

Searching for Rani

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If the material does not exist, does the memory go away as well?

—Meena Kandasamy, *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*

On the bus to Sivaganga, men stared and I looked away. Outside, Chennai's smog and high-rises gave way to rice paddies. Green glimmered under bone-white sky. The sun scorched, but I kept squinting out the window. I would not let my gaze meet the men's, would not let on how much they disturbed me.

Could they read my shoulders—coiled, vigilant? A young woman traveling alone. Indian, but not; Tamil, but not. All this to visit the home of a woman two centuries dead.

It was foolish; I knew that. But I was going to find out what I didn't know.



I had been thinking about Rani Velu Nachiyar for more than a year now, since my aunt in Chennai had sent a card for my twenty-first birthday. The card, I'd quickly lost but the envelope, I'd kept for its technicolor stamp, showing a young woman in an electric blue sari, her face serene as she drew a sword from its sheath. Immediately, I'd known this was no modern Bollywood heroine. No, this was a woman from long ago, calm as she prepared to commit violence. Unusual enough to make me Google her.

Rani Velu Nachiyar of Sivaganga, I learned, was the first Indian queen to fight and win against the British. In 1780, the year of her victory, she became India's most powerful woman. Before that, to even contemplate taking on the British, she must have been India's angriest woman. Now, I was going to Sivaganga to find out how she'd become both things—because the type of anger I knew only rendered me helpless.



We'd left India twelve years ago, when my family was whole: nuclear, recognizable. Upper class, upper caste, and on the im-

migrants' dream trajectory: leaving for a supposedly better life in Canada.

It *was* better, mostly: the uninterrupted supplies of electricity and water; getting a phone line installed and seeing a doctor without paying any bribes. Most importantly, my father finally got sober. All this, for the admission price of assimilation. I happily paid: I straightened my hair, avoided other Desis, tried to befriend girls named Kylie and Jocelyn.

Things didn't change until college, when my mother took down the pocket-sized statues of Ganesh and Vishnu from the kitchen altar. By then, my parents were divorced. She hadn't performed puja or made dosa in years. But doing away with the gods she'd worshipped her whole life, that she used to make me polish on Saturdays—it felt like a severing.

"What do I need to go back for?" she responded when people asked her about India. "The heat, the mosquitoes, the gossiping aunts and uncles? Vanda." No, thank you.

Nearly undone, my ties to India appeared suddenly precious. Instead of studying for finals, I found myself binging Bollywood movies: *Lagaan*, *Dil Se..*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. Online, I pored over sari designs and recipes for milky sweet palkova. I began daydreaming of train rides through fields of plantain, of eating hot tiffin with my fingers, of a place where I could mistake myself in others—not by distorting myself, for once, but by changing the paradigm in which I existed.

Most of all, I wanted not to explain—those cravings, myself, where I was from.

The morning of college graduation, I boarded the first of three flights to Tamil Nadu, in South India: the peninsula where I was born, where I babbled my first words in Tamil, a language I now hadn't spoken in years.

After twenty-seven hours of travel, after the last flight finally, *finally*, descended into Chennai International Airport and I'd stumbled hazily through customs, at baggage claim, I jerked awake. I had been one of three women on the last flight traveling alone. I knew this in the way lone women always seek out other single women. They would be the ones to notice if you needed help, if a man was pestering you, following you.

In baggage claim, the three of us glanced at each other, carefully avoiding the eyes of men, the husbands, fathers and sons who stared as we struggled with our luggage, as our shirts lifted to expose a curve of back or swath of belly.

All those eyes, watching.



Going to Sivaganga hadn't been part of the plan.

Chennai had been the plan. There, I recognized what I hadn't known to remember: the pink shock of bougainvillea in my uncle's garden. The warble of bulbuls. The well in their backyard I used to stare into as a child, fascinated and terrified. Even now, its darkness was smothering, like someone pushing a pillow into my face. I jerked back, gulping air.

My first few days in Chennai, I went to places we'd gone to hundreds of times when I was younger. At Marina Beach, I pictured myself as a toddler, waddling into the ocean, carefree—free. The few other beachgoers clutched umbrellas against a violent sun. There was no wind; even the waves seemed sluggish. After ten minutes, T-shirt and linen pants sticking in ways that drew men's eyes, I gave up, hailing an auto rickshaw.

Later, among Pandy Bazaar's noisy stalls, I eyed a pair of Jhumka earrings, little bronze bells favored by Bollywood heroines.

"Itu evvaḷavu?" I asked.

"Ainūru rūpāy?" the seller offered. His tone suggested that this was a starting offer—that he expected me to bargain. But I didn't know numbers in Tamil.

"Evvaḷavu?" I asked again.

He repeated himself. Of course, I still didn't understand, couldn't even think of how to say "that's too much." I shook my head no.

"Evvaḷavu koṭupṭirka!?" he asked.

I opened my mouth but no sound emerged. He repeated himself. *How much will you give?* My face heated. I wanted to walk away, but my sandals felt glued to the dusty road.

His eyes narrowed. "Eṇ pēca māṭṭirka!?" *You won't speak?* He looked angry, as if he thought I was taunting him.

I fished into my bag, drew out a note—500 rupees—and handed it over. He hesitated before reaching for it, doubt wrinkling his face. He muttered something else I didn't catch—maybe asking if I wanted change.

"Vanda," I said.

He squinted at me, mouth opening slightly in disbelief. Somewhere, a car honked, long and loud. Finally, he gave me the earrings, nearly flinging them at me. I hurried away, sandals slapping.



At tiffin, we ate idli sambar in the mint green kitchen. Zee News played from the living room television.

“You know, I still pray for your parents to reunite,” my uncle said. He wore a sleeveless undershirt, chest hair springing above its rounded neck. My aunt looked down at her plate. Above us, the ceiling fan whirred.

I stared at him, a male version of my mother’s toothy smile, her pockmarked cheeks. He’d known about my father’s habit of purpling her eyes and swelling her lip. As my uncle brought the plate close to slurp up the last drops of sambar, I itched to reach over and flip it, splash the hot liquid all over his self-righteous face.

Instead, like all the women in my family, I looked down at my plate, scooped up more rice. Swallowed.



Temple. Even as a child, I’d loved the feel of cool stone floors against bare feet, the hushed voices, the stepping into sacredness. Into safety.

Before we entered, while my aunt bought marigold garlands to drape around the statues of gods, I gazed at the temple’s exterior, sandstone spires lined with sculptures of Shiva, Rama, Sita. My eyes paused on Kali, blue-skinned, many-armed, holding a bloodied sword in one, the head of a man in another. Around her neck was a chain of men’s heads. A belt of severed arms circled her waist. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth, eyes blood-red, half-crazed, half-gleeful.

I’d been born in this country, this very city, but after ten years away, everything here felt foreign: the heat, the smells of jasmine and garbage in the sun; my uncle, who should have been on my mother’s side; my mother tongue, alien in my mouth. And the men looked so familiar: variations of my skin, my hair. Except for their eyes—sometimes hungry, sometimes bored, always watching.

Gazing at Kali, here was finally something I understood, recognized: a woman’s rage, built up over a lifetime of inhabiting a female body. Even goddesses, it seemed, weren’t immune to it.



At night in my uncle’s house, I watched the red digits of the alarm clock slide towards dawn. I used to do this as a child, before my parents divorced. Lying awake, listening for the garage door rumbling open. Sometimes, my father would pass out on the couch, too drunk to make it up the stairs; other times, he was stormy with rage. Once, I woke beneath banana peels and

crumpled Kleenex on top of me. His way of punishing me for not taking out the garbage.

Now, a decade later, in the continent where my family began, I laid awake once more. Insomnia, I knew, was the brain's response to perceiving danger, or simply remembering it. Repressed anger, accumulated over years, was also a potential cause—the kind that's particularly hard for children from “troubled” families and women to express, taught as we are that upsetting others could be a matter of life and death—ours, that is.

How many times did my body have to play out this story?

As the sky pinked, the image of Rani, peaceful as she drew her sword, came to me. How had she remained calm when the world was trying to kill her? How had she survived after her home was no longer hers? And later, how did she reclaim it?

Rani wasn't the reason I'd come to India, but maybe she could be. Maybe in her life, I could find a way forward. Maybe I wasn't related to her, but I wanted to be. Maybe she was part of my lineage and I didn't even know it.



At breakfast, I told my aunt and uncle that I was going to Sivaganga. My uncle's tumbler of chai slammed against the table.

“Absolutely not!” he said. His face was flushed. “Maybe things are different in your country but here, young women don't travel alone.”

They weren't wrong to be concerned. I would be easy prey here. In 2013, two years after my trip, India would be ranked by the Thomson Reuters Foundation as the world's third most dangerous country for women, after Afghanistan and Pakistan. By 2018, India would take first place.

But I also couldn't stand another moment in this house, this city. When my uncle left for work and my aunt for the temple, I wrote a note thanking them for their hospitality, asking them not to worry about me.

Outside, the noon air was thick with smells of frying bajji and cloyingly sweet frangipani. I hailed an auto rickshaw to the bus terminal.



On the bus to Sivaganga, I was, of course, immediately out of place. The salwar kameez I'd bought in a Chennai shopping mall was baggy and unfashionable compared to the other women's tailored outfits. These women stared out the window and talk-

ed on their phones, updating family on when they'd left, when they'd arrive, which town the bus had just passed. Someone would always know their whereabouts.

We were almost out of the city when a teenage girl and her mother boarded. The girl wore a pink shirt and snug jeans. As they walked to the back, one man turned his head 180 degrees to stare at the girl's butt. I stared at him, eyes widening in disbelief. It wasn't the leering itself that shocked me: that happened in every country. What shocked me here was the directness, the lack of shame. And the persistence: 180 degrees, everywhere a woman went.

Most definitions of sexual harassment don't include staring despite science showing that being watched can stimulate physiological reactions and changes in behavior. A look of desire, when welcome, can produce pheromones; being stalked or surveilled—paranoia, agitation, depression.

If looks counted, then harassment wasn't only insidious here; it was out in the open, for all to see, apparently accepted by both men and women. It was the norm.

A year after I took that bus to Sivaganga, a twenty-three-year-old woman would be raped by six men on a public bus in Delhi. When I heard the news, I would think of that day, that bus ride, those looks.

All those eyes, watching.



After eight hours of thighs sticking to plastic seats, we arrived in Sivaganga. A sleepy town: tamarind trees shaded low, pink-washed buildings. Yellow auto rickshaws and packs of skinny dogs roamed the empty roads.

At my hotel, the clerk asked, "Madam, you are alone? You are here because? You are not Tamil? You *are* Tamil?"

I answered in monosyllables. *Yes. To visit. No. Yes.*

Couldn't my being here be reason enough to be here? If I were a man, it would be.



After dropping off my bag, I wandered. I would visit Rani's palace tomorrow. For what remained of today, I wanted to soak in Sivaganga, experience it as Rani did when she'd first come here, a young bride. I pictured her entranced by the palm trees, the temple tops piercing a periwinkle sky. Or perhaps she was too heartbroken to really see it, desperately missing her parents and home, the life now severed from her.

Born in 1730 to the Raja and Rani of the Ramnad kingdom, Rani grew up in Ramanathapuram, forty-five miles away. An only child, she was raised “like a prince,” learning martial arts, horse riding, and archery. She’d also studied French, English, and Urdu. But after age sixteen, she could no longer escape her gender’s obligations. A marriage was arranged to the King of Sivaganga.

Here, her life transmuted from one of intellectual and physical activity to that of an “ordinary” queen. Details of those years remain murky. Perhaps she’d spent her days choosing fabrics for saris, or offering marigold garlands to temple gods, or overseeing the palace’s cooks and gardeners. Maybe she’d enjoyed these responsibilities; maybe they’d sunk her into depression. It was hard to say: the white male gaze of history overlooked Indian women, neither their public nor private lives deemed worthy of recording.

What is known is this: in 1770, she birthed a daughter. In 1772, twenty-five years after she had arrived in Sivaganga, the British invaded the town, killing her husband. Rani escaped with her infant daughter, fleeing in the night to Dindigul, sixty miles away. She was forty years old.



In 2011, when I went there, Sivaganga seemed like any other south Indian town. Sweet shops with enclosed glass counters of palkova and kajju kathli. “Pure Veg” restaurants. Stalls selling spools of fabric. And here and there, men crowded on street corners, watching.

When I left the hotel, the clouds were clotting pink. Soon, it would be dark. I stepped into the best-lit restaurant I saw, with scarlet walls and chandeliers. But when my order arrived—rice with rasam and bhindi masala—the flavors turned to dust in my mouth. The men—waiters, diners, some with wives and young children, others in groups of all males, others alone—looked at me. The women glanced over too, but looked away as soon I met their gaze. The men did not.

I could almost hear them thinking: *a woman alone, a young woman, a young Indian woman alone. She’s asking for trouble.* I was starting to understand that this unrelenting surveillance was not about desire—or at least, not only about that. Like a swagger, like a blow to the face, it was a way of asserting control. I had learned that much, at least, from my father.

Years later, reading Tamil artist Tishani Doshi’s poem, “Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods,” I would remember my walk

back to the hotel from the restaurant that night. Violet leaked across the sky. Shops were closing. In the metal shutters of a hair salon, I saw myself and behind me, two men, our reflections distorted like in a fun house. I sped up, and so did they.

*Girls are coming out of the woods,
wrapped in cloaks and hoods,
carrying iron bars and candles
and a multitude of scars, collected
on acres of premature grass and city
buses, in temples and bars. Girls
are coming out of the woods
with panties tied around their lips*

Behind me, the two men hissed, saying things I didn't understand, or didn't want to. I sped up. My bones felt viscous, limp. There, finally—the hotel, canary-yellow in the dark. I burst through its double doors, running up the stairs, fumbling with the key. Finally, mercifully, inside my room, I locked both latch and chain. Turning, I rested my back against the door, panting.

After a minute, I walked to the window. There they were, staring up at me, eyes glittering in the dark. I yanked the curtains closed.

In bed, I lay down fully dressed and pulled the covers over me.

Hours passed. The alarm clock glowed a hellish red.

Through the sheer curtains, I watched black sky turn rose. Still, I didn't move. Only when I heard birds singing outside my window did I get up, open the curtains.

*...Girls are coming out
of the woods the way birds arrive
at morning windows—pecking
and humming, until all you can hear
is the smash of their miniscule hearts
against glass, the bright desperation
of sound—bashing, disappearing.
Girls are coming out of the woods.
They're coming. They're coming.*



I tried hypnosis once for my insomnia. The hypnotist, a middle-aged blonde, told me to close my eyes and picture someone

protecting me. “It could a spiritual leader, or an ancestor,” she said.

I’d frowned, eyes still closed.

She tried again. “Is there a grandparent, or another relative who might be watching out for you?”

No, I thought. I’d barely known my father’s side of the family. And my mom, my amma, after a decade of marital abuse, another decade of single parenting, was tired. Like her brother, her parents, who were now dead, had known of my father’s rages and done nothing to protect us.

I opened my eyes and said flatly, “There’s no one looking out for me.”



In Dindigul, where Rani fled with her infant daughter after the British took Sivaganga, she lived under the protection of Hyder Ali, the King of Mysore and a staunch anti-colonialist.

There, her home was a rock fort carved into the cliffs. Surrounding it, cool valleys of lush green and red soil. The landscape, so different from Sivaganga’s flatness and heat, must have appeared hewn with grief to Rani. Her home gone. Kingdom gone. Husband gone.

I imagined her walking the mist-topped hills, wandering into forests of wild plantain, mourning the life she’d lost. Or maybe she didn’t dare to venture out alone. The male gaze and the machinery of colonialism were similar—both intended to monitor, oppress, control.

At night, did Rani also lay awake, imagining her enemies in the dark, watching her?



Morning in Sivaganga dawned pale blue and busy, with uniformed children skipping to school, mopeds, cars, and bicycles rushing to work, to the market, to somewhere. Everyone had a place to be. No one stared or hissed; no one followed. Last night’s darkness seemingly absolved.

The woman at hotel reception desk looked confused when I asked her about Rani’s palace. “You came by bus, no?” she asked. How had she known? In less than 24 hours, I’d become the subject of local gossip. “It’s just across from the bus stand. You didn’t see it?”

Back in the town center, I saw how I’d missed it. The palace, a creamy white building with red arches, was lost amidst

multi-story clothing stores and bank towers. Yesterday, I'd noticed a billboard for Vivo smartphones, an SBI Bank ATM with an armed guard, and mannequins sporting sheer polyester saris. Only now did I see the dull bronze statue towering above the palace gates, Rani's head held high and sword at the ready.

Here, in Sivaganga's center, the past and futuristic present competed for passerby's attention—and the past was losing. Here, it was tempting to conflate modernity for progress, for flashy phones and risqué saris to distract from daily violences. Even the statue of Rani, memorializing a female, suggested women were revered here. But that didn't correlate with the goosebumps that had peppered my forearms all week.

I looked up at Rani's figure, her golden eyes fixed towards the horizon, her right hand on her sword. I'd come to inhale the air she'd breathed, walk the soil she had tread. Yet, I felt nothing; no connection, no remnant of her fierceness that I wanted for myself.



In Dindigul, on her own with an adolescent daughter, Rani slowly built alliances with south Indian kings—Hyder Ali, the Marudhu brothers. Men with money and soldiers. She spent eight years in Dindigul negotiating, amassing an army. Grieving. Though she was already middle-aged, I suspect Dindigul is where Rani really grew up.

There, she also formed her own women's army, surrounding herself with those she trusted most: other angry women. She chose her soldiers carefully. Some women must have hated the idea of another woman in power. Others must have supported British rule, seeing them as either a "civilizing force" or one to ally themselves with for their own benefit.

Even back then, it wasn't only men who enforced patriarchy; not only outsiders who colonized.



At the palace, a lungi-clad man unlocked the gates. "Vannakam," he said, squinting at me under silvery eyebrows. "You would like a tour?"

"How much?"

"No set price, Madam. At the end, you pay whatever it was worth to you."

I hesitated. This trip had shaken my faith in everything, including my own judgement. But—maybe because daylight di-

minished memories of menace, or because he wasn't pushing me to spend, or because I was so tired my teeth ached—I decided to trust him.

My guide, who introduced himself as Rajan, led me across grounds of ankle-high grass, unkempt, verdant. Here and there, rattan armchairs outfitted with plump cushions appeared. Parakeets chirped from neem trees. Quickly, the town's bustle and heat felt far away, everything here half-dreamed. A sanctuary—until I remembered that even sanctuaries could be invaded. This one had been.

We entered a hall of high ceilings, incense smoking the cool air. Photographs of unsmiling kings adorned the walls. Once again, no trace of a woman.

I expected Rajan to recount some piece of history about the kings but he said nothing. We stood, silently, until he said, "Let's show you the best part: the women's section." Was my hunger for Rani's story so obvious?

Soon, we were in a wing of luxury: lily ponds, a large bath with stone enclosures at different heights to adjust the level of water.

"That's where queens washed their hair with frankincense," he explained.

I wondered how often Rani had allowed herself that pleasure, especially after she returned here as the sole ruler. A widow, no man around to smell her hair. When she came back to Sivagan-ga after eight years away, the grounds must have felt alien, the ghost of her husband haunting the garden, the hall of high ceilings. And the memory of her past self: younger, happier.

Or maybe I had it all wrong—maybe she relished having a home of her own, a kingdom to herself.

"What can you tell me about Rani Nachiyar?" I asked.

"Oh, Rani! Very brave woman, of course. You already know she defeated the British, yes? After she spent almost a decade planning her attack?" When I nodded, he added, "Well, did you know she could throw a boomerang?"

"A boomerang?"

"Yes, yes, she was an expert," he said, leading me towards the back of the palace grounds. I hesitated: he could kill me, or worse, and no one would hear. I followed anyway.

At the back stood a small tower, perhaps a shrine, with elephants carved into its sides. Inside hung a large portrait of Rani wielding a wooden boomerang, her face serene as always.

My cheeks grew warm, but this time with frustration, not envy. In every rendering, Rani showed no emotion: as the British attacked her home, as she led her army in battle. Why couldn't

women ever be depicted as fully human—afraid, and still doing what terrifies?

Rajan spun around then, walking back the way we'd come. Thinking this was part of the tour, I followed, but at the gates, he looked at me expectantly. The tour was over.

"That's it?" I asked.

"What more would you like to see, Madam?"

I didn't know—that was the problem. Not knowing what else to do, I fished out some rupees and handed them over. He nodded, satisfied. Had I overpaid? Like most things here, I had no way of knowing for sure.

Outside, the heat of the cement sidewalk seeped through my sandals. The sun and my own disappointment singed my face. Even in Rani's kingdom, I couldn't discover the details of her life. She remained a figure on a stamp, a statue: calm, brave—lifeless. I wanted more. I wanted to know about the times she'd been cruel or afraid, whom she'd confided in, what kind of mother she'd been. How she'd reacted when men leered at her. The things she'd lusted after: her husband? A villager? Hand-woven silk? The ruby hearts of pomegranates?

I would never know. Rani was a woman after all, and therefore not important enough for India's historians—surely mostly men—to research in full. The details remembered were for fashioning her into an icon, handy for society to point at and claim, "Look! We honor our women."

What was left unsaid: only certain types of women are honored. And only in certain ways: by memorializing a version of them more perfect than reality.



My bus back to Chennai left in two hours. From there, I'd go straight to the airport.

To kill time, I bought a juice from a man pulling a cart loaded with jute and a rusted juicer. When I tried to pay, he waved away my money.

"Vanda," he said, grinning.

I watched him push his cart away. It had been a long time since I'd encountered a man and my shoulders hadn't cramped. This time, they'd actually softened, lowered. The pain of relief was almost unbearable.

Clutching the styrofoam cup, I wandered through a park. Older men and women strolled, and young couples sat on their lunch break, shyly holding hands. I sipped my juice, the sugary fibers catching in my teeth.

“Hello,” a voice said behind me. I turned to see a woman whose greying head barely reached my shoulders. “You are visiting here, yes?”

Reluctantly, I nodded. I wasn’t in the mood for conversation but she looked too much like my grandmother for me to dismiss. Patti, I’d loved her so much, until my mother broke down on the phone with her after one of my father’s early frenzies. Patti stayed silent. They never spoke of such things again.

“I was visiting the palace,” I said to the woman.

“Oh, so you learned about our veeramangai?”

Veeramangai, “brave woman” in Tamil, was Rani’s nickname. Before I could reply, she continued, “And did you also learn about Veerthalapathy?”

“Who’s that?”

Her eyes rounded in surprise. “Your guide didn’t tell you about the brave commander? What a rascal!” She looked upset, as if Rajan had indeed cheated me. “Come,” she said, grabbing my hand. “Let us sit and I will tell you the full story.”

Her pink and gold bangles jangled furiously as she led me to a bench.

“I’m Chitra. Your name?”

“Raksha.”

“Oh, so you, too, are like the brave commander,” she smiled, showing gums reddened by betel nut. “A good protector.”

I smiled too. In Sanskrit, my name meant “protection.” My mother had chosen it—a name that was also a wish, a prayer, for me and for herself.

As Chitra talked, sunlight filtered through the peepal tree that towered above us, striping her face yellow. She told me that Kuyili had been a Dalit woman, the lowest caste in India, doomed to “dirty work” like cleaning roads and skinning animals. But Kuyili managed to escape the confines of her caste by joining Rani’s army and eventually becoming a commander.

Before their final, crucial confrontation with the British, Kuyili must have realized her soldiers—exhausted and injured—couldn’t win this battle. She devised a different sort of assault. Slathering herself with ghee, she slipped into the Brits’ storehouse of ammunition. Then, she lit a match and set herself on fire. Within minutes, the storehouse of white men’s weapons, mechanized and fatal, was ablaze. Without those, the British were no match for Rani’s army.

I stared at Chitra without really seeing her. Maybe I’d had it all wrong. Maybe Rani was never the heroine I’d been looking for. She was born a princess, after all—power her birthright—just as being born high caste had freed me from material suffering.

I'd never gone hungry, never thirsted for clean water. Kuyili, a Dalit, had struggled for everything she had, including command of an army, only to give it all up—her power, her soldiers, her life—for something bigger.

"Any of the women in Rani's army would have done it," Chitra continued. "But Kuyili thought she should be the one, as commander, to make the sacrifice."

Maybe power wasn't slaying others, ruling a kingdom. Maybe it was a person turning herself into ash for what she believed in.

Later, I'd read that Rani maintained her women's army throughout her reign, nearly a decade, until dying at the age of sixty-six. I'd picture her on her deathbed, her daughter Vellacci, who would become the second female ruler of Sivaganga, by her side. At the end, mother murmured advice to daughter on how to rule, how to form alliances, how to ward off enemies. Finally, I imagined her saying, "Find someone like Kuyili, someone whose vision is bigger than their fear."

For now, I had to say goodbye to Chitra, who was getting up, brushing the creases from her sari.

"I better get back home. My daughter will be worried," she said. She paused, squinting up at the tree shading us. "It's tiring to be so careful all the time, isn't?"

I blinked, surprised. I'd assumed she, a woman likely born and raised here, would be used to it—that it would be normal for her.

"Yeah," I replied. "It's exhausting."

"I hope in your lifetime, you'll see things change. But I'm too old. I'll die angry." She chuckled, as if to soften what she said. But there was no need. I knew that anger, how it flared even when I thought I was too hardened or tired to feel anything.

"I won't tell you to be careful, okay?" Chitra said. "I'll just say bye-bye."



The bus was full when I boarded. I hung onto the handrail, squeezed between other unlucky souls who hadn't scored a seat. Pants stuck to thighs. My scalp itched.

As the bus shuddered onto the road, darkness slid over the palm trees, the fields of rice and millet. Dread closed my throat. I still hated the dark, hated the thought of going back to Chennai, even if briefly. And something else: with the high of discovery dissipating, I was starting to suspect the stories I'd found of Rani and Kuyili were too easy, too neat.

Githa Hariharan, writing about Scheherazade, the heroine of the widely retold *One Thousand and One Nights*, suggests, "the

way in which [Scheherazade] is reconstructed—how she looks, what her weapons are, says a great deal about whoever is doing the imaginative remembering.” The same was true of the tales I’d created about Rani, Kuyili, even Chitra. They served my story too well: a woman searches for a role model, and finds not one, but three.

Now, under the bus’s fluorescent ceiling lights, I wondered if I’d done enough, searched enough. Yes, history’s male gaze had largely erased Rani and Kuyili. And who knows how many other women it had fully smudged out—brave, conniving, unruly, selfish, endlessly interesting women. The loss was great precisely because it was unknowable.

But I could have pushed Rajan for more on Rani’s life, or Chitra for more on Kuyili. I could have gone to the archives in Chennai, interviewed a historian. But I hadn’t. I’d been after versions of these women that matched the woman I wanted to be. I’d needed, it seemed, to fill in the blanks in their stories before I could do it in my own.

The bus braked suddenly, causing those standing to topple. Someone fell onto my back, a hand landed on my butt and stayed, burning through my salwar kameez. Some long seconds later, it lifted—but I remained frozen. I wanted, so badly, to pretend it hadn’t happened. The damage was done; I could just bury it, burn it, leave it here, in the backroads of Tamil Nadu. But something told me I would be the one turned into ash, and for nothing.

Turning around, I saw a man my age, almost thirty. Old enough for this to be habit. He was looking out the window. Maybe power meant, in part, remembering I had some. I stared at him until he felt my gaze. When he finally turned to look at me, I hoped he would do something lascivious, lick his lips or raise his brows suggestively. Something to make me crazed, to let loose the screams I’d been holding in for what felt like forever. But instead, he looked down and slowly, carefully, turned around.

I stared at the back of his head, the thinning hair, the shiny scalp underneath. He had touched my body—that was fact. Maybe I had touched a nerve, a fiber-network of cowardice. Or maybe not.

I chose to believe I did; in this story, the female gaze would not be subjugated. In this story, it would prevail. I could write that much, at least, into reality.