

## The Film Star

### Deepa Bhandaru

The intern was in the middle of her cardiology rotation when the film star was transferred to the ward. He lay in a private room at the end of the hallway, a blue silk robe draped over his chest and stomach, which had grown slack since she had last seen him on screen. Once in the morning and once in the evening she came to check his vital signs, deftly lifting up his sleeve and wrapping a cuff around his upper arm, watching the soft flesh being squeezed just enough to get a reading. She recorded his blood pressure and monitored his heart rate, leaving the room as quickly as she could without making eye contact or polite conversation.

Truth be told, she was afraid of the man, and as much as she reminded herself her fear was irrational, she couldn't quite shake it. Even in his weakened condition, she could make out the villains he had been famous for depicting, the demon kings and devils from the ancient Hindu epics, which the Indian film industry had revived in the 1950s, when the intern was still a child. Like everyone of her generation, she grew up watching these mythological films, and when she thought about the gods, it was the actors who played them that came to mind. It was the same with the demons, and she couldn't help but feel repulsed each time she walked into the room and saw the film star's face, his nose curling ominously over the oxygen tube, the sinister peak of his hairline looming over his forehead.

He had been in the ward for less than a week when he asked her for cigarettes. The nurses were usually the ones to handle these requests, but it was evening, that time between shifts, and the night nurses wouldn't arrive for another half hour. She wanted to tell him to wait, but she worried he might get angry, might roar and curse like he was used to doing on screen. Worse, he might complain to Dr. Gowda or the director, and they might make her final months at the hospital difficult, maybe spoil her chance of going to America. After all, he was no ordinary patient. He was a powerful cinema actor with important connections, and she was only an intern, good for little more than keeping files and bodies warm.

The cigarette packets were with the liquor bottles in a locked cabinet at the nurses' station, and she knew where they hid the key. She slid her fingers into a jar of pens and found it there at the bottom. No one was around to see her unlocking the cabinet door and skulking down the hallway with the cigarettes in her hand, but still she felt ashamed. To be waiting on such a man, whose debauched habits probably included more than just smoking, was not what she thought she would be doing when she joined the medical college five years ago. Back then she believed in the divine mission of medicine, that doctors would be the great modernizers of India, ridding it of smallpox and malaria and the other ills that held it back. Thankfully, she no longer believed in divine missions. She only believed in herself. And love. But there was nothing divine about love. Like everything else in her life so far, love was methodical. It was a series of exams and rotations, and if you were diligent enough, it would reward you.

Inside the room a slat of dusty light from the street cut through the window and lit up the film star's toes. They stuck out from under a sheet, the nails yellow and overgrown. The rest of him was as poorly groomed, his hair greasy from neglect and the corners of his mouth crusty and dry. If she had been a nurse, she might have

given him a head bath and some water to drink, maybe a toenail clipping and an extra blanket for his lower half, but she felt no duty to him beyond the cigarettes, which she placed on the bedside table as she turned to leave.

"Matches?" he called after her hoarsely.

She stopped at the door. "I didn't bring them," she said, her voice indignant. "Never mind. I have some." He pointed toward a brown leather suitcase lying against the wall. "They should be there, in the inside pocket."

She stood frozen in the doorway as he motioned impatiently for her to get them. Reluctantly, she crossed the room, wrapping the loose end of her sari across her back to protect herself from his peering eyes. She knelt over the suitcase, her long braid falling over her shoulder, almost sweeping the floor, and she thought she heard him grunt.

"Thank you," he said when she dropped the matches on the table. He lifted two cigarettes from the box and offered her one.

Her face flushed with embarrassment.

"In the film industry everyone smokes," he said, lighting his cigarette and inhaling deeply. "Both men and women. It's the fashion these days, women doing everything that men do."

She crossed her arms and looked down at him in the bed, her expression resolute.

"You mean to tell me Priya Kumari and Vijaya smoke?"

"They smoke, they drink," he said, smiling. "They may play angels in the movies, but they are far from it in real life. You know," he added, "Vijaya is quite fond of me."

There was a glint of depravity in his eyes, and she turned away, not wanting to encourage him. She was reminded of a scene from one of his recent films, where he had played the demon king Ravana,

who kidnaps the goddess Sita and carries her through the sky to his nefarious kingdom in Lanka. When the film came out, she and Shankar had gone to see it in the cinema hall near the medical college. There in the darkness, surrounded by other medical college couples, Shankar carefully untied the drawstring of her petticoat and felt along her pelvic bone. Her gasps came as a surprise to both of them, as did the pool of liquid that flooded her sari. They left early, before Lord Rama could kill Ravana and restore Sita's virtue; before anyone could see that her clothing was soiled. When they were outside the theater Shankar kept apologizing, kept telling her it was important to wait, because waiting was what proved commitment, waiting showed they were better than animals. She remembered thinking to herself that she didn't want to be better than animals, but she didn't say that to him, just lowered her head and acted as though she too felt sorry for what they had done.

The film star took a drag from his cigarette and closed his eyes. As he exhaled, the smoke dispersed into the room, which felt detached from everything in the hospital, from everything the intern was familiar with. She watched some of the smoke spin into the ceiling fan, spin round and round above her head.

"I haven't had a cigarette in weeks," he said, his voice floating to her as if in a dream.

"Not since the heart attack."

She glanced down at him, at the V-shaped section of his chest that was exposed through his robe, where his heart would be.

"I was ready to die," he admitted. "It wasn't the first time I had chest pain, but I used to ignore it. I hoped that if it came back, it would be big, final."

He flicked his ashes onto the floor near her feet, and she hopped backward toward the door, startled.

"Do I scare you?" he asked, looking at her face. Guiltily, she cast her eyes to the side. "I don't blame you," he said, amused. "I must look horrible, with this tube in my nose and my beard growing in. A real monster!" He tried to laugh as he did on screen, that hearty laugh of a man convinced of his power, but it wouldn't come out the way he wanted it to, and he sputtered and choked and began to cough. She drew to his side and took the cigarette out of his hand, stomping it out on the floor.

He grabbed her wrist. "I don't want to die," he wheezed. "I know that now. I want to live. More than anything I want to play a god."

His fingers dug into her skin, and she felt her arms tense up, then her neck. She hated seeing patients like this, so desperate, so vulnerable. It was why she preferred surgery, when patients were asleep the whole time. The pathologies of anatomy were more clear—cut than those of personality, and she would much rather deal with a cadaver splayed in front of her than the fragile psyche of a human being. She wondered if the film star had any family, a wife, maybe children—people who were obligated to comfort him, to care for him. But she couldn't picture it, couldn't picture the child on his knee, the wife clearing his dishes from the table.

With her free hand she poured out a cup of water and held it to his lips. Slowly he drank, regaining his strength. He talked to her about the movies. There was a director, V.P Naidu, who had been willing to give him a chance. Naidu was obsessed with the German philosopher Nietzsche, and he wanted to experiment with a Nietzschean god, a god who was lustful and bloodthirsty yet still beloved. He cast the film star as Lord Krishna and wrote a script about Krishna's pursuit of the coveted Syamantaka ruby. They shot the initial scenes, full of voluptuous cowherd girls and choreographed fights between Krishna and various noblemen. But the investors raised concerns. They worried the film would never find an audience, that no one would pay to see a gluttonous and

conquering god. One by one they started pulling out, until Naidu was forced to end production.

The film star's face grew long, and he looked up at her wistfully, as though she had the power to recover what he had lost, what his career had never been. Suddenly, she felt a sliver of remorse for siding with the investors, for succumbing to their prejudices. In the disappearing daylight, she examined his face. He wasn't an ugly man. A bit overweight, with the shadow of a double chin and several lines across his forehead, but no one could say he was ugly. His features were symmetrical and his eyes were large and round, but somehow, when everything came together, his face was unmistakably threatening. Maybe it was an optical illusion, and she closed one eye and then another to make sure she was seeing straight.

"Are you all right?" he asked, squinting back at her.

She noticed he was still holding on to her hand. "I'm fine," she said. "Just tired. It's almost the end of my shift."

She stood next to him for several minutes, not saying anything, listening to him talk about the movies until his eyelids grew heavy and she was confident he had fallen asleep. Gently, she shook off his grip and returned the cigarettes and matches to his suitcase before closing the door behind her.

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The blue house was two blocks from the hospital, and as she approached it she could smell the jasmine in bloom along the vines around the gate. It belonged to Shankar's father, the renowned obstetrician, who rented out all the rooms save one, the one where Shankar slept during the week, when he was too busy or exhausted to make the trip across the city to his parents' place. She had never been inside, mostly out of respect for the neighbors, who would undoubtedly report her visits to Shankar's parents. But that

evening, with the letter from America tucked into her purse, she wasn't worried what people might think.

The air was warm and Shankar came to the door in a ribbed white undershirt, a look of alarm on his face when he realized it was her. He peeked over her shoulder into the hallway, which was empty, and took her in without a word, serving her tea at a small table near the window, in clear view of the street and anyone who might question what they were doing. Under the single bulb that stuck out from the wall, he asked her about the film star.

"Is it true what they're saying? That he had the heart attack while he was with his mistress?"

The intern stared at her glass. It wasn't modesty that kept her from talking about the actor. She wouldn't have minded discussing his condition, whether the heart failure had been caused by peripheral arterial disease or something atypical, like a virus or an atrial tumor, but Shankar wasn't interested in the clinical aspects of his case.

"His organs are probably destroyed," he continued. "A lot of cinema actors have drinking problems. You should take a nurse with you when you go to check on him. Dr. Gowda should never let you go in there alone."

The intern swallowed the rest of her tea and set the steel cup down on the table. It wasn't the film star she had come to discuss. She reached for her purse and unfolded the letter, placing it in front of him. "I got matched," she said. "To a hospital in Pennsylvania."

His mouth was set in a straight line as he read the letter to himself. "What about you?" she asked. "Have you heard anything?"

Shankar clicked his tongue. "I'm thinking it might be better for us to go to England. My cousin is there, and he says the hospitals are full of Indian medical graduates."

England? They had never talked about England. England was the same as India----- the same system of national health, the same stunted future. They would end up stuck in dead---end jobs for decades.

She sought his hand across the table. "You should come with me," she said.

He patted her wrist and then pulled away, leaning backwards in his chair. Even that distance felt like too much, and she dreaded what might happen if they were further apart. She had heard stories of couples separated during residency, couples who made breezy promises to reunite once they finished, only to discover several years later that their lovers had submitted to arranged marriages, or worse, fallen in love with foreigners.

"You'll find a job in Pennsylvania," she tried to assure him. "Surgical assistant, lab technician. Something to pass the year, until they offer you residency." "You want me to follow you?" he asked.

"We'll be married," she said.

"But everyone will know that you got residency and I didn't."

She felt the fingers of her hand curl inward on her lap. It was the same hand the film star had held. On the street she could hear a dog barking, a bark that tapered into a whine until it was silent again. The letter lay on the table, the stationery wilted from having spent all day in her bag. She glanced at the letterhead: Saint Vincent Hospital, Erie, PA. The hospital had not been her first choice. She had never heard of Erie before, and as a Hindu, she wasn't sure about working for a Saint Vincent. But she applied anyway upon the recommendation of Dr. Gowda, who knew one of the supervising physicians. The day she mailed in her matching form, she looked up Saint Vincent in the encyclopedia in the medical college library. He was the patron saint of charity, a former slave who devoted his life to helping the poor, and as she sat alone



at a large rectangular library table, she wondered if Saint Vincent had known from an early age that he was destined for something bigger than the circumstances he had been born into.

She looked intently at Shankar, at his light skin and sharp nose that made him appear more Arab than Indian. America had been his idea from the start. Everyone in Hyderabad, among his posh circle of friends, was mad about America, and the intern had only recently become sold on it. She knew it would worry her mother, who was already worried about her daughter living so far away, almost a day's journey by bus. But Shankar—she never thought she'd have to convince him about America.

She fidgeted in her chair. "It's only one year," she said to him casually. "After that, you'll get residency."

"If it's only one year, why don't you stay here and wait for me to reapply?"

The dog began barking again, louder than before. This was not how it was supposed to be. They were supposed to be happy that at least one of them got residency, and so what if it was her? Of course it was her. She was the better student, the more natural physician, the one who had worked hard to distinguish herself among their classmates. Those first two years she had slogged through invisibility, the studious girl from the interior who never went on picnics or to the cinema with the other fun lovers. It was her marks that drew the attention of her professors and eventually her peers, and that's when Shankar began to notice. Shankar, the golden boy whose father had attended the medical college back when instruction was in Urdu. Shankar who had been groomed for medicine his whole life.

"It's a good opportunity for you," he said without sympathy. "I know how driven you are about your career. But would you really want to go there by yourself?"

She hesitated. "I'm not afraid, if that's what you think." She folded up the letter and put it back in her bag. "I'm not afraid of America, I'm not afraid of the cinema actor." She rose from her chair, clutching the bag to her chest. "And I don't think he has a mistress."

Shankar's eyes narrowed. "How do you know?"

She felt her legs weaken but she stood up tall, her shadow falling across the table. "I've seen his wife," she lied. "She comes to visit him sometimes. She's a beautiful woman. At least she must have been once. She brings him newspapers and books and feeds him tamarind rice with a spoon. No one else comes to visit him. Only her."

Shankar bristled. "So even an animal like him has a wife who waits by his side. How did he get so lucky?"

She began sweating and gesticulating. "He's not an animal," she said defensively. "He was typecast. Had he gotten the right start, he could have played gods his whole career. It's the audiences who aren't sophisticated enough to accept him in a different role."

He didn't seem persuaded, and she thought about running to him, catching him by the wrists, forcing him to look at her so he could remember who they were to each other. Instead she retreated to the door and sprinted down the stairs to the front gate. He was probably watching her through the window, but she didn't bother to turn around. Her purse at her breast, she walked out onto the empty street, the night hanging low on her shoulders, the dog barking in the distance.

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Movies were something she would miss about India. Movies in Telugu, movies in Hindi. Movies about gods and demons. About family and society. About love. Love was different in America, the way it was acted out and discussed, and watching an American movie with American actors would never give her the same

satisfaction as a movie in her mother tongue. But it seemed silly to stay in a country because of movies.

She started spending more time in the film star's room, telling herself it was because she was worried about him. His breathing was shallow and his pulse was weak, and he wasn't recovering as quickly as Dr. Gowda expected him to. But his health wasn't the real reason she lingered at his bedside. It was the movies, the things he told her about them. There was the fight scene in Vaikuntha, where the hero missed his cue and boxed the film star's ear, sending him crashing to the ground minutes before the scene was supposed to end. As he lay unconscious on the floor, the director had the camera zoom in on his face, and it was that shot which made it into the final cut of the film, which became canonized as the death of Hiranyaksha.

"You thought I was acting, didn't you?" the film star gloated. "It was a triumph in my

career. I became a household name because that idiot Shivakanta didn't know how to throw his punches. He never should have made it as far as he did. And always playing heroes. Always playing gods. Sometimes even two gods in one film!"

He was sitting upright in bed, holding a cigarette in one hand, and she noticed how perfect the skin on his arms appeared. Soft and hairless and golden. The rest of his skin was the same, and it surprised her that a man with such fine skin was so believable as a villain.

"I don't like double action films," she said, positioning the stethoscope along his back. "They seem like a way for the studios to save money. To get two actors for the price of one."

"No, no." He wrinkled his nose. "For an actor it's a great honor to play a double role. You have to persuade the audience that the two

characters are distinct. Only the most talented actors can pull it off successfully."

"I'm not sure," she said suspiciously. "It still feels like a trick."

"It IS a trick." He took a deep breath as she listened to his lungs. "All cinema is a trick. That's the beauty of it. That's why we love it."

She thought about what he said, about the illusion of cinema, the smoke and mirrors behind the silver screen, which made things appear that weren't really there, things like goodness and evil, beauty and wretchedness. It became clear to her, how the cameras had trained her eyes to perceive what the directors wanted her to perceive, to feel what they wanted her to feel, even when what she wanted to feel was something very different.

"It's an interesting thing," she said, releasing the stethoscope from his back and coming around the bed so she could listen to his heart. "I was fifteen years old when my father died, and that's when I started going to movies by myself. My mother was too distracted to pay attention, and sometimes I would spend all day in the cinema hall, starting with the matinee and staying through the second show, which would end well after midnight." She moved the stethoscope absently down his chest, her gaze soft and unfocused. "It was a strange time in my life. I had always been a bit of a loner, but what I loved about being in the theater was that I wasn't actually alone. I was transported from my individual world into a collective experience. The collective experience of film. I wasn't mourning anymore. I became part of an audience, and we were laughing together and crying together. Cheering on the heroes, or feeling frightened by the characters you played. For those hours we believed in the world you created for us."

The words came out of her in small bubbles, clean and fresh like soap. They washed away her inhibition, and she felt loose and free in a way she hadn't been before. She told him about America, about the hospital in Erie, PA, about how she wasn't sure she could

go back to living in a small town, to the isolation and monotony of it. What she didn't mention was Shankar, how she had told him she would wait for him. Or her fear. She didn't mention her fear. Her fear of being alone, unmarried, unloved.

The film star told her that he also came from a small town, and he reminded her of the good parts, the parts he missed. The familiarity. The simplicity. He missed knowing exactly who he was dealing with.

That's what she appreciated about medicine, she said. The straightforwardness of it. The body was an organism that couldn't conceal things for long, and it relieved her to know that causes could be traced and diagnoses made, that surgery was a blunt art whose magic lay in the revelation of reality, not its distortion.

"So there is magic in medicine, just like in film," he concluded with a wink.

It wasn't exactly what she believed. She was a sharpshooter when it came to clinical skills, and she believed in the certainty that came from precision. But she smiled anyway, not wanting to appear too serious, and she began rearranging the stethoscope against his chest.

"How is your cough?" she asked, searching for his heartbeat.

"It comes and goes," he sighed, sinking back into his pillow. "I was thinking----- one of my old classmates is a surgeon in Chicago. He's quite a big shot over there. Perhaps he will be able to find something for you. Something in the city. Something better than that Erie place."

She didn't say no. How could she? This was the way things happened for people like her. People born without connections. People from small towns. She bowed her head in gratitude as she thought about the possibility. Chicago. At least it was a name she

recognized, and for a moment, she completely forgot about Shankar and Dr. Gowda and her mother.

"What is it with all of you young people?" the film star demanded, propping himself up on his elbows. "All of you, running to America like ants. You think their sugar is sweeter?" He shook his head chidingly. "The only thing they have that we will never have is Charlie Chaplin," he added with a laugh. "It was America that made that man."

She looked at him, her brow furrowed.

"You know, Charlie Chaplin," he said, raising his forefingers to his upper lip, cordoning off a square of his moustache. "Now there is someone who understands the ingenuity of double action. He made a film some thirty years back. The Great Dictator----- have you seen it?"

She clicked her tongue, hunching over his chest, trying to concentrate on his heartbeat. It sounded far away, like it was coming from another room, and she strained to hear it over his voice.

"It's the most brilliant film," he raved. "Written by Charlie Chaplin. Directed by Charlie Chaplin. Starring Charlie Chaplin..."

She wished he would quiet down so she could focus, but he was too excited, and he began moving his hands restlessly as he spoke. She unplugged the stethoscope from her ears, letting it hang from her neck.

"Charlie Chaplin plays two roles, " he was saying. "He's a Jewish barber and a Nazi dictator. He's a hero and a villain. Last year when I was in America I visited Hollywood, that place where all the stars are lined up on the road. They had just given Charlie Chaplin his star. He should have had it years ago, but there's so much politics in this business. Even in America."

He ground his cigarette butt into the glass ashtray she had bought for him earlier in the week, and she could smell the remains of all the cigarettes he had smoked. The decomposing tobacco, the layers of ash, it made her think of what a cave might smell like, a cave deep in the earth where things were buried and forgotten for long periods of time.

She felt like she was in that cave, like they were there together, and it was dank and mysterious, just like the film star. She reached out her hand for the box of cigarettes, pulling one out and rotating it in her fingers.

"I finally found it," the film star gushed. "Charlie Chaplain's star. And I knelt down right there where everyone was walking. I closed my eyes like I was in a temple."

He didn't seem to think anything of the cigarette raised to her lips, and he picked up his matches to give her a light. The flame hit the tip and she heard a crackle, inhaling like she had seen the film star do. There was the novice's cough that she expected would be worse, but it subsided fairly quickly and gave way to a lightheadedness. The smoke was everywhere, wafting around them in bits and strands, and it made her feel cinematic, seductive. It made her feel like her hair was made of flames, like her eyes were made of flames, like the heat of her body was making the whole room glow. She stumbled forward, and the film star held her waist to keep her from falling onto his lap. But his arms were too weak and she wanted to fall. She didn't want to wait anymore. And that's how she ended up on top of him, with the half---smoked cigarette burning slowly in the ashtray and the film star breathing heavily through the oxygen tube.

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Shankar was there at the nurse's station when her shift ended that afternoon. They walked in silence down the chipped marble staircase and out through the crumbling Mughal archways that

marked the entrance to the hospital. Once they reached the street, Shankar grabbed her hand briefly before letting it go again, and they stood together at the bus stop, a thick procession of traffic droning past them. The bus ride to his parents' house was long and overcrowded, and she sat where the other women sat, at the front of the bus, while Shankar hovered in the aisle a few rows behind. Periodically she turned around to look at him, and he flashed her a smile, a tiny smile that no one else could detect. She wondered if things would be the same once they were married, if they would still sit separately on the bus, if he would still flash her tiny smiles and grab her hand only to let it go a split second later.

Three other women sat on the bench next to her, all older and sweatier and larger than she was. They seemed to be pushing her, nudging her out into the aisle. Maybe they could smell the cigarette smoke on her sari and wanted her as far away from them as possible. Or maybe they could smell the film star and what she had done. They reminded her of her mother, who had never known what to do with a bright daughter. Women of her mother's generation weren't allowed to be bright. They were pulled out of school before they made it to the ninth standard and sent directly to the trenches of marriage and childrearing. She thought about what it was like for these women, the mothers of the nation's independence, and then she felt the weight of it leaning into her side.

She felt the weight of it in the two letters she had written some days before. Two letters, one to Saint Vincent and the other to her mother, although they both sat in her hostel room, unsent. Her mother would be happy upon receiving the news. What mother wouldn't want her daughter to marry a medical doctor? Saint Vincent was another matter, and she thought about Dr. Gowda, what he would say when he found out she wasn't going. Maybe she would tell him about Chicago, about its modern hospitals and glorious physicians, people like the film star's friend. Chicago. The



buildings would be tall and sleek, and the people too. She tried to picture them as she stared ahead through the windshield, watching the road transform into a fury of dust and exhaust as the bus driver overtook a lorry.

Shankar's parents' house was elegant and open, with a leafy veranda where all of them sat on heavy metal furniture. His father seemed pleased with her, and his mother praised her hair, which was thick and shiny, not rough like Shankar's. Mostly they asked her logistical questions, like who would perform the ceremony on her side, since her mother was a widow and widows could not perform wedding rites. She tried to appear modest, not smiling too much, not eating too much, not looking too much at Shankar, who was in high spirits, the highest she had seen in some time. When he spoke about her, he spoke with pride, telling his parents how she had won the gold medal in surgery, how she had traveled to a tropical medicine conference in Madras with several of their professors to present research on scorpion bites. He spoke about her as though she wasn't there, and the sound of his voice was starting to annoy her, so she excused herself to go to the toilet.

The blood on her underwear was bright red, not that dark maroon color she saw every month. Her palms gripped the walls on either side of her as she held herself up over the porcelain bowl. She thought about the film star, imagining him at the wedding, mingling with the other guests, the family members and friends who would come all the way by bus. They would be impressed with him, impressed that she knew him, that her life at the medical college had yielded such famous acquaintances. And they would be impressed with Shankar, impressed that she was marrying him, that she was joining such a well---established family.

She returned to the veranda and sat stiffly in her chair, promising Shankar's parents that she would bring her mother next time, even

though she knew there wouldn't be a next time. She lied to their faces, and she didn't feel guilty. She, too, could be a monster.

Their driver gave her a ride back to her hostel, and as she passed through the gate, the watchman handed her a note. It was from Dr. Gowda.

S. Balu Rao passed away this evening. Death most likely caused by pericarditis. See me in the morning to discuss details.

Pericarditis. Swelling around the heart.

She bolted up the stairs and found the two letters lying on top of her dresser. Her fingers worked automatically, ripping up the paper into microscopic pieces that she let fly out of her third---story window. The stars weren't out that night. They were rarely visible in the city, and she wished there was a way to pull them down from the clouds, to make it so they were always bright and shining.

Pericarditis.

The watchman gave her a critical look when she passed him to leave the hostel grounds, but she didn't care what he thought. She didn't care what anyone thought. On the way to the hospital, she stopped at a paan stall and asked to buy a cigarette. The vendor glowered at her and spit red juice into a cup at his feet. She threw a five rupee coin down on the counter, but he swiped it away, muttering "whore" and shouting for her to get lost. She broke into a run.

Her legs felt stronger than she had known them to be, so certain of where they were going. They carried her through the archways and up the stairs, slamming to a halt in front of the nurses' station. The gossiping night nurses looked stunned when they saw her, and they tried to explain, tried to calm her down, but she charged ahead, breathless and disheveled.

His bed was stripped of the sheets, and the whole room felt sterile and forlorn. It was hard to believe that earlier that day, they had been there together, talking about Charlie Chaplin. She climbed onto the bed and burrowed her face in the mattress, floating in a weightless, timeless vacuum. In front of her she could see the cinema hall back home, the large rectangular building in the center of town, painted a pale yellow and plastered with posters of old films and new films and films not yet realized. The theater was empty and a silent movie flickered on screen, and there she was, sitting next to the film star. But he wasn't a film star. He was a patient, dressed in a hospital gown, not a silk robe, and he was trying to talk, trying to narrate the story to her, but she wouldn't let him. She stopped him from talking so she could find his heartbeat. She was chasing his heartbeat through the rows of folded seats. Chasing it until she could get the exact diagnosis.

Pericarditis.

She had missed it, and now he was gone. Everything was gone. Chicago was gone. Even the glass ashtray was gone. She thought about cold and dreary Erie, PA, far away from the Hollywood stars. She thought about Saint Vincent, the patron saint of charity—Saint Vincent, the former slave—and she wondered what he had to do to secure his freedom, whether freedom was something you could ever secure. And there in the dark room, with the window open and the street quiet below, she thought about the film star's face, how it looked that afternoon when they lay next to one another, and she knew he could have played a god.

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