

From HONOR by Thrity Umrigar

CHAPTER FIVE



SMITA'S HEART BEGAN to flutter, and her hands turned clammy within moments of strolling down the Causeway. Her anxiety wasn't caused by the vendors at the roadside stalls who begged her to examine their leather purses and silver jewelry and wooden statues. It wasn't because she heard her own distant laughter in the laughter coming from the schoolgirls walking ahead of her, saw her former self in the way they half skipped, half walked down the sidewalk.

It wasn't because she passed Metro Shoes and remembered going there with Mummy at the start of each school year. It wasn't because she passed shops selling schoolbags and remembered Papa buying new backpacks for her and Rohit at the start of each school year. It wasn't even because she walked past the Olympia Coffee House and remembered the egg *bhurji* breakfast that Papa used to sometimes treat her to on Saturdays.

Her hands went clammy because she was close to the one street that she'd hoped to avoid forever.

Spencer Road. What does it look like now? she wondered. Would it hold any signs of her family's life there, or had time papered over its absence? Did any of their old neighbors still live there? The ones who would remember that day in 1996? Beatrice Auntie, the kindly Christian woman who had lived across the street from them, was probably long dead. But surely, there were others who remembered her family fondly—who recalled, for instance, how Papa would buy fireworks for all the neighborhood children to celebrate Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights? Some who felt a pinprick of guilt even after all this time? Or had the dark waters of time pooled around that one incident?

Smita stopped walking, coming to such an abrupt stop that the young man behind her almost ran into her. She found a spot under an awning, away from the press of people. Her heart beat so hard, she felt dizzy. It was as if her very body was protesting the incomprehensible thought forming in her mind—she wanted to go see it, her old street.

Don't be ridiculous, she chided herself. *There's nothing there for you to see. Let the past remain the past. You have nothing to say to those people, not anymore.* But a new idea wormed itself into her head: She wanted to visit the old neighborhood not so much for her own sake as for Papa's. At some point, she would have to tell him about her visit to Mumbai. She didn't have to worry about Papa finding out by reading one of her articles in the paper; ever since November 2016, he had stopped watching the news and eventually had let his subscription to her newspaper lapse. "We came to this country believing it was the world's greatest democracy," he'd said when they argued. "And now, look at what damage this man is doing. I mean, banning Muslims from entering the country? Kidnapping children from their parents? Is this the country we came to? I will still vote, *beta*. But I cannot bear to read about what these people are doing. My heart cannot take it."

But Papa would be crushed when he found out that she'd been a ten-minute walk away from their old neighborhood and had not visited. She knew he would be curious about how the area had changed and would pepper her with questions. Buoyed by this thought, Smita began to walk again, ignoring the thudding in her chest. She retraced her steps and cut across one of the by-lanes. Much to her chagrin, she was disoriented within minutes, unable to recognize a single landmark. She stopped and asked for directions to Spencer Road. It turned out she was only two streets away.

When she reached her destination, she stood still, waiting for the pounding in her heart to quieten, her eyes darting nervously as she looked up and down the street. Was it possible that someone would recognize her as the gangly fourteen-year-old girl who had lived there before she left for America? She gazed up at the Harbor Breeze Apartments, the seven-story cream-colored building across the street. Scaffolding covered the front, and she could see that the building was being painted. How shabby and rundown it looked, so different from the posh building she remembered. *Does everything look new and unblemished in our youth?* It was only the bougainvillea that draped over the whitewashed outer wall and the single coconut tree that grew in the small front yard that made the place recognizable to her.

Smita didn't dare turn to look at the building behind her, where Beatrice Auntie had lived. She was already nervous; looking at Beatrice's building would make her come undone.

At the sound of a sharp crack, she jumped. It was only the noise of a bat smacking a ball, from the boys playing cricket down the street—but it was enough to make her realize just how jittery and nervous she was.

On the heels of that realization, she felt anger, as sharp and clean as the sound of that bat smacking that ball. What was she doing, skulking around here, cowering on the street? As if *she* had done something wrong, as if *she* had something to hide. Trembling at the thought of running into one of her former neighbors.

Smita remembered with bitterness how traumatic the first few

years in Ohio had been for her mother. How terribly long it had taken Mummy to make new friends, to trust anyone outside her immediate family. How she'd rebuffed the friendliness of the other mothers when they tried to include her in their outings and lunches. How she'd sat alone at home during the day while Smita and Rohit were at school and her husband at work, a shadow of the gregarious, warmhearted woman who had once been the beating heart of the social activities of this building.

Through the tangle of memories, Smita thought of Pushpa Patel. Mummy's best friend. Chiku's mother. *Maybe she still lives here?*

Without another thought, Smita stepped off the curb to cross the street. A motorcyclist on the one-way street missed her by inches, but she scarcely registered the words he shouted at her.

In the lobby, she looked up at the large wooden board with the apartment numbers of the building's residents. There was Pushpa Patel's name and apartment number, 3B, as it had always been. She had spent so much of her childhood in that flat. And then, as if tonguing a pain she couldn't ignore, she searched the board again until she found apartment 5C. Their old apartment.

To avoid the battery of questions from the liftman, Smita took the stairs. On the third floor, she recognized the brown, flecked floor tile on which she and Chiku used to play hopscotch. The smell of fried food hovered like an open umbrella over the door to the apartment. The anger that had propelled her in from the street had vanished, and in its place was a heart-pounding nervousness. Hand on the doorbell, she waited for the queasiness in her belly to settle. *You can still leave*, she said to herself, even though she knew she wouldn't. She rang the bell and heard its long ding-dong chime.

A moment passed. *Shit*, Smita thought. *This is a fucking mistake.* But just then the door opened, and there was Pushpa Auntie's rotund face, older but familiar, peering at her. "Yes?" the woman inquired. "Can I help you?"

Smita's mouth went dry. She waited for a flicker of recognition to

spark on Pushpa's face, but instead the older woman's brow furrowed in confusion. "Can I help?" she said again.

Too many years had gone by, Smita realized. What a son of a bitch time was, chewing up everything in its path.

The door was closing on her, Mrs. Patel retreating into the apartment. "Pushpa Auntie, it's me," Smita said in a rush. "Smita Agarwal."

But Pushpa Patel looked as confused as before. *How old is she now?* Smita wondered. *A little older than Papa?*

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Patel was saying. "You have the wrong number." As if this encounter were a phone call, instead of a face-to-face visit.

"Pushpa Auntie, it's me," Smita said again. "Your old neighbor from 5C."