping almost every single day in Dharwad).

Ma dropped off her bags at the hotel and made a beeline to the shops, where she left a trail of freshly exchanged rupees at the clothing, homewares and jewellery stores in her wake. Everything was so much cheaper in India. Ma's affinity for gold was the bane of my existence and I'd be climbing the velvet walls of her favourite jewellery stores while she admired the goods. Meanwhile my aunties, though weary from travelling, remained ebullient. They were more content to bask in their indomitable eldest sister's rare presence than in the glow of the yellow metal she hungered for.

The saree boutiques were a different story: nowhere else could I lounge on a daybed with my aunties and mum, *in a shop,* with a fan blowing in my face. As we reclined, our own personal customer service assistant unfurled resplendent sarees before us, one by one, as selected by the women. Sometimes I was allowed to choose ghagras if they stocked children's sizes. Us kids followed Ma around, buoyed by bribes of Pepsi, Limca, Amla Supari and Alpenliebe toffees. Only when she was satisfied with

her purchases (and the rest of us were dying from exhaustion) could we embark on our journey to Ajji's kingdom of chapatis, chucklies, ladoos and karchikais in Dharwad.

Ajji's house never got old – literally. In the same way that the human body replaces most of its cells every seven to fifteen years, her bungalow underwent a thorough rejuvenation whenever her descendants were due home. She hired tradies to give the whole interior *and* facade, including the decorative iron bars on the windows, a fresh coat of paint. She even had the living area retiled several times. The most vocal dissident to Ajji's renovations was Ma, despite the fact she was the only daughter to have inherited Ajji's ability to make money combust as soon as she touched it. 'MOMMY! You don't need to change the house every time we come back to Dharwad! Stop wasting your pension money!' They'd shout and argue until Ajji wanted to commit arson on her own property for all the wasted effort. Even when my pugnacious family wasn't yelling in disagreement, they yelled because it was their standard means of communication.

Evening was the only time of day when the yawping quietened down, the women's eyes glued to the television in the corner of the sunken lounge. On those balmy nights the warm breeze floated in through the open doors, windows and light well. The grown-ups would recline after a day of feverish shopping before or after visits to family and friends, their brains melting into the TV. Whenever Helen Aunty's husband, Manoj Uncle, took a break from running the interstate family business to join us in Dharwad, he was in charge of preparing paan for the adults. If Uncle hadn't picked up

some from a paan walla while on his daytime errands, he would make them himself. He once explained to me that paan was the Indian equivalent of an after-dinner mint. That night I followed him into Ajji's kitchen and watched him lay out a betel leaf and slaked lime on top, followed by a sprinkling of spices, areca nuts and a spoonful of candied rose petals. He made one for me too. I declined but he insisted. He was a kindred shouty spirit to my mother, able to overpower others with sheer vocal volume.

'Try! Just try, Ruhi! If you don't like, then, okay! But you must try!' To someone unaccustomed to eating paan, doing so felt like biting down on sweet and spicy glass shards wrapped in a leaf. I spat it out immediately and hyperventilated over my bleeding mouth. Turns out, areca nuts will challenge your teeth to a duel to the death and slaked lime just turns your spit red.

My cousins and I played on the floor among the adults, who sat around us like a caravan of camels, chewing paan for what seemed like an eternity. At the risk of setting off the cacophony again or having something thrown at us, we smugly pointed out the plot holes and implausibility of their TV series, especially with Ajji's favourite, *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. Afterward, we hung up Christmas decorations as carols played in the background. We would eat dinner at around nine o'clock and we got used to late nights. It was a bummer going to bed after all the fun with my cousins, but even sleep was eventful. Sometimes all the grandchildren crowded into Ajji's huge bedroom for a slumber party, at the cost of enduring her snoring, which sounded like an oversized bee stuck inside a dagga.

Ajji woke up at 5am sharp daily, while it was still dark. Before she ate or did anything else, she lit her kerosene lantern and read her Bible at the dining table. Then, she lowered herself to the floor, onto her knees and forearms. With her hands in prayer and her head bowed, she fervently presented to God her list of needs, which covered every one of her relatives' lists of needs too. With a family as populous as ours, it's no wonder she regularly ran out of breath as she prayed.

Ajji was a boulder of a woman – even more so when she was curled up on the floor. Her exterior had hardened over her years spent with an alcoholic, violent father, then with a psychologically and verbally abusive mother-in-law whom Ajji cared for in her own home until my great-grandmother died in her nineties. Though Ajji was rock-hard to everyone else, she was more like crème brûlée to her grandchildren; we could crack through her thin, burnt-sugar skin and inside was sweet, milky custard.

The walls in the section of the house where Ajji would pray were painted two colours: the bottom half was cornflower-blue and the top mauve – just like Ajji was one colour when in a submissive prayer position on the floor and another when she was upright, ready to face the day as a powerful matriarch. I couldn't always wake up in time to join Ajji for her morning prayers but I felt deeply accomplished whenever I did, as though I'd fulfilled an important duty as her eldest granddaughter. Enduring the cold of the newly installed tiles next to her became my offering, after the decades of dark mornings she had spent interceding for us. Soon, the first rays of dawn streamed in through the light well. In

the morning air, flavours from Ajji's cooking the day before mixed with the aromas of deep-fried street food, coffee, spices and, at times, cows passing by. When I was with Ajji, she wrapped up with a short, simple prayer that I could repeat after her in Kannada. *God, please bless my family. Keep us safe. Give us good health. Help me obey my mother and father and help me with my studies.* Amen was said. Ajji stood up and the day commenced.

The milkman would arrive shortly afterward, handing out one-litre sachets of fresh milk. Ajji would purchase seven to ten, depending on whether her sons-in-law were staying as well. She'd instruct me to cut open the sachets and empty them into a huge cauldron-like pot, ready to transform into fragrant masala chai. She threw in the tea leaves, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves and unbelievable amounts of sugar. She then made preparations for breakfast, whether we were having Bombay toast, Anda Boorji, Uppit Sheera or Idli Sambar. Her servants would soon arrive, ready to mop the floors, make the beds and help her with the rest of the day's cooking.

'Ajji, isn't it bad to have servants? Like slaves?' I once queried.

'No, Ruhi, they are not slaves. They are workers. Poor ladies. When they come and work, I give them money and they can send their children to school.'

I was relieved: I knew Ajji was a benevolent person who usually wouldn't take advantage of others. Although, I never did ask her how much she paid them. And I didn't appreciate the way they weren't allowed to sit on any of Ajji's furniture, instead forced to relax only on the kitchen floor or outdoors

during lunch breaks. Whenever I questioned the inequality, I was reminded about how the servants in Ajji's house worked in vastly better conditions than those in other homes, where they were most likely abused. 'God knows how they treat those poor ladies, worse than animals!' Still, the way my family saw Ajji's servants and spoke to them was disconcerting – ordering them around as if they were lesser and undeserving of the same dignity a privileged little 'foreigner'* kid, like myself, enjoyed. I noticed India's hierarchies within hierarchies. Even those of us in Ajji's Protestant middle-class household, precariously exempt from India's violent caste system as part of the vastly outnumbered Christian community, enjoyed social superiority because of the servants who worked there.

Once the servants were deployed on the day's to-do lists, Ajji would fire up the stove while the rest of the household remained in a fog of slumber. I could hear the Islamic morning prayers in the distance. I found it comforting to listen to their graceful chanting as it floated over the morning birdsong and the growl of hefty trucks on the nearby highway. I had no clue where it was coming from or how they projected the sound but I liked to imagine a Muslim man at the top of a minaret, singing into a loudspeaker, serenading all of Dharwad during Fajr Namaz. Other family members didn't appreciate the songs of worship as much as I did. But if someone had asked Ajji to get up into a tower and sing her heart out to Jesus at five o'clock in the morning, she would have

* Family and friends who lived in India often jokingly referred to Maya and me as 'foreigners'.

snatched up the opportunity and the whole family would have supported her. In our home, an unabashed intolerance – subtle in the presence of 'outsiders' – of other belief systems coloured our worldview, even though in some ways we *were* a microcosm of the religiopolitical tensions in our country.

Ajji and Ajja were staunch Protestants and had raised their children accordingly. Oh to be a fly on the wall when my brave Lingayat father waltzed in demanding their precious daughter's hand in marriage. Okay, he didn't demand. He requested. I knew this because, when I wasn't cooking with Ajji or playing with my cousins, I followed Helen Aunty and Sybil Aunty around, asking them all of my unanswered questions about the famous story of my parents' union in a time when 'love marriages' were even more taboo than they would be when I reached my twenties. I was drip-fed small details over time, like how Ma was eighteen and Pa was twenty-two when they first met in Dharwad. How Pa wrote romantic letters to Ma and she went to a secret location to pick up his phone calls every Friday from Germany, Saudi Arabia or wherever he was working at the time. My chest puffed up every time I heard stories about my once idealistic parents, fighting to preserve their love in the face of adversity. But as much as I relished the sagas of their amorous youth, even as a young child, I'd wonder how and when the plug was pulled to drain out all of the affection. Given that I was so often the topic of their arguments, I felt responsible for reversing the damage and helping them restore their marriage to its original glory. I often took it upon myself to plead with each of them to speak to one another again after hours or days of silence. As I got older,

my role was expanded to include mediation and adjudication when either wanted an ally. And I was too afraid to find out what would happen if I didn't take the initiative to 'fix things'.

My aunties told me that after much ado, my parents defied distance and courtship traditions to finally marry. But not before a bloodbath of egos. It began when Pa moved away from his family in Hidkal Dam to Dharwad for further studies after Year 10. He'd hoped to become an engineer but he and his family were unable to fund his dreams of a university education. So he settled for a trade: toolmaking. Still, wherever he went to school, he was a top-ranked student who skipped entire year levels. He eventually joined the teaching staff at the college he graduated from, which stood opposite the primary school where Ma was a teacher. One day, he caught sight of the beauty that was Ma, a peacock among pigeons as far as he was concerned.

In Dharwad, everybody knew everybody. Ajji was a headmistress at another local school and she'd heard of Pa's academic excellence – and his elegant penmanship, which saw her recruit him as a scribe in her home. Unbeknownst to Ajji, Pa was checking out her eldest daughter between sentences. He and Ma met in secret and got to know each other when Ajji and Ajja weren't around. Time passed and Pa worked up the confidence to tell Ma that he loved her and wished to marry her. After some initial trepidation, she decided she felt the same way and was all in.

When Ma and Pa confessed their feelings for each other to Ajji and Ajja, my grandparents mowed down each fresh, green blade of hope my parents had for their life together right down to

the dirt. Though my dad was fit to work for my Ajji, he was not fit to marry her daughter, not with his lower-class, non-Christian background. Ajja, an influential man with friends in high places – for example, the board of my father's college – threatened to have Pa thrown out of work. It mustn't have helped that Ajja's rifle hung on the wall behind him when he ordered Pa to leave his daughter alone.

When Pa accepted that he couldn't realise his dream to marry Ma without unthinkable collateral damage to both families, he told her to move on and forget him. He wanted their relationship to work, but it was too risky in a society so viciously hostile toward not only 'love marriages', but also to interfaith and inter-class marriages. If he dragged his family's honour through the dirt, he risked jeopardising his younger sisters' eligibility to marry into 'good' families. If Pa eloped with Ma against her parents' wishes, they may have disowned her, which he didn't want either. Ma's sisters would end up in the same predicament as his; once a family's name was tarnished, the only thing that could make it shiny again was status and wealth – things neither family possessed, especially Pa's much poorer side.

Ajji was merciless, pushing Ma to just *pick* a suitable guy (read: Christian, reasonably affluent) and marry him. Ajji and Ajja brought Ma proposals from several suitors, all dismal compared to Pa. Ma refused to bow down. Then one day, a divorcé ten years older than Ma had the opportunity to meet her. When asked what he thought of her, he said, to her face, that she was 'okay but a little too short' for his liking.

Ma fulminated. She had been teased for her compact stature in the schoolyard. She wasn't going to marry someone who judged her for her height like a primary schooler. She told Ajja and Ajji that if they wanted her to get married at all, they'd have to let her pick the skinny Lingayat dude in bell-bottoms who did Ajji's writing for her.

Ajji and Ajja had hoped she'd fall into line, like a good Indian daughter was expected to do. Ma, on the other hand, had calculated that keeping the peace in those moments wasn't worth the lifetime of regret she'd face if she let go of Pa. Ajji and Ajja reluctantly ceded, knowing that an unmarried first daughter reflected worse on their family than one married to an undesirable man. Their caveat? Pa was to be baptised before marrying their daughter in a traditional Protestant ceremony at their church. Looking at their wedding photos, I could detect the artificial joy on Ajji and Ajja's defeated faces. As for my parents, they hid the fireworks going off inside them from the cameras – Pa in his soft-grey suit and Ma in her elegant lavender and silver reshmi saree, thick floral garlands weighing on their chests and around their necks. They weren't about to flaunt their glee and rub their salty victory into Ajja and Ajji's wounded pride. On the next page in the album, my parents' limbs were looser and their facial muscles more relaxed in photos of their honeymoon in the hill station of Ooty, safely folded within rows and rows of burgeoning tea leaves, away from their parents.

My paternal grandparents knew nothing of their son finding himself a wife. They continued with business as usual in a faraway

village. Pa intended to keep it that way until he'd fulfilled his responsibility to get his younger siblings educated and married. All that my paternal Ajji and Ajja knew was that Pa was earning money from his job and sending most of it back home to support the family. They had no idea just *how* productive their son was, especially on his honeymoon. For exactly nine months and nine days later, I arrived. And Pa's parents were clueless about their new grandkid on the block for several years.

Pa didn't like to talk about his choice to keep me a secret from his parents, or how they found out long after we'd left for Australia. My aunties had made it sound like Pa's parents had accepted my existence without a problem when they inevitably did find out. That may well have been the case: Pa was the fifth child in a litter of nine – surely no one was still counting grandchildren on his side of the family at that point. Still, I found it difficult to believe that their reaction was naught but a smile and nod.

Helen Aunty and Sybil Aunty could only tell me these exciting stories when Pa wasn't around to hush them or change the subject – when he'd dropped us off in Dharwad and set off to make the rounds to branches of his extended family without us. (I supposed he was concerned about us kids not being able to cope with the extensive travel across potholed dirt roads, especially since a slight bump was all it took for young Maya to vomit her guts out).

On one trip to Dharwad, when I was eight years old, I became obsessed with Indian money. I figured: if one Australian dollar was equivalent to thirty Indian rupees, I was rich in this country. I pestered my parents for a few rupees for trips to the

milk bar or the ice-cream parlour across from Ajji's house. When they gave me a few coins here and there, I devoutly placed them in a small brown leather zip-pouch Ajja had given me when he was still alive.

Early one morning, I was woken by Pa. I opened my eyes to find him kneeling beside the bed, his silhouette fuzzy in the dark. He whispered goodbye to me and I asked a final time, 'Pa, can you please stay, or at least take me with you?' I felt safer and calmer when he was around in Dharwad; after Ajja's death – and given that I wasn't close with my aunty's husbands – Pa being 'the man of the house' provided a sense of security in this place where women were believed to be in need of male protectors. He shook his head, saying it would be best for me to stay there and look after Ma and Maya. He told me he'd return in a few weeks and that I could speak to him over the phone in the meantime. He then handed me a roll of notes amounting to five hundred rupees and told me I could spend it however I wanted, but to do so wisely. Then he stood up, turned and left. I squeezed his gift in my palm. My sleepy eyes welled up with tears and my heart with gratitude. It was an infinitesimal point in time when the chasm between us closed. Though I soon grew out of my rupee-collecting hobby, it was one of those rare times my father gifted me something I wanted, rather than something he thought was best for me. And it would be a long time before I would ever unpack my feelings around this, because I was supposed to be grateful that I had a father who gave me gifts in the first place or had a father at all.

As soon as I got out of bed, I stowed the wad of notes in my pouch and continued to take my money requests to Ajji, as I was unwilling to cut into my new stash and knew she would cave in a matter of seconds. She was thrilled to drop her poo change into my greedy little hands and I was ready to make it rain on our next escapade to the shops.

The auto-rickshaw stand was at the base of the sloping road that Ajji lived on. Autos were parked in a single file like a line of gleaming black-and-yellow bumblebees. Whenever we made our way to the stand, the drivers addressed me first because I ran ahead of the pack, secreting gullible-little-foreigner pheromones. One time, when we set out on a family excursion to the movies, I rushed down to the rickshaw stand. The driver parked at the front spotted me and hollered in Kannada, 'Yelle honti?!' *Where to?!*

'Lakshmi Talkies!' I shouted over the frenzy of the adjacent highway, as the wheels of passing vehicles catapulted chalky dirt into the air.

'Okay, hop in!'

'How much?' I asked, by way of imitating the grown-ups and not because I actually cared.

'One twenty rupai!'

'Okay! Thank you!' I spun around to the adults waddling down the hill and waved at them to hurry up. 'Ma! I got us an auto!' I called, chuffed with myself and ready to jump in.

'Wait!' Ma yelled back. 'How much?!'

'He said one hundred and twenty!'

She caught up and pierced the driver with an icy look. 'Make it fifty.' Embarrassed by her preposterous attempt at negotiation, my smile dropped. The man needed to fuel his vehicle and feed his family. He wasn't handing out free balloons.

'Sorry, madam, nobody will take you for fifty. Make it one hundred.'

I squeezed her arm and muttered, 'Ma! It's just three bucks. Give it to him!'

'Fifty or we'll take another auto.'

'Please, madam! Okay, eighty!'

'*Eighty?* Goodbye.' The woman was ruthless.

'OKAY, MADAM, OKAY! FIFTY!' he cried after her as she turned her back.

Ma nodded at the rest of us. It was okay to board.

Seven of us – three adults and four kids – piled into the petite vehicle designed to transport two adults at a time. It was exhilarating to ride around in doorless autos on treacherous Indian roads, exposed to the open, dusty air. They zipped and darted between the roaring, colourful freight trucks that snailed along the highways, painted like Chinese dragons and adorned with tinsel. When at first I was not used to autos, each ride felt like a near-death experience; indicators were optional, speed limits were only a guide and traffic signals were mostly decorative. And every time we disembarked, the grown-ups made fun of me for thanking the drivers so profusely as compensation for my mother's bartering.

Going to the movies in Dharwad back in the nineties was pandemonium. I'd forgotten that the enormous theatres at

Lakshmi Talkies were built to accommodate hordes of fans. All of them were as keen as my mother to see their favourite Bollywood star with a six-pack – shirtless, oiled and glistening – open his arms wide to welcome the next big actress into his sexy embrace as fake wind, rain and smoke machines raged around them. No wonder my parents thought the standard Village and Hoyts cinemas in Melbourne were puny. From the back, drunkards catcalled and smashed their glass bottles against the concrete steps whenever the female lead showed some skin while dancing. As they carried on, audience members in the front and middle rows would yell back at them to shut up. Subtitles didn't just bridge the language gaps for me; they meant I could follow the plot over the disturbances of a highly participative audience.

At the conclusion of every film at Lakshmi Talkies, the jostling began. Like an enormous shoal of tuna, the crowd stood up and swam toward the doorway in unison. Unless there was a male family member with us, we made our way to and from our seats huddled together, kids in the middle of the circle guarded by our mums. At times like these I especially missed Pa. Ma, however, loved reliving her teen years – albeit with a couple of dependents in tow – with weekly visits to the talkies, where her troubles dissolved and she became engrossed in the murder mysteries or stories of star-crossed lovers. She was in awe of the latest fashion and jewellery adorning the actresses, the male lovers whose tenderness and passion she'd once hoped her future husband would emulate, the choreography and the foreign locations.

Back in Melbourne, she regularly complained that Pa didn't take her out to the movies enough. To my chagrin (because I was the self-appointed moral police of the family at the time) she compensated by purchasing pirated DVDs.

'You do realise these DVDs are illegal, Ma?' I'd say scornfully.

'No, they're not! I bought them!'

'Just because you bought them doesn't mean they were sold legally.' Those anti-piracy ads before every Hollywood movie at Australian cinemas were lost on Ma. Then again, she might have got the message if Pa took her every week, like she wanted him to.

'I paid for it! I didn't steal it!' she'd insist.

'How much did you pay?'

'$2 or $3.'

'Yeah, well you basically paid for someone else to steal it for you and make copies.'

'EH! HOGA!' HOGA was her staccato sound of dismissal, a mangled version of the 'proper' word, hōga (with an elongated 'o') which, in Kannada, meant 'Go'. When Ma shouted it, HOGA (pronounced hog - AH!), it meant 'Stop spewing rubbish. Bugger off and make yourself useful.'

Pirated or not, Hindi movies brought my family together. Even the ones Pa could point to and say, 'What rubbish is this behaviour?' in the hope that Maya and I would learn what *not* to do. We'd all turn to one another during the bits that made us laugh and wheeze until our bellies ached, our conspiratorial eye contact throwing more joy on the bonfire. And when we all stared into the screen during the sombre scenes, blue light

illuminating our faces in the dark, I'd glance over and see shiny tears surreptitiously spill from my parents' eyes. I saw so much more of them in those moments than their sorrow for the characters. My parents barely processed the heartache from their own lives, unless it came out in an explosion. Instead, their hurt pooled into a heavy goblet inside each of their chests. During these tearful moments in front of the TV, they tilted forward and seemed to pour a little grief out over the place where their wedding garlands once sat. I knew because I felt the same way. We all saw ourselves in the characters who desperately yearned for what they couldn't have: freedom, respect, unconditional love or, most unattainable, a future that followed a script.

Back in Dharwad in 1991, my parents had thought their prayers were answered when they received a letter saying that their Australian visa application was approved. They believed the grass was infinitely greener across the Indian Ocean, blissfully unaware of how prickly it was going to be. I was one year old, Ma was twenty-three and Pa was twenty-seven when we boldly bade farewell to Dharwad. As they took their last footsteps on their motherland before boarding their flight, they dug their fingernails into their Indianness, willing themselves to hold on no matter what came. The only things heavier than their luggage were their ambitions for the fledgling little non-resident Indian (NRI) in their care.

They probably thought that the distance would defuse the family drama. Alas, they were severely underprepared for the sequel to their own Bollywood epic.