American Spirit

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Sara Sahni

American Spirit

Rachna bunches her shoulders, exhaling a breath of sweetness from syrupy "khoa galab jamun," her after school snack. She slumps in the kitchen chair while looking out the bay window, her complacent gaze serene like lotus flowers. She's forgotten about the wrinkled notebook paper sandwiched between the pages of her spelling book. Her body, dimpled with baby fat, shifts methodically, slightly rocking the feet of the chair. The house is still. Only Rachna and I are home. While I fry Ranjeet's favorite meal for hot sticky days like today—spinach and potato fried pakoras rubbed in curry topped over sweet-smelling basmati rice—I see Rachna from the corner of my eye, intermittently nursing the ball of her thumb in her lily-thin mouth. The Arizona blistering September heat rubs up against red-hot oil, splaying my skin with a clinging, indiscernible smell.

"Rachna baby, what's wrong?"

"Mummy, when is Papa coming home?"

"Soon, beta. Only an hour or so more. Papa is very busy."

"The Chevron is busy, Mummy? No, Papa promised he'd take me for pizza today. He said so yesterday at the store!" She throws her arms over her head in protest, her chapped lips ballooning into a pout. "I don't want Indian food! I want pizza!"

"Chal! Quiet! Start your homework. Enough daydreaming. Time for news now. You sit with me or do your homework. Your choice."

"Sit with you!" she bellows, her bright eyes snowy with anticipation. I turn off the wok; I have made plenty of pakoras for now. My body moves slowly to the living room couch, my ankles swollen and too heavy to hold me up. Rachna bounces like all happy little girls do, pulling at the hem of my sari. Her truthful, innocent eyes cannot grasp the week's terrifying ache. She says her schoolteacher talks about the twin towers collapsing and lets
Rachna and her classmates draw and paint with colors from the rainbow during milk breaks. No one is the same anymore. We all seem a little shorter as if time suddenly stood still. We carry yesterday's pain on our backs.

"Bus, beta. Come, sit." I sink into the couch, the cream color of paratha dough, resting my limp body. I let out a deep, sonorous sigh while Rachna collapses into my lap.

"Mummy, I want to watch Blues Clues! No, Sesame Street. Yes, Sesame Street! Please Mummy!"

"Shhh. Enough baby, enough. It's not on now. Be good, beta. Papa is coming home soon." Her face softens into a pillow as I click on the TV. We watch Peter Jennings. Such a handsome man. Agnes, who works the second shift at the convenient store on weekends, doesn't like him.

I close my eyes for a few minutes of peace. The news settles Rachna into a drowsy dream. Taciturn and sleepy faced, she doesn't like him. She says he sleeps around too much with women half his age.

I sit in the living room, listening to the radio, occasionally glancing over to watch Rachna sleep. She is so beautiful, so innocent. I want to watch Sesame Street. I want to believe him. I want to watch Sesame Street. I want to believe him.

Elderly Mr. Rodriguez from across the street asks Pitaji to mow his lawn. And Mark just calls out, "Dad, please!"

"Business is a business. But there's no business today!" He looks around the empty room. "Are we going to get the flowers ready for tomorrow?" He shakes his head, his words sliced in half.

"From behind his father's leg, timid to embrace me. I bend down to hug his thick cocoa frame; he smells of hot dogs and gasoline.

"Did you have a snack at the store, beta?" With a shy smile he nods yes, and scurries upstairs to his bedroom speckled with Pokemon. He runs to his daytime world to escape the day's nagging pain.

"How was work?"

"Fine, fine. Simon worked hard today. Little Rachna asleep?"

"Hey!" His face looks old as lotus root, weary and worn down. I take his hand, rubbing my stretched fingers against his rough, calloused hands. His almond-shaped eyes are generous and loving. His eyes melt the hardest of hearts.

"I don't understand, why?" I exclaim.

"They say..." He falls silent, his words sliced in half. "The people are saying Davinder and Rajan laughed and cheered while watching... watching the buildings collapse." I sit in horror, watching the words fall from my husband's pallid lips.

"But... but there's no TV! They have no TV in any of them! No TV!"

"And the people... in the stores, if you only could see them. They are telling us we are unwanted, asking us to go back to our country. I don't know... I don't know where to go back. This is in my country, I tell them. This place." I picture their hate-suffused faces, the words thrown like a rock into the street. Ranjeet's heartache pours from his limbs. He's not angry, only paralyzed by the grief of his Sikh brothers. I can see his khanda hovering beside him, the double-edged sword of courage. He is a true Sikh, faithful to the Khalsa, the brotherhood of soldier-saints.

Ranjeet's Khalsa spirit simmers inside his heart, rooted in courage, loyalty, and devotion. He mourns the losses of his Sikh brothers with forgiving eyes. He says people here
are scared of the violence happening again; this is why they hate us. This is why they speak with such hateful words. Ranjeet's soft and understanding melodic voice echoes in my ears. His faithful, loving spirit gleams from his sweet and loving smile.

But I am not so blessed. Not so forgiving. Something inside implores me to scream, to rip the heavy air that consumes us. It's too still. My father used to say I had a temper like a man and had no religious sense to put out the fire. He said to respect more, speak less. I feel it stir within me now, a fiery rage wanting to spill out. But I cannot. The children must not worry. They must not be scared. They must love this country, to welcome it with open arms as it welcomed us years ago. I garner strength that's been unused for moons of time, wiping away stored collections of dust.

"Dharjee, let me fix you some food. Come." I sit up from the table to prepare dinner. Tonight I will wipe away the day's mess of reminders. It will be a special meal. I will gently dash just the right amount of garam masala into the cool creamy yogurt sauce; yes, not too spicy, not too mild.

My heart palpitating, I savor Ranjeet's sweet almond eyes and cocoa brown skin. His lips are like two crescent moons making love. He's in a far away place. I'm here, I'm here, I whisper. He sits silently until he hears Rachna's baby-soft footsteps scurry down the hall. Forcing the weight of his body from the seat of the chair, he stands up, shoulders back, chest forward. Little Rachna runs to her Papa, calling his name in her sing-song voice. He picks her up, playfully throwing her into the air like the skateboarding boys outside the store who throw butter popcorn into the gummy Arizona air, waiting for the popped kernels to dribble down their open mouths. Rachna giggles, clapping her arms around her Papa's neck, relaying the day's events at school. Ranjeet sits down, collapsing against the back of the chair with Rachna tangled up in his lap. Simon tumbles down the stairs, running to his father's lap; he motions to Rachna that it's his turn to climb up. Before Rachna can claim her voice to protest, Ranjeet shifts Rachna to his left leg and lifts Simon up onto his right, tenderly pinching their dimpled cheeks. The air, peppered with masala and the love-sounds of children laughing, smells of home. Yes, tonight will be special.

* * *

The children are asleep. Ranjeet is in the bathroom brushing his teeth. I'm lying in bed wearing my new nightgown from Sears. It is thin and airy. I love the color, the same violet blue as the vinc flowers that grew outside my parents' home in Delhi. The room smells of freshly burned sage. Pushpa Auntie says it's good for cleansing the soul. I bought a bundle at Lakshmi's Indian grocery last week. The two-lipped leaves are supposed to wipe away evil spirits. Lakshm, the grocery owner, says it's good for new beginnings. Solve any problems, especially marriage ones. Helps in bed, you know. I'm not tired. The muscles in my body are taut, clenched. I don't want Ranjeet to go to the store tomorrow. Doesn't seem safe. Doesn't seem right. He turns off the bathroom light and rests his willed body on the bed.
brown Lincoln, such a big American car, reliable. I climb into the passenger seat with room enough for two, my right hand clutching the burgundy leathered door handle. Auntie looks peaked, weak. Somatic changes bubble inside of me. I’m afraid to breathe.

“What is it Auntie?”

“Something’s happened. We must go.” The store. Something’s all wrong inside. My head is too heavy to hold up. The store is two blocks from our home. I can’t keep my eyes open. Pushpa Auntie is mute with fear. I want to shake it out of her! Turn her inside out! Is it Ranjeet? Tell me. Breathe Rani. Breathe. I feel light, ethereal. We make a left onto High street. I can see the Chevron up ahead, glistening with American flag lights. Flashes of red, white, and blue flicker uncontrollably; it’s too much to bear. Swarms of sun-dabbled, heat-exhausted people stand behind something that looks like fluorescent yellow measuring tape. I cannot see: something stands between reality and me. Has maya come to put a spell on me? The car comes to a quick halt. Pushpa Auntie nods, motioning me to go. I want to tell her to come with me. I want to tell her about last night, how sage charmed my marriage. I want to thank her for giving me a starry night of constellations, promising my family hope and new beginnings.

I tumble out of the car, running barefoot towards the store. The parking lot is filled with familiar freckled faces, some old, some young. My body feels thick and heavy like the muddy wet earth. Ranjeet! I yell so deep that I feel the air digging into my lungs. Ranjeet! I force my legs forward with quick, succinct steps; my hair flashes through the air like a streak of pepper gray lightning. My robe brushes against the hot black top that soaks my feet. Peoples’ faces turn to see me. I push through the smog of people, fumbling my way to the front of the store. Our store: of homemade memories. A man in uniform with eyes sweet as honey sees me. It is Thomas, Ranjeet’s police friend who buys cheesy puffs and a Coke every afternoon. His hand, the color of French vanilla ice cream, grabs my left arm, pulling me underneath the yellow border. He holds me like Ranjeet once did, warm and safe. Tell me he’s here; tell me he’s still inside, I say. He rocks me gently, scrupulously sweet. I cry uncontrollably, pools of pain pour from my eyes, my voice turning to slush. He holds me underneath the searing Arizona sun whispering honeyed apologies while uniform after uniform slowly fades into the morning.

* * *

It only takes the police five hours to catch the man in the black Chevy pickup that emptied out Ranjeet’s last breath. I watch it on the news from my living room, surrounded by loved ones and simple, kind-hearted strangers. We watch the man with the doughnut-rimmed belly and silvery brown hair turn himself in, never looking back. Frank Silva Roque is his name. He says I’m an American. Arrest me. Let those terrorists run wild.

Streaks of reds and purples dip into the sky’s perfect blue while the sun lays its last rays against thick, heavy clouds. I sit outside on the patio wearing the sari Pushpa Auntie picked out from my bedroom closet only a few hours ago. The sari was a wedding gift from a distant cousin. So pretty. Adult sweet talk has replaced the abrasive television noise from hours before. People fill the house like the masala from yesterday’s dinner: neighbors, friends, no-name strangers. Some I know and remember, but many, I don’t.

The phone cannot stop ringing. Only minutes ago, Ranjeet’s mother cried out Punjabi tales of Rajput princes that I couldn’t understand even with MCI’s special long-distance service. I return outside, letting Pushpa Auntie handle all that I’ve forgotten. I hear her nervously give humble thanks while talking to the Indian Prime Minister. Clusters of unknown couples and families fill up the house’s sudden emptiness, their gentle kindness soothing the pain in my back. I hear laughter again. Plates of food adorn Mr. Rodriguez’s donated tables. Flowers in vases as tall as Rachna sit in each available space. Guru Kaur Khalsa, dressed in simple white, the color of mourning in India, stands to my left shaking hands with Thomas, who casts a Peter Jennings smile that glows like the moon. Thomas comes towards me, bending down to hug my willowy frame. Simon and Rachna run towards him covered in sticky, limp sand from playing in their sandbox with children of all ages and sizes. He turns around as they call his name in sweet, long syllables, opening his welcoming arms to Rachna and Simon’s embrace. People are huddled around us, squeezing my soft shoulders and stroking my uncut hair, their eyes fixed on the children. Thomas scoops up Rachna like ice cream in the summer time, playfully tossing her into the air. She giggles, burping up bubbles of sweetness. I muster up the strength to sit up, bits of courage seeping in. Simon lightly skips a few feet towards me, wrapping his baby boy arms around my right leg. Pushpa Auntie returns from inside, and takes hold of my hand. It’s calm, peaceful outside. Surrounding gentle faces warm my insides. A mild breeze glides across my shoulders, brushing against my sari, the color of sunlight, as I playfully ruffle Simon’s hair. Simon arches his head back, his lips rising to kiss the crest of my right thigh. Unexpected solace slips in slowly. Ranjeet. I can feel him inside my heart, his Khalsa spirit rising. Rising. Rising.

(For Balbir Singh Sodhi 1953-2002)