MONONA WALI

Frieda's Kiss

Swati's parents installed her at an East Coast university in 1972 with little fanfare. Swati was the third of three daughters to go to college. The girls had been born bump, bump, bump, like that, each thirteen months apart. Each, as the family joke went, a failure of effective contraception. Such was India in the good old days. Somehow, the mere act of immigrating to America stopped the onslaught of offspring.

"My baby is gone," Swati's mother said mournfully, directing her comments more to the newly-built dorm building than to Swati or her father. The three of them were standing outside Hill Hall, Swati's new home, the family Volvo parked in a temporary loading zone.

"Your baby?" Swati's father said. "What about my baby? Who will play chess with me? Who will cook with me?"

Swati felt a twinge of guilt looking at him, his narrow shoulders that gave way to his substantial middle, where most of his body mass had settled, then tapering to his women's-sized feet.

"You will both be fine," Swati said, but she held back tears as she did. She gave her mother a final hug; the two were almost twins in size and build, small and light-boned, and so the embrace didn't stick as it might have with heavier people.

"Dad," Swati said. "Are you going to give me a check for the bank account?" She wished she had asked for the money earlier. Now it felt all wrong. They had already bought her new bed linens and a Picasso poster, not to mention mountains of notebooks, pens, retractors, and almost every item on the freshman supply list.

Her father looked momentarily confused. He patted the back pocket of his pants.

"Didn't I?"

Swati shook her head. She had checked with her sisters. They had confirmed that they had each received a check of five hundred dollars at the start of the college year.

"Mother, give her a check." He rubbed his shoulder. All the lifting of luggage and boxes had reignited an old rotator cuff injury.

Swati's mother dug into purse and produced a checkbook. She handed it to Swati's father. He scribbled it quickly, ripped it from the book, and handed it to Swati. It was for two hundred and fifty dollars.

"Thank you," Swati said. Maybe the second half would come next semester.

Swati waved goodbye for a long time as the car pulled away. Her parents would have to make the long trip from Philadelphia back to Chicago without Swati to take turns at the wheel. But once the car was out of sight, she rushed back into her room to organize her newly purchased piles of stuff. Hours later she was hit with the actual pain of homesickness—her throat aching and choked, her chest a heavy stone.

There were a couple of long days spent trying to make friends. Swati's designated roommate came from a community not far from the college, and was off and running with a clutch of high school friends. She felt no responsibility for Swati. When she left the room the lemon-infused scent of her eau de vie clung to Swati's nose hairs. Swati sat under one of the great sycamore trees on the college green and filled her cheap notebook with free verse. *Black crows, massacred villages, burnt terrain, napalmed souls.* She watched bare-chested boys flick beautifully airborne Frisbees back and forth and wondered if she could fall in love with one of them. She wanted to kiss a boy very badly; she had not done that yet, but she could not

bring herself to write a poem about her secret longing. A skinny girl with braces named Luisa Sanchez befriended Swati at the university swimming pool where Swati swam laps, and they ate lunch and dinner together in the enormous cafeteria that validated freshmen meal cards, but by the third day Luisa met a skinny knock-kneed boy, and Swati found herself alone again.

She attended a campus vigil for peace, held up her flickering candle and listened to the familiar speeches. It had not been that long ago that she had been doing the same thing with her parents in Chicago. A Vietnamese Buddhist monk had given her an armband with a hand-embroidered peace symbol on it. "Good people same all over world," he had said, "want peace." She wore the armband faithfully, in solidarity, but drew the line at getting arrested with those who formed a human chain in front of the administration building.

At the vigil, boys and girls were holding hands, and even making out, demonstrating their determination to make love, not war. Swati was envious of these couples, first for the fact that they had found each other, and second for the ease with which they cuddled with each other in public.

It was on the first day of the Survey of English Literature class she met Frieda Deakins. Frieda wasted no time admiring a colorful Kashmiri scarf Swati was wearing that day.

"Are you from India?" she asked.

"Yes. Sort of. Not really. Are you from here?" Swati asked back.

"I wish." Instead, Frieda was from Southern California, which made her quite an exotic at the university. She had charming amounts of curly brown hair and a Mediterranean complexion. She hated all things California, especially sunshine, and was looking for a "serious" East Coast intellectual experience. Swati shared that she would most likely be a biology major, that her father was a relativitist, and her

mother a professor of philosophy, one of her sisters an oceanography major and the other interested in archaeology.

"I come from a family of bankers," Frieda said, "who pray to God at every meal."

"I was raised an atheist," Swati said, and she saw she had visibly impressed Frieda. Their friendship was cemented.

They hung out in Frieda's dorm room. Frieda often complained about her looks; she thought her eyes were too narrow and close together; she longed for straight hair, and better posture. Childhood scoliosis had left her slightly stooped. Swati reassured her she was beautiful, and Swati meant it. She found Frieda's eyes to be infinitely alive and intriguing; her curly hair bounced in a way straight hair never did, and the stoop was noticeable only if you really looked for it. Frieda wanted Swati's exotic Indian looks, the big, dark eyes, the delicate small-boned body. Swati wanted Frieda's ease with people.

Frieda quickly accumulated a collection of friends, aspiring artists and poets and disaffected rebels. Swati felt jealous of all these friends, the way they would drop in to visit Frieda and hang on her every word. Swati wanted it to be known that she was the favored one, the one who held all of Frieda's confidences. Frieda and her friends smoked a fair amount of marijuana, and Swati joined in, although the pot made her sleepy and incommunicative and paranoid.

Her father, of all people, had introduced her to pot. He had attended a physics conference in Santa Cruz one summer in the early sixties, and, there in California, he had met like-minded peaceniks. They convinced him to try the weed. Someone played Bizet's *Carmen* and he danced on the beach half-naked in the face of a magnificent sunset, kicking his legs up like a fool, and then he cooked everyone a spectacular meal of eggplant curry and rice pilaf and afterwards donned a turban

and played a guru, doling out spiritual advice. This story had traveled the world of relativist physicists and made him somewhat legendary. "Wah, wah," Swati's mother said. She would never go near the stuff. Her father didn't like buying it, however, and was dependent on friends or visitors passing through. Swati could have scored some easily from her high school, but he wouldn't let her. They smoked together a few times, but she did it mostly to keep him company. She was in her senior year in high school then; Usha and Raja had both gone off to college.

Swati could not convince Frieda to help her canvass for George McGovern in the working-class neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Frieda said she couldn't be on her feet for that long; her scoliosis might flare up. So Swati went door-to-door, row house to row house, politely presenting residents with information on her presidential candidate. Those who answered were not unfriendly, but they were not very communicative either. They wanted to get on with their dinner, and the evening's television entertainment lineup. In the few minutes she was given, Swati peeked into their houses, at their sofas with ruffled skirts and large display televisions and the oversized comfy armchair for Dad, smelled what was on the stove for dinner, usually a big, meaty aroma, and felt there was not a bridge long enough to help her cross into their world. She thought of her own home, filled with modern Danish teak furniture, and books, and art, and music. Her parents were opposed to television. They had one, but only to watch the news. She felt shame at her own privilege, the privilege to feel hopeful for a better world. As she sat on the bus staring out into the early darkness of near winter, traveling away from houses put together with shingle and clapboard, back into the heart of the university, she was glad for her student ID. Without it, she might not know who she was. Swati wrote a poem about it, and titled it "The Bridge." She shared it with Frieda. The next night

Frieda read it out loud to the circle of friends who had gathered, and Swati felt herself swell with love.

Swati arrived home for Thanksgiving the day before her sisters, and had a moment alone with her father, who was quick to pull out the chessboard.

"Dad," Swati said. "Do you want to read one of my poems?"

"You are writing poems?" he asked.

She shrugged. "For a long time."

"You read it to me."

So Swati pulled "The Bridge" from her pants pocket and read it. Swati was nervous, and her voice shook a little. The words seemed clunky and without rhythm, now that she was reading out loud.

Her father was silent afterwards. "Did you like it?" Swati asked.

"I am not a poet. I don't know how to judge these things," her father said. He pointed to the chessboard. "Do you want black or white?"

Swati put the poem away. The phone rang, and her mother called her to it.

"I want to go first," she said, as she ran down the hall to the phone. "I want to beat you."

Her father smiled.

It was Frieda.

"I miss you," Frieda said. "It's so lonely here."

"I miss you too," Swati said, feeling guilt for having left Frieda on campus for the four-day holiday. "I told you you should have come with me."

"No, you need to be with your family."

"My father didn't even like my poem."

"Let me talk to him!"

Swati laughed. She heard her father calling for her. He was anxious to start the game, so she promised Frieda she would call her later.

Swati lost the chess game to her father, as she almost always did.

Raja and Usha, her two older sisters, arrived early the morning of Thanksgiving. Raja, who had more of their father's heft and darker complexion, had acquired what Swati thought to be a slightly affected Bostonian twang. Usha looked like neither parent, and had been subjected to much teasing about her origins. She was tall and lanky, more resembling a Spaniard than Indian. She had remained faithfully attached to her peasant blouses and painter's jeans. They all got busy cooking, and there was loud chatter and laughter. Swati told them of her experiences in the neighborhoods of Philadelphia, of how odd and different she felt from that world she had peeked into. She said she even felt different from the other students at the university.

"We are different," Raja said. "Our family is very different, even though we watch Walter Cronkite and we eat broiled chicken and boiled peas."

"We don't listen to rock and roll. We don't date," Swati said.

"Most of my friends hate their parents," Usha said.

"Their parents don't go to peace marches and make toasts to dead scientists," Raja said. "My friends are jealous because Mom and Dad are so cool."

"Yeah, but we just do what our parents tell us to do," Swati said.

"We devote ourselves to the cause of higher learning." Usha said, sticking her nose in the air.

"What's wrong with that?" Raja said.

"Is it good to be so different?" Swati asked. "Sometimes I wish I had dated and watched TV. I didn't even know who Joni

Mitchell was." It was Frieda who had introduced her to the high-voiced songstress, as well as to Laura Nyro and Judy Collins, female folksingers who stirred Swati's heart.

Then, Raja confided that she had a boyfriend. Usha and Swati instantly looked around to see if either parent was in the vicinity of the kitchen.

"Who is he?" Swati asked.

"He's a senior from England. He was my T.A. last spring for physics."

"You didn't tell me he's a physicist!" Usha shrieked.

"Not British!" Swati said.

"Shhh."

"Why don't you want to tell Mom and Dad?"

"I will, but not yet."

Their father walked into the kitchen just then, and demanded to know why they were whispering. "What secrets are you girls hiding?" he said. Swati had noticed her father had come to life once all three girls were home. He had been cheerfully setting the table for the Thanksgiving dinner and humming classic Hindi film songs.

"Raja has a boyfriend," Usha said, poking their father in his ample stomach.

Raja looked at her and flared her eyes.

Their father repeated the news mechanically. "Raja has a boyfriend."

He looked to his oldest daughter for confirmation.

"She's already sleeping with him. She's on the pill." Usha was taking great pleasure in seeing her older sister squirm; it was a rare opportunity to knock her off the pedestal of the first-born. Swati realized that Usha had been in on this more than she had.

"Usha!" Raja was now flushed and deeply upset.

Their father took a seat at the small kitchen table. He put his head in his hands. Raja went over and comforted him by lightly laying her hand over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Dad. He's very nice. He's a physics major."

Swati and Usha took the other two seats at the table.

"Does Mother know?" Their father asked, lifting his head and taking Raja's hand.

Raja shook her head.

"Why you didn't tell us?"

"I'm sorry."

"You are happy? You are in love?"

Raja smiled stupidly. Swati's father had educated his daughters to understand that sex was only truly enjoyable when love was involved. It had been an effective deterrent to the kind of free sex rampant among their friends all through their high school years. Mother walked into the kitchen, and everyone looked at her. Her black hair was held back in a classic bun, and she had the kind of formal elegance more suited to an ambassador's wife. Usha repeated the news. Their mother looked at their father. He took her hand. "It is okay, Mother. She says she is in love."

"Wah, wah. Who is this idiot?" she said, nudging Swati from her chair.

Raja shoved Usha from her chair. "He was my T.A."

Mother took one of Raja's hands, and their father took the other. The three sat in a ring around the table, and to Swati and Usha's disbelief, became teary and sentimental.

Usha returned to hacking the squash. Swati joined her at the cutting board.

"I don't know why they bothered to have us," Usha said, and Swati agreed.

Frieda called at least five more times over the weekend, and Swati's family became suspicious of all the times Swati ran to the phone. They wanted to know who this person was, and what

did she need calling so often. Swati told them all about Frieda. How unusual she was. And what a good friend.

Swati and Frieda requested and were granted a dorm room together second semester. They decorated it with Indian saris and cloths swiped from Swati's mother. Frieda had been home to San Diego for the long winter break and returned with tins of dates and dried fruits that were popular with her friends.

Swati took a poetry writing class her second semester, and felt a zing shoot through her every time she left class. Her whole body seemed to hum with excitement. She wrote poems, working late into the night. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* became her textbook of choice. Biology, the study of life, left her feeling dead.

One evening, alone in their dorm room, in the middle of writing long papers, Frieda said her back hurt and asked Swati to massage it with some cream. Frieda often complained of back pain and the unresolved scoliosis. She'd had to spend one of her high school summers in a full body cast. She told Swati she wished she had her known her then; she would have been far less bored. She lay down on her bed, and Swati gently worked the lotion in. She didn't mind doing this. Frieda's back had a pleasing roundness to it, a paleness that contrasted with the brown of her own skin. Maybe in some corner of her mind, she felt she was practicing on a future lover.

Frieda asked Swati if she liked kissing.

Swati took a couple of long strokes up the length of Frieda's spine. "I've never kissed anyone," she said.

Frieda flipped over, now exposing her breasts, and looked at her with shock.

"You never kissed in high school?"

Swati shook her head.

"So you're a virgin?" Frieda said. "Jesus, I have to find you a boyfriend."

"I'm not going to have sex with someone unless I'm in love with them," Swati said.

"How would you know you were in love with them until you had sex?" Frieda asked, puzzled. "You wouldn't know if there was any chemistry between you unless you had sex. There have been guys I've been really attracted to, but one time in bed, and it was all over."

Swati saw, for the first time, the holes in her father's education. Frieda offered to teach her how to kiss.

"Okay," Swati said, giggling.

Frieda sat close to Swati and drew Swati's long black hair away from her face. They twisted their faces to close proximity and Frieda's tongue pried into Swati's hesitant lips. Frieda's tongue felt like a warm and spongy popsicle.

"You're too tense. I feel like I'm kissing a plank. Relax, " Frieda said, pulling back.

" I don't like it," Swati said.

"Shut your eyes and imagine I'm Jim Morrison."

So Swati tried again, not wanting to disappoint Frieda. Swati pictured not Morrison, but Jack Espy, her poetry professor, whom she had developed a secret crush on. He was in his late thirties, she guessed, and curly-haired, like Frieda, and surprisingly personable. The second round of kissing progressed with more ease. Frieda smelled pleasantly of the rose-scented lotion, and her full breasts pressed into Swati. Swati felt aroused, and even though she knew they were just playing, she pulled away and broke into a fit of giggles. Afterwards, she wished she had paid more attention. She was sure there was a poem hidden in the story of an awkward Indian atheist kissing for the first time, a poem that could impress Professor Espy.

The summer after her freshman year Swati was at home in Chicago, jobless. Raja was studying ocean currents as an intern

in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and Usha was on an archeological dig in Bolivia. Swati had done some lackluster job hunting, but was happy to be denied employment at the department stores and ice cream parlors. She managed to organize her day around the lap swim schedule of the local municipal pool. A neighbor hired her to walk Bobo, her Jack Russell terrier, and so Swati spent a good hour every day entertaining the little dog. Her father did not approve of her unambitious summer—he offered to get her employment in the photon lab, where they were always looking for fresh eyes to read the microfilm of atomic particle collisions, but Swati begged off. It was the last thing she wanted to do—sit in a darkened room all day staring at particle trajectories and recording their paths in millimeters. She had not brought herself to tell her parents, yet, that there was only a very slim chance of her continuing as a biology major.

She talked to Frieda on the phone frequently, and finally convinced her to stop in Chicago en route to their second year in Philadelphia. She was excited about Frieda's arrival. She bought extra chips and cookies and a jigsaw puzzle of an Escher drawing. She changed the sheets on Usha's bed, vacuumed her room, and even adorned it with a vase of flowers.

"Is she a member of some royal family?" her mother asked. "Such treatment." Frieda handed over her satchel as soon as she saw Swati and said her back ached from the flight. Swati introduced her proudly to her parents. Here she was finally, her smart and pretty friend. At the dinner table, her father served wine, even though they were underage. Frieda engaged all of them in a discussion about the possibilities of life after death.

"Does this mean you believe in God?" Swati's father asked pointedly.

"I don't know," Frieda said.

"You don't know if God exists, or you don't know if you believe in Him?"

"*Dad—*" Swati felt protective of Frieda, but Frieda held her own.

"Him *or* Her. I'm not sure what I believe," Frieda said. "I'm still figuring that out."

Swati's father demonstrated to the young Frieda, by citing the scientific method, that there was no way to prove or disprove the existence of God.

"No one, to our knowledge, has come back from the dead to talk about it. And without some proof, it simply cannot be true."

"Reincarnation might be comforting," Swati's mother said, "but I take the view of the existentialists that we should not look to the beyond; we should squarely face the hell we are living in now." She was regal and positive in her beliefs.

"It doesn't matter," Swati said hotly, "if you can prove it or not." Swati didn't mention it, but once, when she was writing a poem, she felt that someone or something else was moving her hand.

"Wow," Frieda said. "I can't believe we're even talking about this stuff. This is so great. In my house, you can't even say 'Darwin.'" Frieda couldn't talk to her own father about reincarnation, and she certainly couldn't smoke pot with him. Her father, according to her, was possibly the most boring man on earth. Swati had met him only once, when he had visited on Parents' Weekend, and Swati could literally see the one thought that ran through his mind: "I'm paying for my daughter to live in a hippie den."

Swati's father poured more wine. He was charmed.

After dinner, when they had settled in the living room, Frieda pulled out a joint.

"Is this okay?" she asked, holding it up, looking to Swati, then her father, then her mother. Swati's father's eyes lit up, but Mother wanted no part of this, and she went to read in her

study. Swati's father put a favorite Ali Akbar Khan record on; a quiet evening raga that built ever so slowly in tempo.

"Tell me about India," Frieda said. "I want to go there so badly."

Swati's father was delighted. "What do you want to know?"

Frieda wanted to know about his marriage to Swati's mother. Swati had told her the story, in brief, how they had married out of caste, and suffered the castigation of their families. Frieda was curious about other details of life in India.

Swati wanted to abscond to her bedroom with Frieda. There was so much to talk about—all the intimate details of their emotional lives. She had new poems to show Frieda. She had no desire to smoke the pot or face a long evening of oft and affectionately retold stories. But Swati's father held sway, and she watched as Frieda's probing questions spurred him on. Swati did smoke, and had to struggle to stay in the conversation, saying less and less, until finally she dozed off. She woke momentarily and massaged a stiff neck. Frieda and her father were still talking away as she trudged off to her bedroom.

She woke a while later, and got up to go to the bathroom. As she entered the hallway, she heard their voices coming up the stairs. Finally, they are going to bed, she thought. As she was leaving the bathroom a few minutes later, she saw them at the door to Frieda's room. Her father was caressing Frieda's hair, pushing his face close to her lips. Frieda jerked back. Swati stepped into the hallway, her father looked up at her, annoyed, she thought. She was scared by the drunken lust she saw in his eyes. Frieda shut the door of her room. Swati hastily went into her room and heard the door to her parents' room close. Frieda came into her room moments later.

"Your father is a pig," she said. Her face was streaked with tears.

"I didn't know," Swati said. "I'm sorry."

Frieda packed up her bags and left the next day, using excruciating back pain as an excuse. She said she would consult doctors in Philadelphia. Swati drove her to the airport.

"You don't have to go," Swati said. "We don't even have to see my parents."

Frieda looked at her coldly.

"Say something," Swati pleaded.

"Your family is so fucked," Frieda said.

Swati felt Frieda's insult with five times the intensity she had felt her kisses.

At the airport, Frieda grabbed all her bags, refusing help. Swati winced as Frieda slammed the door shut. The old Volvo didn't take well to the jolt. The window fell straight down into its sleeve.

Swati returned all her father's books and journals, piling them in a dangerously leaning tower on his desk. She left an unsigned note. "I will never be a scientist," she wrote. She went to the pool and swam two miles instead of one. Accusations formed in her head like little bombs. She would accuse him of hypocrisy, of arrogance, of being no better than any other person. She would watch him suffer her scorn, her hurt, and her contempt.

Later, when he returned from work, she debated whether to follow him into his office as he set down his briefcase. But the phone rang. She hoped it was Frieda, but it wasn't; it was someone for him. Then her mother summoned them to dinner, and they sat there like two wooden chess pieces. He looked haggard.

"I don't know about this friend of yours," her mother said.

Swati maintained a studied silence.

"She's seems kinky to me."

"You mean kooky—"

"Kooky, kinky—"

"No, Mother, there is a big difference. One is just sort of crazy, and the other is a sexual deviant."

"Her parents are normal?"

Swati rose abruptly from the dinner table.

"What is it?" Swati's mother called out after her. "Why don't you talk to us?"

As she walked away, Swati heard her mother ask her father what was the matter.

"Who can know?" her father said in a quiet, little voice.

"You know," Swati wanted to scream.

Swati bumped into her father late at night in the hallway, not far from where he had attempted to kiss Frieda. She had just brushed her teeth and he was just going to bed.

"Why did you do it?" Swati asked.

"Do what?"

"You know."

Her father put two fingers to his forehead, as he did habitually when he was thinking on a calculation.

"Human beings are complicated," he said. It was cowardly, the way he said it, without meeting her eyes. "Maybe when you grow up you will understand."

"Fuck you," Swati said, swearing at her father for the first time in her life. She expected an apology, an explanation. She expected him to ask for forgiveness.

He looked swiftly at her, shocked. She saw that her curse hurt him, and that there was no more to say. She retreated quickly to her bedroom.

Raja and Usha both arrived the next day for the Labor Day weekend. Raja had brought along her boyfriend, who it turned out was not a geek at all, but tall, with classic Aryan good looks, and much energy was directed to impressing the first boyfriend to set foot on family soil.

Swati picked up the phone once and called Frieda, but there was no answer. She wanted to reassure Frieda that she, Swati, was nothing like the rest of her family. Frieda did call finally.

"I've gotten a room change. I want a single, you know, so I can have more privacy."

"Okay," Swati said, lamely, her heart sinking. "Are we still going to be friends?"

There was a painful silence. "I'm taking six classes," Frieda said. "I doubt I'll have time." Her voice was so cold. Swati had been dumped.

It was just before suppertime that Swati's father knocked on her bedroom door, come to call her down to dinner. She had been avoiding him, avoiding the whole family. In all the commotion and excitement of hosting a potential future son-in-law, no one paid much attention to Swati's obdurate silence.

"I was drunk, darling. Forgive me," her father said.

He looked so small and pathetic, this man whose kiss of approval she had so desperately wanted for so much of her life.

"Please don't tell Mother," he pleaded.

She was silent and contemptuous.

"I thought your friend wanted—"

"Dad!"

"Sorry, sorry. Forgive me."

He turned and walked out of the room. Swati felt the scales tip in her favor. It left on odd metallic taste on her tongue, this secret feeling of power. She harbored it for a minute or two, before joining her family at the dinner table.

When the talk turned to politics, and the recent election, they passionately denounced Nixon and his long Pinocchio nose. Swati spoke up.

"He's not the only one with a long nose," she said.

When all eyes turned to her, she looked at her father.

"I am not the president of the United States," her father said.

“Of course you are not,” Mother said. She made a big deal of passing the lamb curry and told everyone to eat up. The boyfriend told Mother that her cooking was extraordinary. Mother told him he was too kind.

Swati hated each member of her family separately. Her father, of course, for what he had done, her mother for all the ways she chose to accommodate the hell that was her husband, and now for the way she fawned over Raja's boyfriend. She hated Raja for the superior way she carried herself, as if attending Harvard and having a boyfriend were in and of themselves certificates of proven worth. Usha she hated for the way she obsessively used her position in the middle to shift loyalties up or down depending on what suited her in the moment. The boyfriend she hated for being handsome.

On Labor Day, the family took a walk along Lake Michigan. The water was frothy, churned by a steady wind. Waves lapped into shore with urgency and crashed against the stone embankment. The sun still sat high enough to cast heat and warmth. Jogging had recently come into fashion, and people were out walking dogs and pushing strollers. Someone had a toddler on a harness with a three-foot tether. Swati stared in horror.

Raja chattered about her fieldwork with her father and her boyfriend, and Usha had her arm wrapped around their mother's. Swati did not want anyone to mistake hers for a happy Indian family, so she kept her distance. Once, her mother looked back and smiled, waving her up to join them, as if they were in a relay team, but Swati looked away. She stared out over the water and felt an urgent longing shoot through her. Surely there was someone out there who could read her inner dialect, who could swallow her in kisses, who could love her exactly.

Swati accepted a ride to the airport from her father. She put a cassette tape in the car stereo. Bob Dylan's coarse voice boomed out. *Like a rolling stone.* Her father did not adjust the

volume. He let it play. Swati enjoyed blasting his ears. When they arrived at the airport, she didn't let him unload her suitcase from the trunk of the car.

"You will need money, no?" he said, handing her a check as they stood at the curb.

"Thank you," she said, taking the check and stuffing it into her purse.

"If you want to study poetry, it is okay," her father said. "Write what you like. Be happy. That is all."

She noticed, in his eyes, a well of sadness.

In the airplane, Swati pulled the check from her purse. It was for a thousand dollars. She wondered if it had hurt her father as much to write it out as it hurt her now, digesting the over-generous number. She looked out the plane window. What she saw was the blank blue page of the sky. It invited only silence.