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Returning to Windy Gap Island

I leaned over the side of the rowboat and vomited as a speed boat full of drunk college kids from Duluth sped by. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, careful to hold my hair back so it wouldn't get tangled in the corners of my mouth. The weight of my body and my backpack pulled the small vessel down, so it sat low in the choppy water. I took another moment to rest and let the waters calm before continuing.

My episode of seasickness, combined with the wake of the speedboat, had sent my small craft rocking. I quickly secured my backpack and scrambled to check on its contents. The urn containing my mother sat snugly at the bottom of my bag next to her silk dupatta. It had been eight years since I'd last been to the lake, let alone Windy Gap, and unlike my previous trips — filled with perfectly roasted marshmallows and board games in the sunroom — this visit was strictly business. I had been given exactly three weeks leave from the hospital to fly from New York to Minnesota and complete my tasks: sort my mother's affairs, sell the lake house, and finally deliver my mother's ashes to Windy Gap.

I resumed pushing the oars and examined the expanse of sky and water stretching out before me, blending in a dusty haze on the horizon just above the pines. It was early fall, and red-orange flecks were beginning to speckle the trees that lined the shore. Families that travelled to the lake for the summer were packing up their vans and heading back to whatever quaint Minnesotan suburb they came from. The sweet notes of the goldfinches were only soured by the lingering taste of bile and the banana I had eaten for lunch. Their melody wrapped around me like a familiar memory of better times on the water.

In my childhood, whenever we visited the lake, my mother would rise early and drink her chai on the porch, listening to the birds call out to one another in the misty morning. My mother's favorite time of the day was 5:30am. It was the only time when the house was totally quiet and she couldn't be bothered by me or my father, who usually got up around 7:30. She'd mop the kitchen while listening to Asha Bhosle, her hips bopping as she dusted the living room to Bollywood showtunes. Sometimes she'd even cook breakfast: eggs, bacon, and toast with a side of freshly squeezed orange juice.

My Naani hated that she cooked American food, angry that my mother abandoned her traditional Sindhi breakfast of koki and dal pakwan for sausage and grits. My mother was always in a bad mood when her mother visited. As soon as my mother put her earbuds in and started a track on her iPod, Naani would already be in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on an Indian breakfast of loli or idli sambar. My mother would slink off to the den and spend her usually peaceful hours of the morning behind the computer, slapping it every time the internet stalled. Most of Naani's visits consisted of her hovering over my mother, waiting for her to forget to pay a bill or feed me lunch. And when it happened, which it inevitably did, she would scold my mother and never let her forget it.

What I would give to have a loli right now, I thought as my vessel rocked in the wake of yet another speedboat, the oar locks clicking in time. Lake Vermillion had changed a lot since the last time I was there. The once quiet and peaceful waters were now full of college kids partying on gas-guzzling speedboats. During my time in college, it became popular for students in Minnesota to rent lake houses and party in them during the long weekends or for spring break.

Luckily, my family's lake house was farther down the shore, so I experienced few symptoms of the co-ed invasion. Instead, with the influx of families from the Duluth suburbs, development companies were beginning to swarm Lake Vermillion, snatching up properties for renovation like vultures. Still, I hoped that they could take the lake house off of my hands and rid me of its burden.

I stretched my sore muscles and grasped the oars, lowering them into the water, and began to row again. As I pushed the rowboat along, I listened to the laughter of children splashing along the banks and the revving of a speedboat engine as it drew closer to my vessel. The bass from the speakers made the boat look like it was vibrating. Bikini clad girls and shirtless boys lifted solo cups of jungle juice and beer in the air, their "Saturdays are for the Boys" flag billowing in the breeze. The driver slowed the boat down and began to pull closer to me, the waves violently rocking my craft.

"Hey!" A guy, who looked no more than twenty-one, with teeth as straight and white as he was called out to me.

"Hello?" I shot back, irritated by his overconfidence in his looks. I thought of how Marisol, my girlfriend of the past four years, would've made a snarky remark about how he looked like a privileged Vineyard Vines wearing douchebag whose parents paid his way into Yale.

"We're all heading to the Phi Kapp house down the shore for a party later," he said. His lips drew into a smirk as he leaned his forearms on the railing of the boat. "You should come!" A girl not three feet away was shot gunning a beer, the frothy mist spraying into my boat as she pierced the can.

"I think I'll pass," I said through a forced smile, "but thanks for the invite though."

"C'mon, it'll be fun! Nothing crazy, just a celebration of the three-day weekend," He shifted his weight uncomfortably, clearly thrown off by my glare. "Plus, I mean... I'll be there, so —"

"Look kid, I'm twenty-five. I graduated college like three years ago, so my days of throwing back shots and rallying for darters are over. I'm just here on business, so if you don't mind, leave me the hell alone."

"Bitch." he mumbled under his breath as I lifted the oars again and resumed my journey, leaving pretty-boy and the Pi Phi sisters to their quest for cheap beer and Jager bombs. As they continued, the din of the motor blended with the rustling of leaves and the wind, making the lake anew. Their noises made me long for the days when the Lake was quiet, except for the sound of the waves lapping the sandy shore.

Growing up, most of our time spent on the lake made for fond memories. For my tenth birthday, my parents decided we would hold a small picnic on Windy Gap and play in the water until sunset. But when the morning of my birthday arrived, a storm was passing through, making it impossible to row out to the island. I cried and cried as my mother tried to console me, her frustration with my endless wailing becoming visible.

“Okay, okay sweetheart if you stop crying, we can drive into town, go to Target and pick out anything you want for your birthday. How does that sound?” I slowly calmed down and a smile spread across my puffy face. “But you have to promise me and dad you’ll stop crying.”

My father drove as carefully as he could through the precarious weather to the nearest Target. Inside, I ran through the toy isles picking out Barbies and My Little Pony dolls.

“How about, instead we pick up something we can all work on together?” My father said as he knelt down in the board game aisle. “Maybe Monopoly? Or Clue?” We picked out a Harry Potter themed Clue set and Star Wars Legos. My mother was off grabbing ingredients for a box cake and canned frosting which she would whip into a simple dessert with “Happy Birthday!” written in sprinkles. My father and I spent the rest of the day building a Lego replica of the Millennium Falcon and eating cake as my mother smiled and watched.

I think Lake Vermillion was the only thing my mother liked about moving all the way from Ujjain to Minnesota. When she was twenty-three, she arrived in New York with her friend Harsha and started writing for a small paper in the Village. She mostly wrote culture pieces: profiles about local LGBTQ activists, reviews of obscure foreign films, and event coverages of the happenings in Washington Square Park.

When I was seven, I climbed into the attic of the lake house where I found a shoebox full of polaroids of my mother and Harsha out at bars in tweed skirts and oversized cotton turtlenecks, drinking coffee on the steps of the New York Public Library, and making funny faces at the lion statues out front. They modeled elegant dresses that they thrifted and wore to pricey restaurants once a month, searching for a taste of New York’s glamour on a writer’s budget. There were shots of them in facemasks, drinking what I thought at the time was juice but must’ve been cheap wine. Buried underneath her many polaroids from New York sat a small envelope. Amid various photographs was a worn portrait of my mother and Naani staring stoically at the camera, Naani’s hand resting cold and detached on my mother’s shoulder.

After about a year in New York, she met my father, a business consultant from Akron, at a small club downtown. They weren’t dating for long before she got pregnant and he convinced her to marry him to which she said yes, in all of her naivete. Naani was most disapproving of the match. After her husband died — my Naana, who I never met, was a severe man with a horrific smoking habit that inevitably led to lung cancer — she made a plan for my mother’s future that was sure would benefit them both. My mother was to remain in India after completing her degree in journalism, move to Mumbai, and find a nice Hindu man in the finance world who could support the two of them. But much to Naani’s disappointment, my mother had other plans. First there was moving to New York, then getting pregnant out of wedlock, and the final nail in the

coffin, marrying a WASP. Their wedding was a small and fast affair with no reception, only a dinner between embittered in-laws and eager soon-to-be parents. Despite resenting my mother for the small wedding, and making this disappointment known regularly, Naani held onto her hopes of living in the Big Apple. But after I was born, and my father lost his first job, they moved to Duluth — me and Naani in tow — and his alcoholic tendencies began unraveling their marriage into a thankless mess.

I think Lake Vermillion was the only place my parents really knew peace. During the drives up to the lake, my mother would wipe the corner of my father's mouth when he sloppily ate a bagel while driving, getting cream cheese all over his face. When he had a bad day at work and shut himself in their room, she would cook lasagna and put on *The Godfather*, his favorite movie, to help him calm down. But these small acts of patience couldn't mask the smell of booze on my father's breath when he sauntered out the door for work or when he passed out after his fourth beer of the evening as I played with my Barbies at his feet. They couldn't make up for my mother spending hours on end behind the computer and snapping at me when I asked her to play. While he was gone, she'd cook us dinner in silence, leaving a cold plate of leftovers on the dining table for my father, and I think they called that love.

After I was born, my mother became a devout Hindu — apart from her habit of eating meat, an Americanism that stuck with her from her time in New York. We lit candles around the house and cooked vats of dal and bhindi aloo for Diwali and ate mountains of rice and laddoo for Ganesh Chaturthi. We did elaborate poojas every night, but I never understood a word because my mother neglected to teach me Sanskrit and Hindi. Nevertheless, she saddled me with the name Lakshmi. But since white people couldn't pronounce it, and I didn't know what it meant, I started to go by Lucky, much to her disappointment.

Before he left us, my father began teaching me how to row. When we travelled out to Windy Gap, he showed me how to generate strength from my lower instead of my upper body to prevent straining my back and arms. He showed me how to control the power of the oar while still allowing the blade to cut gracefully through the murky water in one swift motion. After he began to teach me, my mother signed me up for the crew team at school, thinking that if I could excel, it could be my ticket to Columbia University. But I quickly discovered just how untalented I was at sports. I could work out and get stronger, but whatever talent and drive one needs to be an athlete, I lacked it. She also signed me up for the debate team and model UN, two things I hated perhaps more than being bad at crew. When she wasn't hunched over the keyboard writing an article or paying bills, she was yelling at me to get ready for practice or club meetings. All of it was in the name of getting into Columbia; or Harvard or Yale if that didn't work out.

Much like Naani, my mother had a plan for how my life would unfold after Columbia. There would be grad school — preferably at another Ivy — marriage to a doctor or a lawyer (someone who could support her in her old age) and kids. Lots of kids; and of course, moving to New York with me to babysit all these children that I was supposedly going to have. Part of me believes she wanted me to succeed and be happy, of course. But I also think she wanted an excuse to go back to New York, even if it meant, like her mother, following me.

It was safe to say I was underqualified for any Ivy League school, so rejections came pouring in. But instead of screaming at me or comparing me to my friends — who got acceptances to Vassar, Hopkins, and Brown — she quietly paid for my enrollment at the University of Minnesota’s main campus in Minneapolis.

The sun was on its arc down toward the horizon, but I wanted to make it back to the lake house before sunset. The lake house had finally been revived from its state of disarray, and I was tired of sleeping on an air mattress. I longed to be back in my cramped apartment, among the dozens of plants I bought in desperate attempts to produce more serotonin. I missed my Pomeranian, Mogu, and the feeling of his cold, wet nose on my cheek in the morning. It wasn’t enough to see his little face on my daily Facetime calls with Marisol. I think I missed Marisol the most. I missed the way her tongue poked out between her lips when she was concentrating, like when she cooked or when she read a good book. She wanted to come with me, but between her law school exams and struggling to find a dog sitter for Mogu, it was decided that she would stay behind.

Marisol loved my mother, and my mother loved her. Even though my mother grew up in a conservative Indian household, she left behind many of their “traditional family values”, only bringing with her a slight accent. She first met Marisol when I was a junior in college, only three months after we had started dating, at a small Italian restaurant in Minneapolis.

“Mom, this is my girlfriend, Marisol,” I could tell she would be critical of my relationship choices, wanting me to find a person who would support not just me, but a whole family including her. Someone who was smart and witty, but not overly ambitious. “She’s studying economics and literature, but she’s actually planning to go to law school after graduation,” the tension in my mother’s face seemed to dissolve as I told her this news.

“Good, good,” she said with a soft smile.

“Lucky tells me you’re a big fan of Patti Smith,” Marisol chimed in. “She actually came to speak on campus about *M Train* about a month ago. My mom used to play her music around the house when I was little, so I was quite starstruck when I met her,” she laughed.

I recalled the way Marisol made my mother laugh over glasses of pinot noir and warm ciabatta rolls as I continued to push the bow of the boat through the dark waters of the lake. The college kids seemed to have passed and were off drinking somewhere. I deserved a drink after all I went through getting the lake house ready for sale. But the thought of drinking alone just reminded me of my father and the alcoholism that consumed our final summer together.

The spring semester of my junior year of high school, before my many college rejection letters came in, my mother found out my father was having an affair; a shock to no one. In addition to his infidelity, my father’s alcoholic tendencies had worsened; but my mother made

sure he never laid a hand on her or me. He started seeking treatment, though it was seventeen years too late, and the toll on their marriage was wearing away at my mother.

She stopped holding pooja at night. By Diwali, the kitchen no longer smelled of cardamom and my mother's hands were no longer stained with turmeric the way they always were. Instead, the freezer was piled high with frozen meals and pizza. Second notices on gas and electric bills started coming in, and 5:30am was filled with silence in the absence of my mother's morning routine.

"Mom, I'm driving to crew practice, okay?" I'd say, leaning into the den, talking to her backside as she sat silently, not typing, behind her computer.

"Hm," she'd grunt back.

"Do you need me to get anything from the store on my way back?" No response. "Okay. Well, you can call if you need anything." No response again. I would lean on the door frame just a second longer until she snapped out of her trance.

"Wait, wait... umm milk I think." I reminded her that we already had two full gallon bottles from my last trip. "Oh yes... well, maybe grab some dinner for yourself, Lakshmi. I'll be going to bed early tonight." Sure, enough by the time I returned at 7:30, her bedroom door would be shut.

My father's therapist recommended that we take a trip up to the lake as a family and get a break from our lives in Duluth. We were instructed to be there for two weeks and spend some time on Windy Gap or playing board games in the sunroom of the lake house. But my mother spent her time behind the closed door of her bedroom, and my father would sleep on the couch well into the afternoon. Most mornings I would wake up to find whiskey shooters or a flask poking out from underneath the pullout bed, careful to nudge them away so my mother wouldn't see on her brief walks from the bedroom to the bathroom. Then I'd quietly grab a pop tart and a book, and head down to the dock until my father called me in for lunch.

One morning, about a week into our trip, I woke up to the smell of bacon frying and the ding of the old toaster oven. It was just after 7:00am and the smell of bacon and eggs, and the sound of Bollywood showtunes wafted in from the kitchen. My mother was up and preparing breakfast. My father was still out cold, a small bottle of whiskey peeking out from underneath the mattress. She was humming, hips swaying in a cotton dress that spilled down her figure. I tried to quickly kick the bottle under the couch, but my mother turned around to face me before I could.

"Take a seat, *beta*," my mother said, a small smile on her lips. I cautiously woke my father and sat down at the dining table as she began to dole out the food. My father attempted to look sober as he sat across from her, his bleary eyes trying to disguise themselves as sleep. The meal continued in silence until we were all done, and my mother looked up from her plate.

An awkward dance ensued between the three of us as my father tried to pick up all of our plates, his uncoordinated movements giving him away. My mother exuded a false cheeriness as she picked up the plate of bacon and pan of eggs off the table and began to carry them back to

the sink. But just as he turned to follow her, the plates slipped through my father's fingers and shattered on the kitchen floor.

What happened after that was a blur. My mother found the exposed whiskey bottle and began wielding it like a club. She threw the bottle and shards of the plates at his head.

"I'm so, fucking tired of this life," She wailed. "You ungrateful, useless, drunk, son of a bitch! You're drinking AGAIN? After everything you've already put me through? What you've put *Lakshmi* through? I was something before I met you, and you've taken everything from me. My love, my time, my energy, wasted on you!"

She wilted to the floor in sobs while my father yelled at her, calling her a crazy bitch before she pulled a knife off the kitchen counter and held it to her wrist. My father was in a blind range and only went silent when he saw the drops of blood blossom on my mother's white dress, her wrist bleeding profusely. The sound of her sobs filled the room. He tried to rush to her side, but before he could touch her, she pointed the bloodied knife at him and began to shriek for him to get out of the house.

I can still see the back of my father's head through the rear window of his car as he zigzagged down the path back to the main road, and I called 911 to come collect my mother.

I had stopped rowing once more and let the oars rest in their locks. The onslaught of memories released a flood of guilt, and I felt as though I would be sick again. I felt guilty for covering up for my dad, for not realizing the hurt my mother felt. Perhaps it was a sense of duty as a daughter, or my own fucked up sense of love, but I thought I was protecting her, protecting them both. Now here I was, on my way to deliver my mother's ashes, eager to get the hell out of here and back to New York. New York. The place my mother wanted so much to return to, yet when I left Minnesota to move there, I never once thought about bringing my mother along. I felt sick with selfishness for resenting my mother.

In life I hadn't given my mother the help she needed nor the respect she deserved, and I felt as though I was failing her again in death. I steadied my stomach before grabbing the oars, determined to finish this god forsaken mission, and wash my hands of this misery.

Soon after the incident, my father collected his things and rid himself of us. He moved to Palm Beach with his mistress and sent holiday cards to me when he remembered. After my mother died, he met me at the hospital where he held my hand as we said our goodbyes. We got takeout from the Chinese restaurant around the corner from my old apartment and ate quietly in my hotel room, only breaking the silence to discuss plans to take care of my mother's assets. As we rummaged through storage boxes in the attic of the lake house, my father found our dusty replica of the Millennium Falcon shoved in a box of blankets. That was the only time I ever saw him cry.

"I'm sorry, Lucky. I... I just can't do this," and with that he packed his things and left me to fend for myself once again.

I lived with my Naani after my mother's suicide attempt. I drove alone to visit her in the hospital until she was allowed to leave. Once she returned home, my mother remained a recluse. She spent most of her days holed up in the den, only leaving to produce hot plates of food just before I returned from practice. She turned away phone calls from family and friends, only accepting mail in the form of bills, divorce documents, and child support checks. She stepped back from reporting and found a smaller gig copyediting pieces for a local food blog. I quickly picked up an afterschool job, grateful to have an excuse to quit model UN, and we pooled our paychecks together so that we could stay afloat until I moved into my dorm and she could move to a smaller apartment in Duluth.

When I moved to Minneapolis, our contact began to wear thin. I had decided to get my bachelor's in nursing, and, amid late night cram sessions, term papers, working at the bookstore to make rent, and trying to maintain a semblance of a social life, I had meager moments to call my mother. I spent summers doing my clinical rotations and taking classes, so the only time I went home for an extended period was after Naani passed and my mother needed help sorting her affairs. As she organized photo albums and hand-stitched sarees, my mother began to weep. Her tears turned into heaving sobs as I knelt beside her. I placed my hand on her back, and for a moment it felt as though we were learning to carry our burden together.

I soon returned to campus and was once again preoccupied with studying. Constant and relentless studying. In the fall of my junior year, I decided to take microeconomics to fulfill a gen-ed requirement, not realizing how much I would struggle with game theory and marginal utility. During a late-night study session in the library, amid textbooks and crumpled granola bar wrappers, I buried my head in my hands and let out a groan.

"Hey, are you in Johnson's microeconomics class?" A gentle voice greeted me. I looked up at Marisol's kind and gentle face.

"Hi, uh, yeah... yes I am... unfortunately," I chuckled as I scratched my temple with the back of my pencil.

"I could tell by the little performance you put on there. I threw a similar fit last year when I was in his class, though there were more tears involved," We laughed in agreement. "My name is Marisol," She said as I reached over to shake her outstretched hand. "I can help you out if you want. I ended the semester with an A- after bombing his first test, so I think I know a thing or two."

We stayed in the library for most of the night studying market revenue and short run production amid conversations about *The Bachelorette* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Study sessions turned into coffee dates which turned into dinners where she would tell me about her passion for immigration law, inspired by her experiences watching her parents struggle to gain citizenship for most of her life. Since she was born in the U.S., she was spared from this struggle, but felt a calling to help others — including children at the border — find protection in the immigration system. After graduation, Marisol started law school at NYU and I managed to land a job in the city as well, so we decided to move in together and adopt our first child, Mogu. Working in the ICU was grueling. The hours ran long at times and holding patient's hands through their

suffering was emotionally draining. I found comfort in Mogu, biking around the city, and befriending the other nurses on the floor. When Marisol came home from the library, we would slip into our pajamas and drink margaritas while we mocked stupid TV shows. But about a year after my move, when I thought our life had finally settled into a routine, I got a call saying that there had been an accident and that my mother was in the hospital. I scraped together my vacation and sick days to get just three weeks off, booked flights, and called my dad who promised to meet me at the hospital the next day before I headed back to Minneapolis, my heart walking on a wire.

I walked the hallways of the same hospital where I did my clinical training as a nursing student, but this time it just felt wrong. All of the things people hate about the hospital — the smell of antiseptic, the glare of fluorescent lights, and the ugly linoleum floors — overwhelmed my senses. I was used to navigating the labyrinth of stairwells that led from the locker room down to the ICU. I had never entered through the ER before. That entrance was reserved for the crying parents, numb spouses, and wailing children that came to see their family members die. But now I was walking their path. A young nurse at the front desk quickly guided me back toward my mother's room where the doctors explained that she had been passing through an intersection when a tired truck driver ran a red light, the impact leaving her body close to death. No amount of training or clinical rotations or exams could prepare me to see her. I looked at her body, tubes and life support wires sprouting out of her like she was an alien. The mechanical breath of the vent still rang in my ears.

I paddled up to the small dock on Windy Gap and moored the boat to a post. I opened my bag in the boat to retrieve the urn and my mother's dupatta. I swaddled her in the dupatta and gathered her into the crux of my elbow as I descended from the dock. I found a small grove of trees under which my mother used to sit and, on the rare occasion, laugh as I played in the water. I remembered our picnics from long ago, splashing in the water to relieve the heat of the dog days of summer, and my mother fanning herself as my father and I jumped off the end of the dock. I felt hot tears roll down my face as I unscrewed the urn and reached in to feel the ashes of my mother encase my hand in a haunting embrace.

"I'm so sorry, mommy," I whispered to the ashes as the wind carried them over the sand and into the water. With each handful, a new tear fell and with it a piece of my burden. After spreading her ashes, I settled at the edge of the dock and played an old message of hers that I had saved.

"Hey, *beta*. I hope everything is going well with work. I just wanted to call you because I found this old picture of you at the lake house from that summer when we made the pies with Naani and lit fireworks for the Fourth of July," her chuckle drifted through the speaker. I smiled. "You're holding one of those sparklers and, oh my, do you look terrified!" She laughed harder this time. "I remember your father tried to take it from you and you said, 'Daddy, daddy! Be careful, it's going to burn your hand!' but he was okay, and you were okay, and I just laughed and laughed. Do you remember?" She sighed. "Well anyways, I'll talk to you soon I hope."

I untied the boat and began to row back to shore. Dusk began to paint the sky a hazy purple. The trees stood tall like dark soldiers guarding the setting sun, their figures flickering on the surface of the lake, the sound of party music drifting out of a small cabin down the shore. And for what would be the last time, Windy Gap slowly dissolved into the landscape, returning my mother to the earth.