BOOMTOWN GIRL

A Collection of Short Stories

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For my parents,
and to my son

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DRAGON GIRL

The girl was the dragon's head. Green cardboard scales, eyes the size of cricket balls, crocodile mouth spilling crinkly orange flames.

Inside the papier-mâché shell, a state of perpetual dusk. Grey and cool and slightly dizzy-making. Breath swirling about her ears. Fumes of drying Fevicol.

Outside, a broiling afternoon in a year of severe drought. The closing day of a six-week arts class. In the vast compound of a British-era mansion, before an open-air stage, an audience of thirty or so parents sat beneath a mango tree and fanned themselves with newspapers. An occasional gust of wind set off a drizzle of half-ripened fruit. In ten years' time the tree would be felled, the mansion demolished, the city's ponds gone to mud and flies. But on that day, late in the millennium, the mangoes fell by themselves as a chorus sang from behind a bamboo screen:

Custard the Dragon had big sharp teeth,

And spikes on top of him and scales underneath.

The girl was twelve years old. The mask came down to her waist. With her hands at her shoulders, she gripped Custard by the molars and drove forward. A train of children followed, lined up in descending order of height, green cones strapped to their heads to form the dragon's spiny length. It was the girl's first time as a leader, a role she'd earned by her superior height. In public, her body did not know how to carry itself: the growth spurt that rounded her hips and chest also left her gangly and knobby-

kneed. Under the mask, with no one watching, she could lengthen her neck, she could pick up her head.

Beneath the blazing sun the dragon bristled and reared and whipped his fiery snout. When the pirate came on stage, waving his plastic pistols, the girl charged him with vigor, almost ripping the green bedsheet that tied her to Custard's body.

Neither of her parents was there to applaud the performance. Friends did not gather around afterwards to say congratulations, let's keep in touch. She had a tendency to shy away from people, her face contorted as if in a scowl. Girls whispered to each other that she thought too much of herself. Boys snuck up behind her and yanked at her braid. You're bigger than they are, a teacher said when she complained. Can't you stand up for yourself?

That same teacher, after the performance, might have given some words of praise: Well done, Mansi, nice to see you smiling for a change. Have a little confidence, and you will go far.

But after the adults had clapped and made their way out from under the mango tree; after the dragon's head had been placed in the middle of the stage for all to admire; after a domestic from the girl's household, dispatched to pick her up, had searched frantically all over the mansion grounds—it was concluded the girl had disappeared.

You have to wear a mask to be a dragon? her mother had joked that morning at breakfast. You don't look scary enough just on your own?

The mother was a beauty consultant. Immaculate skin, Colgate smile. A line of facial creams bearing her name. Being seen in public with her daughter was something of a liability. People shook their heads in amused pity at the walking example of how an attractive parent can give birth to an ugly child. Days earlier at the Bangalore Club, during a wedding reception, the mother had

given the girl a hard pinch in the back of the arm. Can you please stand up straight, she'd hissed. Can you please wipe off that scowl from your face? The girl had slipped into a daydream. Her mouth twisted to one side whenever this happened, even when she was thinking pleasant thoughts.

Just scowl a little more, her mother said now at the breakfast table. She put down her teacup and picked up a nail file. Just scowl a little more and fire will start coming out of your mouth.

I helped to make the dragon's head, the girl said to her bowl of cornflakes. I did more than anyone else. I mixed the papier-mâché, I painted the eyes, I cut out all the cardboard scales.

Her mother ran the file around her pinky nail.

Please, Ma, can't you come? The skit is for half an hour only. Daddy, can you come?

Her father sat down with a rustle of his crisp silk kurta. He had returned in the wee hours from a trip to London and was on his way now to a board meeting at the Bangalore School of Music. He owned coffee estates in Coorg and tea estates in Munnar; he was a chess master and a scholar of Sanskrit poetry. Sorry, puttu, he said. As he patted the girl's head, his gold cufflink grazed the top of her ear.

Please? she repeated, making her eyes large.

Is this to be a vocation of yours? he asked. Acting, making masks, and so on?

Vacation? the girl said.

If not, he went on, next summer we had better send you to chess classes. It will make your mind sharper.

And help in maths, the mother added. She winked at her husband. Though if she has my genes, forget it. Nothing will help.

Everyone else's parents are coming, the girl said. But you both don't care.

If you're going to be rude, the mother said, you can stay at home.

The girl stared into her congealing bowl of cereal. She was the dragon's head, the most important role. The kids who pulled her hair and whispered mean things were about to line up in her shadow.

And it was her last chance to make friends with the boy.

The boy was the pirate Custard would attack on stage. He and Mansi had never spoken to each other until the previous week, when a series of incidents culminated in a strange encounter. The boy was trying his hand at a potter's wheel. The girl was painting geometric patterns on a clay vase, so absorbed in her maze of twisting triangles that she didn't hear the class's worst bully, a hulk of an eleven-year-old, sneaking up behind her. The boy watched as the bully yanked the girl's braid. The vase fell from her hands, and she whirled around. You stupid idiot Fatty, she screamed, and poked the bully's stomach with the hard end of her brush. The teacher, Mr. Krishna, strode up to them. Shame on you, Mansi, he said. And don't let me hear you say *Fatty* again. It's not nice to call people names.

The girl scurried to the mango tree, shimmied up the trunk, and disappeared into the foliage. Minutes later the bully reappeared, grinning. He waddled up to the boy with a fistful of clay. You're in loooove, he said. In love with that girl. You want to marry her.

Get lost, Fatty, the boy mumbled before he was knocked to the ground and his face pressed into the dirt. Mr. Krishna was attending to the kiln. The bully laughed, bystanders whistled and cheered. The boy wriggled free, spitting mud from his mouth as he ran.

She had never climbed a tree before, but the trunk welcomed her like a friend. Everywhere she groped, she found somewhere to wedge her foot, something to grip. She pulled herself up to the

crotch, crawled on hands and knees along a fat lower branch. The compound wall of the mansion passed beneath her.

On the far side was a deserted yard, overgrown and buzzing with crickets. She jumped to the ground a few feet from an anthill. It rose to her own height, slopes reddish-brown and steep.

Cobras live in anthills, someone said. King cobras.

She looked over her shoulder and saw the boy. As if cobras eat ants, she said.

They wait for the ants to build the anthill, then they go in.

She imagined the anthill full of cobras—glistening, slithering cobras; cobras oozing down the red slopes like tar, hissing like a thousand pressure cookers; cobras flowing towards her, winding around her, hoods flared, tongues flickering.

Shall we see, she said to the boy, if there are cobras living there?

If one bites you, you're finished.

She inched forward, through a thicket of parthenium and alligator grass. She could have been in a jungle—her first time in the wilderness, with no ayah or driver to supervise her. She beckoned to the boy, who hadn't moved. What would happen if she kicked it? If the slope caved in? Would a writhing black snake emerge? She stood on one foot and with the toe of the other sandal, she tapped the hillside. It was solid, unyielding. She bent her knee and kicked harder, and a dark hole opened. She waited.

There's not even an ant, she said.

Let's go, the boy said. I'm getting bored.

Let's find a stick, the girl said.

The boy picked up one nearby. It was heavy and long. You're mad or what? He passed the stick to the girl. She held one end with both hands and prodded the rim of the hole. Then slowly she slid the stick inside. The boy clapped his palms to his face and bit down on his thumbs.

There's something there, she said, jumping back. Something soft. Something moving.

They waited for it to emerge. Twenty years later, the deserted yard and the mansion next door would together be replaced by a multistoried mall, where the boy, a corporate lawyer, would bring his four-year-old daughter to spend a Saturday afternoon shopping. He would tell her how, when he was a kid, this part of Lower Palace Orchards used to be quiet, full of sprawling trees and old buildings. He would tell her he'd once attended summer arts classes here, in the grounds of a crumbling mansion, where he learned to use a potter's wheel. He would not mention the girl. He would've long forgotten her name.

But he would remember how she looked that day, lunging forward on her long legs like a tribal warrior, about to thrust the stick into the anthill when Mr. Krishna yelled from the mango tree. You two, get back here right now.

She followed the boy over the wall. You're brave, he muttered to her once they were on the other side. I didn't know a girl could be so brave.

That had happened a week earlier, and since then the boy and the girl had exchanged barely a word. She'd approached him a few times, twirling her braid with one hand, calling out, Hi, Mukund, in front of everyone. She wanted to suggest they go exploring somewhere else. But as soon as he looked her way, she retreated, blushing with an intensity she'd never felt before. She'd lain awake at night wondering what it would be like to sit next to the boy and eat lunch together, what it would be like to hold his hand. When Custard charged at the pirate, nobody knew that inside the dragon's head a girl's heart was beating fast. After the performance, as everyone headed to the verandah for snacks, Mansi went up to the boy and whispered, Do you like me?

He had not enjoyed being the pirate, waving his ridiculous plastic pistol and allowing the dragon to engulf him. All week he'd

been teased by Fatty and the other boys. She's in love with you, yaar, the boys sang. When is the wedding? Mukund weds Mansi!

He tore off the bandana and flung it at her. You, he spat. Why can't you stop being such a nuisance?

An aunty found the girl sitting alone behind the kiln, her back to the wall and her knees to her chest.

You're the dragon girl, yes? the aunty said. I kept wondering, how can she maintain control of such a big head? How can she see where she's going?

The aunty was holding the hand of a little girl in a blue checkered frock. Two ponytails secured by Love in Tokyos bobbed about her eyes. She gazed at Mansi with eyes round as a doll's.

This is my daughter Tara, the aunty said. We just came to watch the skit. Where are your parents, child? Did they see you perform?

They couldn't come, Aunty.

The aunty and the little girl had the same plump cheeks, the same shiny curls. They stood close to each other, their fingers happily intertwined. The girl did not like it when her own mother took her by the hand on the street or at a party. She would try to wriggle free, and then her mother would seize her wrist or elbow, her nails digging so deep they left crescent-shaped furrows.

How are you going home, child?

The girl shrugged.

Where is your house?

The girl thought for a moment. Kaverinagar, she said. It was a township she had never been to, one she suspected wasn't far from here. At school, she'd heard her classmates talk of getting chaat at Raghu's or vadas at Vani's. These were the same girls who walked or rode their bicycles around town, who called her Miss Richie Rich or Maharani Mansi for living in a big house and being chauffeured everywhere. On the rare occasions when they had invited

her to join them, she'd declined. She didn't have a bicycle, didn't know how to ride one; she didn't want to follow them in her father's gleaming Benz.

What's your name, child? the aunty said.

Mansi.

What street do you live on?

Near Raghu's, Aunty. The chaat place.

So, Fifth Main. It's on our way. The aunty smiled with her eyes and her dimples, even with her nose. Go get your things, and we'll take you home.

The girl slipped away to the mansion verandah. There, from a row of shelves, she collected the pieces she'd made during the summer: a cloth elephant stuffed with sawdust, a necklace of cowrie shells, and the clay vase, cracked but still in one piece after Fatty tried to break it. Everything fit into her canvas shoulder bag, along with her Squeezie water bottle and the tomato-cheese sandwich the cook had packed for her lunch.

Soon she was sitting on a moped for the first time in her life. Between her and the aunty sat the little girl, and together they rode down Palace Road, the wind whipping the strands of hair escaped from her braid. Despite the heat, her skin was covered in goosebumps. Natarajan, her father's driver, would have arrived at the mansion compound by now; he would be waiting patiently with the car windows lowered, reading his Kannada newspaper.

At a traffic light the little girl twisted her neck to look back at Mansi. Let's play a game, she said. Let's see who can count more stray dogs. Starting now.

They passed Chowdiah on the left, Wodeyar Lake on the right. Mansi's heart rippled like a shirt hung out to dry. She was well and truly running away now, hurtling into the unknown.

Ten, she heard the little girl say. How many did you get?

One.

I win!

Mansi wrapped her arms tighter around the little girl. If I had a little sister, she thought, I would let her win every game we played.

The roads of the township were narrow, the shops small, dingy, and crowded. The aunty turned onto a narrow residential street lined with squat houses, each with a gate, a square front yard, and small windows.

Aunty, I can get off here.

The aunty pulled up to the curb and looked over her shoulder. Her eyes were hidden by dark shades; in profile her face looked more stern than kind. I thought you said you lived on Fifth Main, child.

I can walk from here, Aunty.

It's quite a distance.

There's a short cut.

Are you sure?

The girl swung one leg and then the other to the ground. She straightened the strap of her shoulder bag, took out the elephant, and offered it to the little girl.

No, child, the aunty said. You should take it home, show it to your parents.

The girl had made the elephant with care. She'd sewed the seams tight so the sawdust wouldn't leak; she'd stitched fingernail-sized mirrors all over the palanquin and sparkling beads along its border. It's for you, she said to the little girl.

The little girl accepted the gift with both hands. What do you say, Tara? her mother asked.

Thank you, the little girl said, transfixed by the mirrors and the beads. Later, she would pick them out and make a sparkling pile in her room. She would keep the elephant up on a shelf, where it would grow bleached in the sunlight. She was four years old. In a decade's time her parents' landlord would announce that he was selling the property to a developer. While packing up their belongings in preparation to vacate, her mother would find the elephant

caught between the back of the shelf and the wall. Do you remember how you got this? she would ask her daughter. Do you remember that girl we gave a ride to, whose face was in the newspaper the next day?

Thank you, Aunty, Mansi said. Bye, Tara.

Bye.

Are you sure you know where you're going?

Yes, Aunty, definitely. And to demonstrate that she had no doubts whatsoever, the girl marched to the nearest intersection and turned right, her arms swinging at her sides, elbows locked, like a toy soldier carved from wood.

For an hour she roamed the unfamiliar streets. Her sandals grew slippery with grime; her eyes burned from the heat and the smog. She maintained a brisk pace, looking only ahead, as if she had walked these paths a thousand, ten thousand times, as if she had a destination and no time to waste. She passed compound walls veined with mold and crowned with bougainvillea; three-storied apartment buildings in whose driveways kids her age were playing cricket. The shade was patchy, the four o'clock sun strong. Already her entire body felt dirty, as if she'd been rubbed with oil and rolled in dust. She hadn't eaten since breakfast; her stomach was a knot. Natarajan would have reached home by now. Or maybe he went straight to her mother's boutique on Lavelle Road. Her mother would be screaming at him, ordering him to get out and find the girl and not dare show his face again until he had brought her back.

She passed a pre-university college with a granite facade and windows bordered in green. Teenagers were idling about on the pavement, some smoking, others necking on the seats of their two-wheelers. Mansi paused to watch. Useless youngsters, her father would have said. When I was their age, I was spending my

free time reading Sanskrit poetry. The youth of this country is going to the dogs.

What's up, girlie? a student in a khadi kurta called to her. Why are you staring?

Nice jeans, said Kurta's companion, a young woman in a purple dress. Where did you get them?

Mansi looked down at her clothes and caught a whiff of her own perspiration. In her bathroom were sandalwood-scented soaps, Sunsilk shampoos, lotions infused with almond and rose. She liked to take a bath as soon as she felt even a little bit dirty, which meant sometimes she bathed two or three times a day. How long, she wondered, until her next wash?

You don't know English, eh? Purple said.

You live nearby? Kurta asked in Kannada.

The students were sitting side by side on the curb, observing her with friendly interest. Mansi replied in Kannada. She had picked up the language as a toddler, surrounded as she had been by servants who spoke it. I live far away. In a village.

Oh, really, Kurta said. What does your father do?

He's a farmer. He has a bullock cart. He works in the fields.

This kid thinks she looks like a villager, Purple said, reverting to English. Tell us some more stories, girlie. Where is this high-class village of yours?

I am a dragon. My name is Custard.

The students frowned at each other. Mental case, Kurta said. Padded-cell variety.

You people are the mental cases, the girl said and set off with a new spring in her knees. It felt good to be rude, to speak nonsense to strangers and saunter off. The knot in her stomach had loosened. In the shade of a jacaranda tree she reached for her Squeezie bottle and caught the lukewarm fountain of water with her mouth. She took out her tomato sandwich, a pink, sticky mess in its plastic wrap, and ate it in three bites.

Around the corner was a small street market. Passing a cart piled high with mangoes, she grabbed one and dropped it into her bag before the vendor or anyone else could see. It was her first time stealing. She strode past stands selling lace handkerchiefs and sticker bindis, men's and women's underwear, plastic buckets. When she went shopping with her mother, to boutiques and showrooms in the Cantonment area, she passed pavement stalls like these stocked with colorful, dusty wares that her mother would never deign to buy. Now she fingered a red-and-orange duppatta hanging from a hook on a board. It felt rough and slippery at the same time, of a material she had never before touched. If the street weren't so crowded, if the vendor, sitting a foot from her, hadn't looked at her like he knew she was up to no good, she might have tried to filch it.

A few blocks past the street market was a small park. She sat on a bench, took out the mango, and sank her teeth into its leathery skin.

For a long while she sat there. A breeze cooled her sticky face. Three crows fought over the mango seed she'd tossed to the ground. An ant wandered over her hand. I can sit here forever, she thought. Like the man in the fable who had stood so long in the forest that vines grew up his legs. She closed her eyes. The wind whispered in the rain trees. When she opened her eyes she saw a figure standing before her. It was a man, red-mouthed and yellow-eyed, lifting a fingerless hand to his face. Beggars were not a problem from the car: Natarajan simply rolled up the window to keep their dirt and diseases outside. Once, while walking down Commercial Street with her mother, a beggar-child her own age, with wild brown hair, had tugged at her t-shirt. Before she could react, her mother said *chhi* and slapped the beggar-child's hand away. She then held her own hand, the one that had dealt the slap, away from her body until they reached home, where she scrubbed with Dettol and instructed her daughter to do the same. Otherwise

you'll get leprosy, she said. Now the girl recoiled from the beggar man, tucking her knees against her chest. He raised his other hand, which had fingers. He was an amputee, Mansi saw, not a leper. She shook her head to say she had no money. Looking down, the man unwound the front of his dhoti until his penis flapped out. It stretched this way and that before pointing straight at her, like a snake coming out from a hole, preparing to bare its fangs.

A row of canna bobbed their scarlet heads as she ran, trying to find the gate she'd come through. The sun was getting lower, its light ripening. When she found the gap, she tripped, fell, and scraped her hands. This stretch of sidewalk was deserted, darkened by overhanging rain trees, whose roots had warped and cracked the paving stones. At any moment the man could spring out from behind a tree trunk. When the pavement ended in a deep trench, forcing her onto the road and into traffic, it was something of a relief to be cocooned by the swerving motorcycles, the warm, salty fumes of exhaust, the blaring bus horns.

She resolved to walk straight, to make no turns. She passed a wrestling tournament in a playground. She passed a herd of goats and a temple elephant. Eventually, she decided, she would come to some place she recognized—the mansion, her school. She walked through the twilight and into the dark. Her feet blistered, her throat parched. She took out her Squeezie and squeezed, but the mouthful she was expecting never came. Her shoulder bag was damp. Enraged, she flung the bottle into the open drain alongside the road. She was near a bazaar of some kind, the smells of fruit and ripe flowers spoiled by the stench of garbage.

Past an enormous peepal tree, she found an ice-cream parlor. A man looked at her from behind the counter. Can I please make a phone call? she said.

Two rupees, the man said.

I don't have any money. I need to call my parents.

He picked up the receiver. Number?

She recited the digits, holding back sobs. Soon she would be home. Hot bath. Full meal. Clean, soft bed. Her parents would be angry. After she had cried and apologized, their reprimands would turn to taunts. They would tell their friends at the Bangalore Club: Madam tried to run away. Madam thought it would be an adventure of some sort, running off by herself to god-knows-where. We were going bonkers looking for her, and then as soon as it started to get dark she telephoned and said she was ready to come home. Such a baby!

Line is engaged, the man said brusquely. He dropped the receiver into its cradle. The girl went out and sat beneath the peepal tree, on a granite slab.

For a while nobody paid her any attention. A three-legged dog hobbled up to her knee, sniffed at her hand, and hobbled away. Mosquitoes sucked blood from her neck and arms. She reached into her bag for the necklace she had made from cowrie shells. Cowries, she had once heard someone say, will bring you luck. Whether good luck or bad the girl couldn't remember. She held the shells tight in her fist, closed her eyes, and waited.

Hello? a voice said.

She looked up. Standing before her was an uncle. He was short and thin and balding, with a small moustache and large spectacles. In one hand he carried a brief case, in the other a cloth bag bulging with what looked like fruit. Are you waiting for someone?

No.

You live nearby?

I don't know.

The uncle sat down beside her. The girl peeked into his bag. It was full of mousambis. He reached in and handed her one. What's your name?

She told him.

Are you lost?

I ran away, she said. Now I want to go home.

He laughed. It was a strange laugh—shrill, like a bird. She didn't like it, but all the same she hoped he wouldn't leave.

Why did you run away?

Because everybody hates me. She murmured the words to the mousambi. It felt firm in her palm, its green skin pebbly. If she were a proper dragon, she could have swallowed it whole. She was the dragon's head, she reminded herself. Big, sharp teeth, and scales, and spikes. People feared dragons; they weren't ever meant to be loved.

Why does everyone hate you? the uncle said. You seem like a nice, polite girl.

Thank, you, Uncle.

Let people say whatever they want. Just ignore them.

His voice was serious now. He was no longer laughing. What's your address?

One sixty-one Lavelle Road.

I can take you on my scooter.

He was a kind uncle, she decided, but it was too dark at this hour for a scooter ride with a stranger. Uncle, please can you give me two rupees? Then I can make a phone call. To my parents.

I don't have change, he said. Let's go to my house. You can use my phone.

She kept a few feet behind him as he turned down a narrow road. A lone streetlight cast its bluish beam over a cluster of parked motorcycles. He was barely taller than she, and he walked with his head bowed, as if he were sad about something. She wondered if he was married, if his wife was also short.

Which school do you go to? he asked over his shoulder.

Sophia's.

Girls' school.

Yes, Uncle.

He stopped at the gate of a dilapidated building painted pink. The upper floor was lit up, the lower dark. A crooked coconut tree grew over the compound wall. Do you have a boyfriend? he asked as he lifted the gate latch.

She giggled.

Why are you laughing?

Because I'm too young to have a boyfriend.

Now it was his turn to be amused, and once again he laughed his shrill laugh. She'd been hoping to ask, once they reached his house, if she could use the toilet. Now she decided it would be better to wait until she was home. He seemed a teasing sort of person; he might make a joke about her needing to pee. She would speak brusquely on the phone to show him she wasn't timid. I got lost, she would tell her mother, as if it were a small thing. I'm at an uncle's house. You can pick me up. Here, he'll give you directions.

She followed him through the gate and up the front steps. Inside, there was a divan, a cloth-covered television, and, off to the side, a square table with two metal folding chairs. The uncle didn't look back to check if she was there. He left his briefcase and mousambi bag on the floor. It was the smallest dwelling she had ever been in. A small house for a small uncle, she thought. The green walls seemed to be sweating. There were no photographs or paintings, only a calendar with a colorful print of the goddess Lakshmi seated in a lotus.

You want something to drink? he asked. Bejois, Limca? From a fridge no higher than his shoulder he took out a chilled bottle and brought it to her on a tray, the same way she was served at home by the cook. She put the bottle to her lips, and her throat flooded with a sweet cooling that spread through her stomach and out to her toes.

He looked past her to the entrance. For a moment she thought he was going to make his way back to the door and close it. Instead

he began to roll up his shirtsleeves. His arms were thin and very hairy. He stepped to the wash basin beside the kitchen counter and ran water over his hands. You'll have something to eat? he asked over his shoulder.

Can I please use the telephone, uncle? She looked around for it.

He dried his hands on a frayed towel. Don't you want to have a wash first?

She stepped to the wash basin and cleaned herself, wincing as the soap stung her scraped palms. Beside her, the uncle had turned on the stove and was stirring the contents of a frying pan. Have some fried rice, he said. I'm just warming it up.

She wanted to ask if she could make the telephone call first, but it seemed rude to say no to his offer. So she waited. He divided the rice between two steel plates. Best when it's hot, he said.

She hadn't realized how hungry she was. Within minutes her spoon was scraping the last of the food from the plate. He ate more slowly. His bald patch shone like porcelain under the ceiling bulb. He asked if she had any hobbies. From her shoulder bag she produced the vase and the cowrie shell necklace.

Wear the necklace, he said.

She obliged, tying the ends behind her neck.

A single grain of rice caught in his black moustache. You are very pretty, he said.

Can I make the call now, Uncle? Please?

Will you do me a favor first? It's a small thing. Come sit on my lap.

She'd sat on uncles' laps before, at the Bangalore Club, uncles who were friends of her parents. They'd tickled her, asked her to sing songs, given her sweets or money when she went along. But this hadn't happened in years. Perhaps the uncle thought she was younger than she actually was—six or seven years instead of twelve. She worried he might find her too heavy. He was a small man after all. But he sighed with contentment as she settled on his

knees, her bag still hanging from her shoulder. His smell was sweet, like a Parle-G biscuit.

When he bounced his knees, she giggled. He put his lips to her neck. The goddess Lakshmi gazed sternly at her from the calendar. His moustache tickled her, and she squirmed, laughing. Then his palms slithered beneath her t-shirt. They were warm, smooth. She went quiet. He encircled her waist with his narrow, hairy arm.

As she tried to wriggle free, she felt the snake part of him on the bare skin over the band of her jeans. He was wet, like a tongue. He hissed in her ear. He was about to bite. Around her neck the cowrie shells rattled. She shrieked with all her might and kicked him in the shins. He pushed her off his lap, and she stumbled away toward the half-open door. Many years later, after she'd left Bangalore and settled in a larger, colder city across the globe, it would occur to her that perhaps he'd deliberately left the door open, that he'd hoped she'd flee before he could do his worst. There were two kinds of men in the world: those who knew they were snakes and those who didn't. The first kind were easier to escape from.

She found her way back to the main road, to a haze of headlights and smog. When the pavement ended, she found herself in an alleyway. Outside a low window she paused. A television screen flickered; a girl her age was sitting cross-legged on the floor, and a woman sat behind on a stool, braiding the girl's hair. Off to the side an old man tottered across the room and, with hands that trembled, picked up a magazine. The lamplight was soft. The people looked kind.

But the more she willed herself to go around to the front door and ring the bell, the more difficult it was to move. She heard jingles from television ads, hot oil sputtering, the screams of a baby. The noises were comforting. She climbed an outdoor staircase to a terrace. A sliver of moon illuminated the surrounding terraces—

concrete rectangles dotted with television antennas and criss-crossed with clotheslines. Beyond, an uneven spread of twinkling lights gave way to dark, empty space.

A water tank stood against the terrace wall. She squatted and put her mouth straight to the tap. The water was warm, having absorbed the heat of the day.

In a corner, beside a potted tulasi plant, she sobbed and trembled; she peed in her clothes and didn't care. Something in her was coming to an end. The way turning a new age on a birthday meant she would never again be eleven, or ten, or nine, a part of herself was being sloughed off for good.

Her body settled, her breathing steadied. She watched an airplane slide through the clouds. All night her eyes remained open. A star rose, another fell. A glimmer of dawn spilled over the horizon. She didn't know that within an hour a maidservant would come up to sweep the terrace and find her dozing there, cross-legged beside the potted plant, still as a sculpture. By then the newspapers would have gone out with her face on the front page, under the headline *Daughter of Eminent Bangalore Couple Suspected Kidnapped.*

For now, the girl watched the city flood with daylight. Short houses clustered in the gaps between rain trees. The odd high-rise with its cage of scaffolding stuck out rigidly like a bandaged finger. She sat up to see as far as she could. For an instant the world looked flat. Like a mural on a vast, curved wall. If she'd extended a hand, she might have touched it.

Shubha Sunder's debut short story collection, *Boomtown Girl*, won the 2021 St. Lawrence Book Award and was a finalist for the Hudson Prize, the Flannery O'Connor Award, and the New American Fiction Prize. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Boston Mayor's Office of Art & Culture, and the Corporation of Yaddo. She grew up in Bangalore, India, and now lives in Boston, Massachusetts.