JEFFREY EUGENIDES, FRESH COMPLAINT (2017)

FRESH COMPLAINT

By the time Matthew learns that the charges have been dropped—there will be no extradition or trial—he's been back in England for four months. Ruth and Jim have bought a house in Dorset, near the sea. It's a lot smaller than the house Matthew and his sister grew up in, when Ruth was married to their father. But it's full of things that Matthew remembers from his London childhood. As he climbs to the guest room at night or goes out the side door on his way to the pub, familiar objects leap out at him: the carved figurine of the Alpine hiker, in lederhosen, purchased on a family trip to Switzerland, in 1977; or those glass bookends that used to be in Dad's office, solid blocks of transparency, each containing a golden apple that, to his child's eyes, had appeared magically suspended. Now they're in the kitchen, holding up Ruth's cookbooks.

The side door opens onto a cobblestone lane that winds around the back of the neighboring houses, past a church and a cemetery, into the center of town. The pub is opposite a chemist's and an H&M outlet. Matthew's a regular there now. Other patrons sometimes ask why he's come back to England, but the reasons he gives—problems with his work visa and tax complications—seem to satisfy their curiosity. He worries

that something about the case will pop up on the Internet, but so far nothing has. The town lies inland of the English Channel, 120 miles from London. PJ Harvey recorded *Let England Shake* in a church not far away. Matthew listens to the album on headphones while he walks on the moorlands, or runs errands in the car, if he can get Ruth's Bluetooth working. The lyrics of the songs, which are about ancient battles and the English dead, dark places of sacred memory, are his welcome back home.

Occasionally, as Matthew drives through the village, a flash goes off in his peripheral vision. A girl's bright blond hair. Or a group of students standing outside the nursing college, smoking cigarettes. He feels criminal just looking.

One afternoon he drives to the seaside. After parking the car, he sets out walking. The clouds, as they always do here, hang low in the sky. It's as if, having traveled across the ocean, they're surprised to find land beneath them, and haven't withdrawn to a respectable distance.

He follows the trail until it reaches the bluff. And it's then, as he looks west over the ocean, that the realization hits him.

He's free to go back now. He can see his children. It's safe to return to America.

Eleven months ago, early in the year, Matthew had been invited to give a lecture at a small college in Delaware. He took the Monday-morning train down from New York, where he lived with his wife, Tracy, who was American, and their two children, Jacob and Hazel. By three that afternoon he was in a coffee shop across from his hotel, waiting to be picked up by someone from the physics department and taken to the auditorium.

He'd chosen a table near the front window so that he could

be easily seen. While he drank his espresso, he went over his lecture notes on his computer, but soon got distracted by answering e-mail, and after that, by reading *The Guardian* online. He'd finished his coffee and was thinking of ordering a second when he heard a voice.

"Professor?"

A dark-haired girl in a baggy sweatshirt, carrying a backpack, was standing a few feet away. As soon as Matthew looked up at her, she raised her hands in surrender. "I'm not stalking you," she said. "I promise."

"I didn't think you were."

"Are you Matthew Wilks? I'm coming to your lecture today!"

She announced this as though Matthew had been hanging on the answer to this question. But then, seeming to realize that she needed to explain herself, she lowered her hands and said, "I go here. I'm a student." She pushed out her chest to show off the college seal on her sweatshirt.

Matthew didn't get recognized in public much. When it *did* happen, it was by colleagues of his—other cosmologists—and graduate students. Occasionally a reader, middle-aged or older. Never anybody like this.

The girl appeared to be Indian-American. She spoke and dressed like a typical American girl her age, and yet the clothes she had on, not only the sweatshirt but the black leggings, Timberland boots, and purple hiking socks, along with a general sense that clung to her of undergraduate uncleanliness, of the communal, dormitory existence she lived, didn't keep the extravagance of her face from making Matthew think of her genetic origins far away. The girl reminded him of a figure in a Hindu miniature. Her dark lips, her arching nose with its flared nostrils, and most of all her startling eyes, which were a color that might only exist in a painting where the

artist could mix green and blue and yellow indiscriminately, made the girl look less like a college student from Delaware than a dancing gopi, or a child saint venerated by the masses.

"If you're coming to my lecture," Matthew managed to say while processing these impressions, "you must be a physics major."

The girl shook her head. "I'm only a freshperson. We don't have to declare until next year." She slipped off her backpack and set it down, as if settling in. "My parents want me to do something in science. And I'm interested in physics. I took AP Physics in high school. But I'm also thinking about going to law school, which would be more like humanities. Do you have any advice for me?"

It felt awkward to be sitting while the girl was standing. But asking her to sit would invite a longer conversation than Matthew had time or desire for. "My advice is to study whatever interests you. You've got time to make up your mind."

"That's what you did, right? At Oxford? You started studying philosophy but then switched to physics."

"That's right."

"I'd really like to hear how you combine all your interests," the girl said. "Because that's what I want to do. I mean, you're such a beautiful writer! The way you explain the Big Bang, or spontaneous inflation, it's almost like I can see it happening. Did you take a lot of literature courses in college?"

"I took some, yes."

"I'm literally addicted to your blog. When I heard you were coming to campus, I couldn't believe it!" The girl paused, staring and smiling. "Do you think we could get coffee or something while you're here, Professor?"

Bold as it was, this request didn't surprise Matthew all that much. Every class he taught had at least one pushy kid in it. Kids who'd been building their résumés since kindergarten. They wanted to meet for coffee or come to his office

hours, they wanted to network, hoping to line up recommendations or internships down the line, or just to relieve for a few minutes the anxiety of being the stressed-out, hypercompetitive people the world had fashioned them to be. This girl's intensity, her buzzing enthusiasm that came close to nervousness, was a thing he recognized.

Matthew was away from home on business, with free time on his hands. He didn't want to spend it serving as an undergraduate advisor. "They're keeping me pretty busy while I'm here," he said. "Full schedule."

"How long are you here for?"

"Just tonight."

"OK. Well, at least I'm coming to your talk."

"Right."

"I was going to come to your Q and A tomorrow morning but I have class," the girl said.

"You won't miss anything. I usually just repeat myself."

"I bet that is *so* not true," said the girl. She picked up her backpack. She seemed on the point of leaving but then said, "Do you need anyone to show you where the auditorium is? I still get lost around here but I think I can find it. I'm going there, obviously."

"They're sending someone to fetch me."

"OK. Now you think I *am* stalking you. It was nice meeting you, Professor."

"Nice to meet you."

But still the girl didn't leave. She continued to look at Matthew with her weird intensity that was also a vacancy. From out of this vacancy, as if delivering a message from another realm, the girl suddenly said, "You're better-looking in person than your photos."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment."

"It's a statement."

"I'm not sure it's good news, though. Given the Internet,

more people probably see photographs of me than my actual living self."

"I didn't say you looked *bad* in your photos, Professor," the girl said. And with a touch of hurt feelings, or an indication that their interchange had been, after all, a slight disappointment, the girl shouldered her backpack and walked away.

Matthew turned back to his laptop. Stared at the screen. Only when the girl had left the coffee shop and was passing by the front window did he glance up, conscientiously, to see what she looked like from behind.

It wasn't fair.

Even though a third of the kids at her school were Indian, Diwali wasn't an official holiday. They got off for Christmas and Easter, of course, and for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but when it came to the Hindu or Muslim holidays there were only "accommodations." That meant teachers excused you from class but still assigned homework. And it meant that you were responsible for whatever material they went over that day.

Prakrti was going to miss four days. Almost a whole week and at the worst time possible: right before exams in math and history, and during her crucial junior year. The thought of it filled her with panic.

She'd pleaded with her parents to cancel the trip. She didn't understand why they couldn't celebrate the holiday at home like everyone else they knew. Prakrti's mother explained that she missed her family, her sister, Deepa, and her brothers, Pratul and Amitava. Her parents—Prakrti and Durva's grandparents—were getting older, too. Didn't Prakrti want to see Dadi and Dadu before they vanished from the earth?

Prakrti made no reply to this. She didn't know her grandparents well—saw them only on intermittent visits to what was, for her, a foreign country. It wasn't Prakrti's fault that her grandparents seemed strange and attenuated, and yet she knew that to publicize this fact would put her in a bad light.

"Just leave me here," she said. "I can take care of myself."

This didn't work either.

They flew out from Philadelphia International on a Monday night in early November. Sitting in the rear of the plane next to her little sister, Prakrti switched on the overhead light. Her plan was to read *The Scarlet Letter* on the way over and write the related essay on the flight back. But she couldn't concentrate. Hawthorne's symbolism felt as stuffy as the cabin's recirculated air; and though she sympathized with Hester Prynne, punished for doing what anyone would nowadays, as soon as the flight attendants served dinner Prakrti used the excuse to put down her tray table and watch a movie while she ate.

By the time they arrived in Kolkata, she was too jet-lagged to do homework. Too busy as well. Insisting that they shouldn't nap, Aunt Deepa took Prakrti, Durva, their cousin Smita and their mother shopping first thing. They went to a fancy new department store to buy utensils, silver forks, knives, and serving spoons; and, for the girls, gold and silver bangles. After that, they walked through a covered market, a kind of bazaar lined with stalls, to get the rice and vermillion powder. Back at the apartment, they began decorating for the holiday. Prakrti, Durva, and Smita were given the task of making Lakshmi's footprints. Barefoot, the three girls stepped into trays of moistened powder laid outside the front door. Carefully, they stepped out again, and made a path inside. They created two sets of footprints, one in red and one in white; and because Lakshmi was supposed to be bringing prosperity, they didn't miss a room, making footprints lead in and out of the kitchen, the living room, even the bathroom.

Rajiv, their other cousin, who was a year older than Prakrti, had two Xboxes in his bedroom. She spent the rest of the afternoon playing *Titanfall* with him, in multi-player mode. The apartment's Internet connection was super fast, and didn't glitch. On previous trips to India, Prakrti had pitied her cousins' obsolete computer equipment, but now, like Kolkata itself, they had leapt ahead of her. The city looked almost futuristic in places, especially compared with poor old Dover with its redbrick storefronts, its leaning telephone poles, its roads full of potholes.

Prakrti and Durva had packed their saris in plastic dry cleaner's bags to keep them from wrinkling. That night, for Dhanteras, they put them on. They slipped the new bangles on their arms and stood before the mirror, watching the metal catch the light.

As soon as it got dark, the family lit the diyas and placed them around the apartment—on the windowsills, coffee tables, in the center of the dining table, and on top of her uncle's stereo speakers. Music streamed from these black monoliths, as the family gathered around the dining table, and feasted, and sang bajahns.

All night long, relatives kept arriving. Some Prakrti recognized but most she didn't, though they knew all about her: that she was a top student, a member of the debating team, and even that she planned to apply for Early Decision to the University of Chicago next year. They agreed with her mother that Chicago was too far from Delaware, and also too cold. Did she really want to be so far away? Wouldn't she freeze?

A group of old women, white-haired and loud, wanted a piece of her, too. They clustered around her with their sagging breasts and bellies, and shouted questions in Bengali. Whenever Prakrti didn't understand something—which was most of the time—they shouted louder, only to give up,

finally, and shake their heads, amused and appalled by her American ignorance.

Around midnight, jet lag caught up with her. Prakrti fell asleep on the couch. When she woke up, three old ladies were hovering over her, making comments.

"That is so creepy," Durva said, when Prakrti told her.

"I know, right?"

The next few days were just as crazy. They went to the temple, visited their uncles' families, exchanged gifts, and stuffed themselves with food. Some relatives observed every custom and ritual, others only a few, and still others treated the week like one long party and vacation. On the night of Diwali they went down to the water for the festivities. The river that ran through Kolkata, the Hooghly, which looked brown and sludgy during the daytime, was now, under a starlit sky, transformed into a black and sparkling mirror. Thousands of people lined the bank. Despite the throngs, there was little jostling as people approached the water's edge to release their rafts of flowers. The crowd moved like a single organism, any lurch of activity in one direction compensated for by a retraction in another. The unity was impressive. On top of that, Prakrti's father explained to her that everything that was going into the water—the palm fronds, the flowers, even the candles themselves, which were made of beeswax—would decompose by tomorrow morning, the entire blazing ritual winking out and leaving no trace.

The glittery nonsense surrounding the holiday—Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity, gold and silver baubles, shining knives, forks, and serving spoons—all came down to this, to light and its brevity. You lived, you burned, you spread your little light—then poof. Your soul went into another body. That's what her mother believed. Her father doubted it, and Prakrti knew it wasn't true. She didn't plan on dying for a long time.

Before she did, she wanted to do something with her life. She put her arm around her little sister and together they watched their candles drift out until they became indistinguishable in the sea of flames.

If they'd left on the weekend, as scheduled, the trip would have been tolerable. But after Bhai Dooj, the last day of the festival, Prakrti's mother announced that she'd changed their tickets to stay a day longer.

Prakrti was so furious she could hardly sleep that night. The next morning, she came to breakfast in sweats and a T-shirt, her hair uncombed, her mood sullen.

"You can't wear that today, Prakrti," her mother said. "We're going out. Put on your sari."

"No."

"What?"

"It's all sweaty. I've worn it three times already. My choli smells."

"Go put it on."

"Why me? What about Durva?"

"Your sister's younger. A salwar kameez is fine for her."

When Prakrti came out in her sari, her mother was unsatisfied. She took her back to the bedroom to rewrap it herself. Next she inspected Prakrti's fingernails and tweezed her eyebrows. Finally—a new thing entirely—she applied kohl around Prakrti's eyes.

"Can you not?" Prakrti said, pulling away.

Her mother seized Prakrti's face with both hands. "Be still!"

A car was waiting outside. They drove for over an hour to the outside of the city, where they stopped before a compound with walls topped with razor wire.

A gatekeeper led them across a dirt courtyard into the house. They passed through a tiled entryway, up a flight of stairs, into a large room with tall windows on three sides

and wicker-bladed fans on the ceiling. Despite the heat, the fans weren't running. The room was severely underfurnished, except in one corner, where a white-haired man in a Nehru jacket sat cross-legged on a mat. The kind of man you expected to encounter in India. A guru. Or a politician.

Across from him, a middle-aged couple occupied a small sofa. As Prakrti and her family came in, they waggled their heads in greeting.

Her parents sat opposite the couple. Durva was given a chair just behind. Prakrti was steered to a bench or platform—she didn't know what to call it—slightly apart from everyone else. The bench was made of sandalwood inlaid with ivory. It had a vaguely ceremonial air. As she sat down, she caught a whiff of herself—she was beginning to perspire in the heat. She wanted not to care. Had an urge even to inflict her body odor on all these people and embarrass her mother—but of course she couldn't. She was too mortified herself. Instead, she sat as still as possible.

During the conversation that followed, Prakrti heard her name spoken. But she was never directly addressed.

Tea was served. Indian sweets. After a week, Prakrti was sick of them. But she ate them to be polite.

She missed her phone. She wanted to text her friend Kylie and describe the torture she was presently undergoing. As the minutes passed on the hard bench, and servants came and went, other people passed along the corridor, peering in. The house appeared to contain dozens of people. Curious. Nosy.

By the time it was over, Prakrti had made a vow of silence. She got back into the car intending not to say another word to her parents until they got home. So it was left to Durva to ask, "Who were those people?"

"I told you," Prakrti's mother said. "The Kumars."

"Are we related to them?"

Her mother laughed. "Maybe one day." She looked out

the window, her face lit with a violent satisfaction. "They are the parents of the boy who wants to marry your sister."

Matthew talked for forty-five minutes, as requested. His topic, that day, was gravitational waves, in particular their recent detection by twin interferometers located at disparate locations in the continental United States. Wearing a lavalier, and pacing the stage in a navy jacket and jeans, Matthew explained that Einstein had theorized the existence of these waves almost a hundred years ago, but that proof had only been found this year. To aid his presentation, Matthew had come equipped with a digital simulation of the two black holes whose merging, in a galaxy 1.3 billion light-years away, had created the ripples that had passed invisibly and silently through the universe to register against the highly sensitive devices—in Livingston, Louisiana, and Hanford, Washington—that had been engineered for this purpose alone. "As acute as the ear of God," Matthew described them. "In fact, a lot better than that."

The auditorium was less than half full. Equally disheartening, most of the audience consisted of people in their seventies or eighties, retirees from the town who came to these lectures at the college because they were open to the public and given at a reasonable hour, and because they gave them something to talk about afterward at dinner.

At the book signing, those who remained bore avidly down on Matthew as he sat behind a table, armed with a Sharpie and a glass of wine. Many carried beige totes, the women wearing bright scarves and loose, forgiving sweaters, the men in shapeless chinos, all of them exuding anticipation and forbearance. It wasn't clear from what people said if they had read Matthew's book, or understood the science, but they

definitely wanted their copies personalized. Most everyone was content to smile and say, "Thank you for coming to Dover!" as if he were doing it for free. Some men trotted out whatever they remembered from high school or college physics courses and tried to apply it to Matthew's talk.

A woman with white bangs and red cheeks stopped in front of Matthew. She'd recently been to England to research her genealogy, she said, and she gave him an extended account of the pertinent gravestones she'd located in various Anglican churchyards in Kent. This woman had just moved on when the girl from the coffee shop appeared.

"I don't have anything for you to sign," she said guiltlessly.

"That's all right. It's not required."

"I'm too poor to buy a book! College is so expensive!"

A little over an hour ago, the girl had struck Matthew as something of a bother. But now, drained by the procession of old, haggard faces, he gazed up at her with relief and gratitude. She'd taken off her baggy sweatshirt and now had on a little white top that left her shoulders bare.

"At least get yourself some wine," Matthew told her. "That's free."

"I'm not twenty-one yet. I'm nineteen. I'll be twenty in May."

"I don't think anyone will mind."

"Are you trying to ply me with liquor, Professor?" the girl said.

Matthew felt himself blushing. He tried to think of something to counter this impression, but because what the girl had said wasn't so far from the truth, nothing occurred to him.

Fortunately, the girl, in her hectic, excited way, had already moved on. "I know!" she said, her eyes growing wide.

"Could you sign a piece of paper for me? That way, I can paste it into your book."

"If you ever buy it."

"Right. First I have to graduate and pay off my college loans."

She had already swung her backpack onto the table. The motion released her smell, a light, clean scent, something like talcum.

Behind her, a dozen people were still in line. They didn't seem impatient but a few were staring to see what was holding things up.

The girl produced a small ringed notebook. Opening it, she searched for a blank page. As she did this, her black hair fell forward, curtaining them off from the people in line. And then a strange thing happened. The girl seemed to shiver. Some delicate or tormenting sensation traveled the length of her body. She lifted her eyes toward Matthew's, and as if giving in to an irresistible urge, she said in a strangled, elated voice, "Oh, God! Why don't you just sign my body?"

The avowal was so sudden, so absurd, so welcome, that for a moment Matthew was struck dumb. He glanced at the nearest people in line to see if anyone had overheard.

"I think I'd better stick with the notebook," he said.

She handed it over. Laying it flat on the table, Matthew asked, "How would you like this?"

"To Prakrti. Want me to spell it?"

But he was already writing: "To Prakrti. A Fresh Person."

This made the girl laugh. Then, as if making the most innocent request in the world, she said, "Can you put down your cell?"

Matthew didn't even dare to look up again. His face was burning. He was desperate for the moment to be over and

thrilled by the encounter. He scrawled down his phone number. "Thank you for coming," he said, pushing the notebook away, and then turned to the next person in line.

The boy's name was Dev. Dev Kumar. He was twenty years old, worked in a store selling TVs and video equipment, and was taking night school classes toward a degree in computer science. All this Prakrti's mother told her on the plane back to the U.S.

The idea that she would marry this unknown person—or anyone for that matter, for a long, long time—was too preposterous for Prakrti to take seriously.

"Mom, hello? I'm only sixteen."

"I was seventeen when I got engaged to your father."

Yeah, and look how that turned out, Prakrti thought. But she said nothing. Discussing the idea would only dignify it, when what she wanted was to make it go away. Her mother was prone to wild imaginings. She was always dreaming of moving back to India after Prakrti's dad retired. She fantasized about Prakrti's getting a job there someday, in Bangalore or Mumbai, of her marrying an Indian boy and buying a house big enough to accommodate her parents. Dev Kumar was just the latest form this fantasy had taken.

Prakrti put on her headphones to block her mother out. She spent the rest of the flight writing her essay on *The Scarlet Letter.*

After they got back home, just as she hoped, the nightmare scenario went away. Her mother brought up Dev a few times, in a scripted, promotional way, but then let the subject drop. Her father, back at work, seemed to have forgotten the Kumars entirely. As for Prakrti, she re-immersed herself in schoolwork. She studied late every night, traveled with the

debate team, and, on Saturday mornings, attended SAT prep sessions at her school.

One weekend, in December, she was in her bedroom, Facetiming with Kylie while they did their homework. Prakrti had her phone in bed next to her, Kylie's voice coming from the speaker.

"So, anyway," Kylie said, "he comes to my house and leaves all these flowers on the front porch."

"Ziad?"

"Yeah. He leaves them right there. Like grocery-store flowers. But a lot of them. And then my mom and dad and my little brother come home and find them. It was so embarrassing. *Hold* on. He just texted me."

While she waited for Kylie to read the text, Prakrti said, "You should break up with him. He's immature, he can't spell, and—I'm sorry but—he's large."

When her phone pinged a moment later, Prakrti thought Kylie had forwarded the new text from Ziad, so they could discuss it and decide what to write back. She opened the text without looking at the sender, and the screen of her phone filled with the face of Dev Kumar.

She knew it was him by his pained, overeager expression. Dev stood—or had been posed, most likely—in flattering light before the convoluted limbs of a banyan tree. He was skinny in a developing-world way, as though deprived of protein as a child. Her cousin Rajiv and his friends dressed the way boys at Prakrti's school did, maybe a bit better. They wore the same brands and had the same haircuts. By comparison, Dev was wearing a white shirt with absurdly large seventies-style lapels and ill-fitting gray pants. His smile was crooked and his black hair shiny with oil.

Normally Prakrti would have shared the photo with Kylie. Selfies of guys who were trying too hard, guys who sent chest pics or used filters, were normally guaranteed to send

them into fits of laughter. But that night Prakrti clicked her phone shut and put it down. She didn't want to explain who Dev was. She was too embarrassed.

Neither, in the passing days, did she tell her Indian friends. A lot of them had parents whose own marriages had been arranged, and so were used to hearing the practice defended at home. Some parents advanced the superiority of arranged marriages by citing the low divorce rate in India. Mr. Mehta, Devi Mehta's dad, liked to bring up a "scientific" study in *Psychology Today*, which concluded that people in love marriages were more in love during the first *five* years of marriage whereas people in arranged marriages were more in love after *thirty* years of marriage. Love flowered from shared experiences was the message. It was a reward rather than a gift.

Parents *had* to say this, of course. To do otherwise would be to invalidate their own unions. But it was all an act. They knew things were different in America.

Except that sometimes they weren't. There was a group of girls at Prakrti's school who came from super-conservative families, girls who'd been born in India themselves, and partly raised there, and who, as a consequence, were totally submissive. Though these girls spoke perfect English in class, and wrote essays in a strange, beautiful, almost Victorian style, among themselves they preferred to speak Hindi, or Gujarati, or whatever. They never ate cafeteria food or used the vending machines but brought their own vegetarian lunches, packed in tiffins. These girls weren't allowed to attend school dances or to join after-school clubs that had boys as members. They came to school every day and quietly, dutifully did their work, and, after the last bell sounded, they trooped out to Kia sedans and Honda minivans to be returned to their quarantined existence. There was a rumor that these girls, protective of their hymens, wouldn't use Tampax. That

inspired the nickname Prakrti and her friends had for them. The Hymens, they called them. Look, here come the Hymens.

"I don't know why I like him," Kylie said. "We used to have this Newfoundland, Bartleby. Ziad sort of reminds me of him."

"What?"

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Sorry," Prakrti said. "Yeah, no. Those dogs are gross. They drool."

She deleted the photo.

"So now you're giving out my number to random guys?" Prakrti said to her mother, the next day.

"Did you get the picture from Dev? His mother promised to make him send one."

"You say never to give my number to strangers and now *you're* giving it out?"

"Dev is hardly 'random.'"

"He is to me."

"Let me take a picture of you to send back. I promised Mrs. Kumar."

"No."

"Come on. Don't look so gloomy. Dev will think you have a terrible disposition. *Smile*, Prakrti. Do I have to force you to smile?"

Why don't you just sign my body?

At dinner, in a restaurant near campus, while making conversation with members of the lecture committee, Matthew kept hearing the girl's words in his head.

Did she mean what she said? Or was it just the kind of dumb, provocative statement American college girls made nowadays? Equivalent to the way they danced, bumping and grinding, *twerking*, sending out messages that were unintentional. If Matthew were younger, if he were remotely the same age, maybe he'd know the answer.

The restaurant was nicer than he'd expected. A woody, farm-to-table place, with a warm interior. They'd been given a room off the bar, Matthew seated, importantly, at the center of the table.

The woman next to him, a philosophy professor in her thirties with frizzy hair, a broad face, and a pugnacious manner, said to Matthew, "Here's my cosmology question. If we accept an infinite multiverse, and the existence of every conceivable kind of universe, then there has to be a universe in which God exists and one in which He—I mean, She—doesn't. Along with every other kind of universe. So, which one are we living in?"

"Fortunately, one that has alcohol," Matthew said, raising his glass.

"Is there a universe where I have hair?" said a bald, bearded economist two seats away.

The conversation went on like that, quick, jovial. People peppered Matthew with questions. Whenever he opened his mouth to answer, the table fell silent. The questions had nothing to do with his talk, which had already faded from their minds, but were about other topics: space aliens, or the Higgs boson. The only other physicist there, possibly resentful of Matthew's relative success, didn't say a word. On the walk over to the restaurant, he had told Matthew, "Your blog is popular with my undergrads. The kids love it."

After the main course, while the dishes were being cleared away, the chair of the committee instructed the people sitting closest to Matthew to switch seats with those farther away. Everyone ordered pudding, but when the waiter came

to him, Matthew asked for a whiskey. The drink had just arrived when his phone vibrated in his pocket.

The new person who sat down next to Matthew was a birdlike woman with pale skin, dressed in a pantsuit. "I'm not a professor," she said. "I'm Pete's wife." She pointed to her husband across the table.

Matthew took his phone from his pocket and held it discreetly below the table.

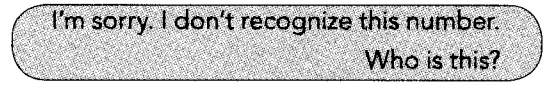
He didn't recognize the number. The message was simple: "hi."

Returning the phone to his pocket, he took a sip of whiskey. He leaned back and gazed around the restaurant. He'd reached the stage of the evening—of evenings like this on the road—when a rosiness came over things, a slow, flavorful, oozing light invading the restaurant almost like a liquid. The rosiness came from the glow of the bar with its rows of colorful bottles stacked on mirrored shelves, but also from the wall sconces and candlelight reflecting on the plate-glass windows etched in gold. The rosiness was part of the hum of the restaurant, the sounds of people talking and laughing, convivial, city sounds, but it was also part of Matthew himself, a rising sense of contentment at being who and where he was, free to get up to whatever mischief presented itself. On top of it all, this rosiness had to do with his knowledge of the single word—*hi*—that lay hidden in the cell phone tucked in his pocket snug against his thigh.

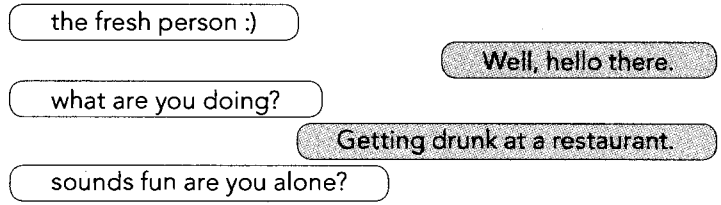
This rosiness wouldn't survive on its own. It needed Matthew's participation. Before excusing himself, he ordered another whiskey. Then he stood up, gaining his balance, and walked through the bar to the stairs that led down to the lavatory.

The men's room was empty. Music, which may have been playing upstairs in the loud restaurant, was pumping from high-fidelity speakers in the ceiling. It sounded surprisingly

good in the tiled space, and Matthew moved to the beat as he entered a toilet stall and closed the door behind him. He took out his phone and began typing with one finger.



The response was almost immediate.



Matthew hesitated. Then he wrote:

It was like skiing. Like the moment when, at the summit, you first lean downhill and gravity takes hold, sending you flying. For the next few minutes, as they texted back and forth, Matthew was only half aware of the person he was communicating with. The two images he had of the girl—one in the baggy sweatshirt, the other in the tight white top—were hard to reconcile. He couldn't remember exactly what she looked like anymore. The girl was specific enough yet vague enough to be any woman, or all women. Each text Matthew sent generated a thrilling reply, and as his tone escalated in flirtatiousness, the girl matched him. The excitement of hurling impetuous thoughts into the void was intoxicating.

Now ellipses appeared: the girl was typing something. Matthew stared at his screen, waiting. He could feel the girl

at the other end of the invisible pathway connecting them, her head lowered, her black hair falling over her face as it had at the book table, while she worked the keys with her nimble thumbs.

And then her response appeared:

you're married right?

Matthew hadn't seen that coming. It sobered him up at once. For a moment he saw himself for what he was, a middle-aged, married man and father, hiding in a bathroom stall, texting a girl less than half his age.

There was only one honorable response.

I am indeed.

Ellipses appeared again. Then vanished. Did not reappear.

Matthew waited a few more minutes before exiting the stall. Seeing his reflection in the mirror, he grimaced and cried out, "Pathetic!"

But he didn't feel that way. Not really. On the whole, he felt rather proud of himself, as if he'd failed while attempting a spectacular play in a sporting contest.

He was climbing the stairs back to the restaurant when his phone went off again.

I don't mind if you don't.

On the dresser in the master bedroom stood a wedding portrait. In garish color, it showed the boy and girl who would become Prakrti's parents standing solemnly beside each other, as though prodded into position by a goad. Atop her father's impossibly slender face sat a white turban. A diadem depended

from her mother's smooth forehead, its gold chain matching the ring in her nose and shadowed by the veil of red lace that covered her hair. Both their necks were draped with heavy necklaces made of multiple strings of shining, dark red berries. Or maybe they were too hard to be berries. Maybe they were seeds.

On the day the photograph was taken, her parents had known each other for twenty-four hours.

Most of the time, Prakrti didn't think about her parents' wedding. It had happened long ago, in another country, under different rules. But every now and then, compelled by outrage as much as curiosity, she forced herself to imagine the events immediately following the taking of that photo. A dark, provisionary hotel room somewhere, and, standing in the middle of it, her seventeen-year-old mother. A naïve village girl who knew next to nothing about sex, or guys, or birth control, and yet who knew what was required of her in that particular moment. Understood that it was her duty to take off her clothes in front of a man no less a stranger than someone she passed on the street. To remove her wedding sari, her satin slippers, her hand-sewn underclothes, her gold bangles and necklaces, and to lie on her back and let him do what he wanted. To submit. To an accounting student who shared an apartment, in Newark, New Jersey, with six other bachelors, his breath still smelling of the American fast food he'd wolfed down before getting on the plane to fly to India.

Prakrti couldn't reconcile the scandal of this arrangement—it was almost prostitution—with the prim, autocratic mother she knew. Most probably, it hadn't happened like that at all, she decided. No, more likely nothing had gone on in the first weeks or months of her parents' marriage but only much later, once they'd gotten to know each other and any hint of compulsion or violation had disappeared. Prakrti would never know the truth. She was too scared to ask.

She went online to find other people in her situation. As usual with the Internet, it took only a few searches to locate message boards teeming with complaints, advice, rationalizations, cries for help, and expressions of comfort. Some women, usually educated and living in cities, treated the subject of arranged marriage with theatrical alarm, as though they were living out a zany episode of *The Mindy Project*. They depicted their parents as well-meaning people whose meddlesomeness, however infuriating, never kept them from being loveable. "So my mom keeps giving out my e-mail to people she meets. The other day I get this e-mail from some guy's dad and he starts asking all these personal questions, like how much do I weigh and do I smoke or take drugs and are there any health or gynecological issues he should know about, in order to see if I'm marriage material for his lame son who I wouldn't even hook up with if we were both at Burning Man on molly and I was feeling generous and/or horny." Other women seemed resigned to parental pressure and scheming. "I mean, seriously," one person wrote, "is it any worse than joining OkCupid? Or having some guy in a bar blow his boozy breath in your face all night?"

But there were heartbreaking posts, too, from girls closer to Prakrti's age. Girls who didn't write that well and who maybe went to bad schools or who hadn't lived in the States long. There was one post, from a girl whose username was "Brokenbylife," that Prakrti couldn't get out of her head. "Hi, I live in Arkansas. It's illegal here to get married at my age (I'm 15) unless you have parental consent. The problem is my dad wants me to marry this friend of his from India. I haven't even met him. I asked to see a photo but the one my dad showed me was of a guy way too young to be a friend of his (my dad's 56). So it's like I'm being catfished by my own father. Can anyone help me? Is there some kind of legal aid I can contact? What can you do if you're young and don't consent but are too scared to go against your parents because of past issues with verbal/physical abuse?"

After spending a few hours on the Internet reading stuff like that, Prakrti was frantic. It made everything *real*er. What she'd thought lunacy was everywhere being put into practice, fought against, or given in to.

From Dorset Matthew takes the train to London, and then another to Heathrow. Two hours later, he's in the air, heading to JFK. He's chosen a window seat so he won't be disturbed during the flight. Looking out the window, he sees the wing of the jet, the large, cylindrical, dirty-looking jet engine. He imagines opening the emergency door and walking out on the wing, balancing himself against the force of the wind, and for a moment it almost seems plausible.

In the four months he's been in England, he has kept in touch with his children mainly by text. They don't like e-mail. Too slow, they say. Skype, their preference, disorients Matthew. The streaming images of Jacob and Hazel that appear on his laptop render them simultaneously within reach and irreclaimable. Jacob's face looks fatter. He gets distracted and frequently looks away, possibly at another screen. Hazel pays her father undivided attention. Leaning forward, she holds a fistful of hair close to the camera to show off her new highlights, which she's dyed red, or purple, or blue. Often the screen freezes, however, pixelating his children's faces and making them seem constructed, illusory.

Matthew is unnerved, too, by his own image as it pops up in a window at the corner of the screen. There he is, their shadowy dad, in his hideout.

All his attempts at joviality sound false in his ears.

There's no winning: if his children seem traumatized by his absence, it's terrible; if they seem distant and self-reliant,

it's just as bad. The familiar details of their bedrooms stab Matthew in the heart, the flocked wallpaper in Hazel's room, Jacob's hockey posters.

The children sense that their lives have become precarious. They have overheard Tracy speaking with Matthew on the phone, with her family and friends, with her lawyer. The children ask Matthew if he and their mother are getting divorced, and he tells them, honestly, that he doesn't know. He doesn't know if they will be a family again.

More than anything, what astounds him now is his stupidity. He'd thought his cheating only involved Tracy. Had believed that the trust he was breaking was with her alone; and that his deceit was mitigated, if not excused, by the travails of marriage, the resentments, the physical dissatisfactions. He'd careened out of control, with Jacob and Hazel in the backseat, and thought they couldn't be injured.

Occasionally, during Skype calls, Tracy blunders into the room. Realizing whom Jacob or Hazel is speaking to, she calls out a greeting to Matthew in a strained, forgiving voice. But she stays back, careful not to show her face. Or to see his.

"That was awkward," Hazel said, after one such episode.

It's difficult to know what the children think of his misbehavior. Wisely, they never bring up the case.

"You made one mistake," Jim told Matthew, in Dorset, a few weeks ago. Ruth was out for the night with her play-reading group, and the two men were smoking cigars on the terrace. "You made an error in judgment on a single night in a marriage of many hundreds of nights. Thousands."

"More like a few mistakes, truth be told."

Jim waved this away with the smoke from his cigar. "OK, so you're not a saint. But you were a good husband, compared to most. And, in this case, you were enticed."

Matthew wonders about that word. Enticed. Was it true? Or was that just how he'd portrayed the incident to Ruth, who'd taken his side, as a mother would, and then had given that impression to Jim. In any event, you couldn't be enticed by something you didn't already want. That was the real problem. His concupiscence. That chronic, inflammatory complaint.

There was a coffee shop near the university where Prakrti and Kylie liked to go. They sat in the back room, trying to blend in with the college students at the surrounding tables. If anyone ever spoke to them, especially a guy, they pretended to be first-year students. Kylie became a surfer girl named Meghan who was from California. Prakrti introduced herself as Jasmine and said she'd grown up in Queens. "White people can be so dumb, no offense," she said, the first time she'd gotten away with this. "They probably think all Indian girls are named after spices. Maybe I should be Ginger. Or Cilantro."

"Or Curry. 'Hi, my name's Curry. I'm hot.' "

They laughed and laughed.

In late January, as midterms approached, they started going to the coffee shop two or three times a week. One blustery Wednesday night, Prakrti got there before Kylie. She commandeered their favorite table and took out her computer.

Since the beginning of the year, colleges had been sending e-mails and letters encouraging Prakrti to apply. At first the solicitations had come from schools she wasn't considering due to their locations, religious affiliations, or lack of prestige. But, in November, Stanford had sent her an e-mail. A few weeks later, Harvard did.

It made Prakrti happy, or at least less anxious, to feel pursued.

She logged into her Gmail account. A group of girls in bright-colored rain boots came in from the wind outside, smoothing their hair and laughing. They took the table next to Prakrti's. One of them smiled and Prakrti smiled back.

There was one e-mail in her queue.

Dear Miss Banerjee,

That is what my brother, Neel, suggests I write as a salutation, instead of "Dear Prakrti." Though he is younger than I, his English is better. He is helping me to correct any mistakes, so that I will not make a bad first impression. Maybe I should not tell you this. (Neel says that I should not.)

My own feeling is that, if we are to be married someday, I must endeavor to be as honest with you as possible to show you my True Self, so that you will get to know me.

I suppose I should ask you all sorts of questions, such as, What do you like to do in your leisure time? What movies are your favorite? What kind of music do you like? These are questions relating to our personal compatibility. I do not think they matter greatly.

More important are questions of a cultural or religious nature. For instance, do you want to have a big family someday? Perhaps this is too big a question to ask so early in our correspondence. As for myself, I come from a very big family so I am used to a lot of commotion around the house. Sometimes I think it would be nice to have a smaller family, as is becoming more common.

I believe my parents have told your parents about my aspiration to become a programmer for a major

firm like Google or Facebook. My dream has always been to live in California. I know that Delaware is not close to there, but that it is close to Washington.

In my leisure time I enjoy watching cricket and reading manga. What do you like?

In closing, may I say that I thought you extremely nice-looking when I saw you at my great-uncle's house. I am sorry I could not say hello but my mother told me it was not customary to do so. The old ways are often curious but we have to trust in the wisdom of our parents, who have the experience of a longer life.

Thank you for the photograph you sent. I keep it close to my heart.

If the boy had sat down with the intention of revolting Prakrti with every word he wrote, if he were a Shakespeare of pure annoyingness, he couldn't have done better. Prakrti didn't know what she hated most. The mention of children, which assumed a physical intimacy she didn't want to imagine, was bad enough. But somehow it was the phrase "extremely nice-looking" that bothered her more.

She didn't know what to do. She considered writing back to tell Dev Kumar to stop bothering her, but she worried that this would get back to her mother.

Instead, Prakrti googled "age of majority U.S." From the results she learned that, when she turned eighteen, she would obtain the legal right to buy property, maintain her own bank account, and join the military. The phrase that encouraged her the most, however, was where it said that turning eighteen "brought the acquisition of control over one's person, decisions, and actions, and the correlative termination of the

legal authority of the parents over the child's person and affairs generally."

Eighteen. A year and a half from now. By then Prakrti would already be accepted to college. If her parents didn't want her to go, or wanted her to go somewhere nearby, it wouldn't matter. She would go on her own. She could apply for financial aid. Or win a scholarship. Or take out loans, if necessary. She could work part-time during college, ask her parents for nothing, and owe them nothing in return. How would her parents like that? What would they do *then*? They'd be sorry they ever tried to arrange her marriage. They'd repent, and grovel before her. And then *maybe*—when she was in graduate school, or living in Chicago—she'd forgive them.

When Kylie was Meghan and Prakrti was Jasmine, they were lazier, slightly dumber, but more daring. One time, Kylie had gone up to a cute boy and said, "So I'm taking this psych class? And we're supposed to give someone this personality test. It'll only take a few minutes." She called Prakrti over, as Jasmine, and together they interviewed him, coming up with questions off the top of their heads. What was the last dream you had? If you were an animal, what animal would it be? The boy had dreadlocks and dimples, and after a while, the inanity of their questions seemed to register on him. "This is for a course? For real?" he said. The girls started giggling. But Kylie insisted, "Yes! It's due tomorrow!" At that point, the fiction they were creating doubled: they weren't just high school girls pretending to be in college; they were college girls pretending to be giving a psychological test in order to talk to an extremely cute guy. In other words, they were already inhabiting their future collegiate selves, the people they might someday be.

Now all that felt far away. Prakrti looked at the girls in

the leggings and rain boots. At other tables kids were typing, or reading, or meeting with professors.

She had thought she belonged among them, not as Jasmine from Queens, but as herself.

She felt dizzy. Her vision dimmed. It was as if the floor of the coffee shop were giving way and a chasm opening between her and the other students. She grabbed hold of the edge of the table to steady herself, but the dropping sensation continued.

Soon she realized it wasn't a dropping so much as a retarding or encircling; a claiming. *She* was the one chosen. Closing her eyes, Prakrti pictured them coming toward her, as they did through the halls of her school. With their dark, downcast eyes, murmuring in foreign tongues that were her own, looking like her, and reaching out with their many hands to haul her in. The Hymens.

She didn't know how many minutes went by after that. She kept her eyes closed until the dizziness passed, and then got to her feet and made her way toward the front door.

Just inside the entrance was a bulletin board. It was covered with flyers and announcements, business cards, and tear sheets for tutoring or sublets. In the upper-right-hand corner, only partially visible, was a poster advertising a lecture. The topic meant nothing to her. What caught Prakrti's attention were the date of the event—next week—and the photograph of the speaker. A pink-faced man with sandy hair and a boyish, friendly face. A visiting professor from England. No one from around here.

When the girl came to his hotel room, Matthew had already made his decision.

He was planning to offer her a drink. Sit, talk, enjoy her

company, the nearness of someone so young and pretty, but nothing more. He was drunk enough to be content with just that. He felt no strong physical desire, only a rising sense of exhilarated apprehension, as though he were crashing an exclusive party.

Then the girl swept in and her powdery smell hit him with full force.

She didn't meet his eyes or say a word, merely unshouldered her backpack onto the floor and stood with her head down. She didn't even take off her coat.

Matthew asked if she wanted something to drink. She said no. Her nervousness, her possible reluctance to be there, had the effect of making him want to reassure or persuade her.

Stepping forward, he put his arms around the girl and buried his nose in her hair. She allowed this. After a while, Matthew lowered his head to kiss her. She responded minimally, without opening her mouth. He nuzzled her neck. When he returned to her mouth, she pulled away.

"Do you have a condom?" she said.

"No," Matthew said, surprised by her directness, "I don't. I'm afraid I'm not part of the condom generation."

"Can you go get one?"

All flirtatiousness had left her. She was all business now, her brow furrowed. Once again Matthew considered going no further.

Instead, he said, "I could do that. Where would I get one at this hour?"

"In the square. There's a kiosk. That's the only place open."

Later on, in England, during the months of recriminations and regrets, Matthew admitted to himself that he'd had time to reconsider. He'd left his hotel wearing only a jacket. The temperature outside had dropped. As he walked

to the square, the cold cleared his head, but not enough, in the end, to keep him from entering the kiosk when he found it.

Once inside, he had another chance to reconsider. The condoms weren't on display but had to be requested from the clerk behind the counter. This turned out to be a middle-aged South Asian man, so that the crazy thought assailed Matthew that he was buying condoms from the girl's own father.

He paid with cash, not meeting the man's eyes, and hurried out.

The room was dark when he returned. He thought the girl had left. He was disappointed and relieved. But then her voice came from the bed. "Don't turn on the lights."

In darkness, Matthew undressed. Once in bed, finding the girl naked as well, he had no more reservations.

He fumblingly put on the condom. The girl spread her legs as he climbed on top of her, but he had hardly got anywhere before she stiffened, and sat up.

"Did it go in?"

Matthew thought she was worried about birth control. "It's on," he reassured her. "I've got a condom on."

The girl had placed a hand on his chest and become very still, as though listening to her body.

"I can't do this," she said, finally. "I changed my mind."

A minute later, without another word, she was gone.

Matthew awoke the next morning a half hour before his Q and A. Jumping out of bed, he took a shower, rinsed his mouth with hotel mouthwash, and dressed. Within fifteen minutes he was on his way back to campus.

He wasn't hungover so much as still a little drunk. As he walked beneath the leafless trees, his head felt light. There

was a curious insubstantiality to things—the wet leaves on the pathways, the ragged clouds drifting across the sky—as though he were viewing them through a mesh screen.

Nothing had happened. Not really. He had so much less to be guilty about than might have been the case that it was almost as if he had done nothing at all.

Halfway through the morning session, his headache kicked in. By then Matthew was at the Physics Department. When he'd arrived, he was worried that the girl might be among the students gathered in the brightly lit classroom; but then he remembered that she couldn't come. He relaxed, and answered the students' questions on autopilot. He barely had to think.

By noon, with his honorarium check in his jacket pocket, Matthew was on his way back to New York.

Just past Edison, he'd nearly fallen asleep in his seat when a text came through to his phone.

> Thanks for signing my piece of paper. Maybe I can sell it someday. It was nice meeting you. Bye.

Matthew wrote back, "I'll send you a copy of my book to paste it in." Then, deciding this sounded too open-ended, he deleted it and replaced it with, "Nice to meet you, too. Good luck with your studies." After pressing SEND, he deleted the entire conversation.

She had waited too long to go to the police. That was the problem. That was why they didn't believe her.

The town prosecutor, with whom Prakrti had met once before, was a barrel-chested man with a kind, open face and wispy blond hair. He was gruff in his manners, and frequently

used profanity, but he treated Prakrti with delicacy when it came to the details of the case.

"There's no question who's at fault here," the prosecutor said. "But I've got to bring charges against this reprobate, and his lawyer is going to try and impugn your testimony. So I have to go over with you the things he might say so that we're prepared. Do you understand? I'm not happy to be doing this, let me tell you."

He asked Prakrti to tell her story again, from the beginning. He asked if she'd been drinking on the night in question. He asked about the sexual acts in detail. What exactly had they done? What was permitted and what was not? Whose idea was it to buy the condoms? Had she been sexually active before? Did she have a boyfriend her parents didn't know about?

Prakrti answered as best she could, but she felt unprepared. The whole reason she'd slept with an older man was to avoid questions like this. Questions having to do with her willingness, her blood alcohol level, and whether she had acted provocatively. She'd heard enough stories, she'd streamed enough episodes of *Law & Order* on her phone, to know how these cases worked out for women. They didn't. The legal system favored the rapist, always.

She needed the sex itself to be a crime. Only then could she be its victim. Blameless. Blameless and yet—by definition—no longer a virgin. No longer a suitable Hindu bride.

This was how Prakrti had worked it out in her head.

An older man was preferable because, with an older man, it didn't matter if she'd sent flirtatious texts, or had come willingly to his hotel room. The age of consent in Delaware was seventeen. Prakrti had looked the statute up. Legally, she wasn't capable of consent. Therefore, there was no need to prove rape.

An older, married man wouldn't want to talk about what had happened, either. He'd want to keep it out of the papers. No one at school would ever know. No college admissions officer, googling her name, would find an electronic trail.

Finally, an older, married man would deserve what he had coming to him. She wouldn't feel so bad involving a guy like that as she would some clueless boy at school.

But then she'd met the man, the physicist from England, and followed through with her plan, and felt regretful afterward. He was nicer than she expected. He seemed sad more than anything. Maybe he *was* a creep—he definitely was—but she couldn't help liking him a little, and feeling sorry for tricking him.

For this reason, as the next months passed, Prakrti held off going to the police. She hoped she wouldn't have to put the last part of her plan into action, that something would alter the situation.

The school year ended. Prakrti got a summer job at an ice cream parlor in town. She had to wear a candy-striped apron and a white paper hat.

One day at the end of July, when Prakrti came home from work, her mother handed her a letter. An actual letter, written on paper, and sent in the mail. The stamps on the envelope showed the face of a smiling cricket star.

Dear Prakrti,

I apologize for not writing you sooner. My studies at the university have been extremely onerous and it has been all I can do to keep up with them. I keep myself going with the thought that I am working hard to prepare a future for myself and my future family, which of course means you. I am beginning to see that it might not be so easy as I had hoped to get a position at Google or Facebook. I am now thinking of perhaps working for a flash-trading company based in New Brunswick, where my uncle also works. I do not have a driver's license and I am beginning to worry that this may be a problem. Do you possess a license? Do you perhaps own your own car? I know our parents have been discussing the possibility of a car being provided, as part of the dowry. This would be most acceptable to me.

Prakrti read no further. When she got off work the next day, instead of going home, she walked to the police station behind the town hall. That was almost a month ago now. Since then, the police had been looking for the man, but there had been no arrest. Something was holding things up.

"The judge is going to want to know why you waited so long," the town prosecutor said to her.

"I don't understand," Prakrti replied. "I read the statute online. I'm seventeen now, but I was sixteen when it happened. By definition it's rape."

"That's right. But he's claiming there was no sex. No—penetration."

"Of course there was penetration," Prakrti said, frowning. "Check out our text messages. Or the video. You can see what was going on."

The reason she'd sent the man out to the kiosk was because she knew there was a security camera there. She'd intended to save the condom, too, to tie it in a knot to preserve the semen. But, in the complications of the moment, she had forgotten.

"The texts prove there was flirting," the prosecutor said. "They prove intention. So does the video of him buying the condoms. But we don't have any proof of what happened in the room."

Prakrti looked down at her hands. A fleck of green ice

cream had dried on the outside of her thumb. She scraped it off.

When the man had got on top of her, she'd been flummoxed by a wave of tenderness and protectiveness toward her own body. The man's breath smelled sharp and sweetish from alcohol. He was heavier than she expected. When Prakrti had entered the hotel room and seen the man standing in his socks, he'd looked old and hollow-cheeked. Now she had her eyes closed. She was worried it was going to hurt. She didn't care about losing her virginity but she wanted to give away as little of herself as possible. Only what would serve the legal distinction but nothing else, no outward approval and certainly no affection.

He was between her legs now, pressing. She felt a pinch.

And she pushed him away. Sat up.

Was the pinching she had felt not penetration? She would know if that had happened, wouldn't she?

"Obviously, if someone's buying condoms, he's doing it for a reason," she told the town prosecutor. "How can I prove that there was penetration?"

"It's harder because of the passage of time. But not impossible. How long did you have sex?"

"I don't know. A minute?"

"You had sex for one minute."

"Maybe less."

"Did he climax? I'm sorry. I have to ask. The defense will ask and we have to be prepared."

"I don't know. I've never been—this was my first time."

"And you're sure it was his penis? Not his finger?"

Prakrti thought back. "His hands were on my head. He was holding my head. Both hands."

"What would really help me is if we had a fresh-complaint witness," the prosecutor said. "Somebody you told right after it happened, who could corroborate your story. Is there anybody you told?"

Prakrti hadn't told anyone. She didn't want anyone to know.

"This asshole says there was no sex. So it would help your case, a lot, if you had told somebody closer to the time of the assault. Go home. Think about it. Try to remember if there was anybody you might have talked to. Even texted or e-mailed. I'll be in touch."

Matthew's flight over the ocean keeps pace with the sun. His plane arrives in New York at roughly the same time of day, give or take an hour or two, as it departed London. Emerging from the terminal, he's assaulted by the sunlight. He feels that the November day should be winding down, softening his reentry, but instead the sun is at its zenith. The loading zone is crowded with buses and taxis.

He gives the driver the address of his hotel. There is no possibility of his returning home. Tracy has agreed to bring the children to see him later this afternoon. When Matthew invited her to stay for dinner, hoping to reunite them as a family and to see where this might lead, Tracy was noncommittal. But she didn't rule it out.

Just being back, with the Manhattan skyline in view, fills Matthew with a sense of optimism. For months he's been powerless, safe from arrest but in limbo, like an Assange or a Polanski. Now he can act.

The news that Matthew was wanted for questioning arrived in August, while he was giving a series of lectures in Europe. The Dover police had got a copy of his passport from the hotel where he stayed, which he'd shown upon checking in. From that they tracked him to his mother's address. After

finishing his lectures, he'd come to Dorset to visit Ruth and Jim, and the letter was waiting for him.

In the six months between his visit to the college and the arrival of the letter, Matthew had nearly forgotten about the girl. He'd regaled a few of his male friends with the story, describing the girl's bizarre come-on and her eventual change of heart. "What did you expect, you idiot?" one friend said. But he also asked, enviously, "Nineteen? What is that even *like*?"

In truth, Matthew can't remember. Thinking back to that night, the thing he remembers most clearly is the way the girl's stomach quivered when he heaved himself on top of her. It had felt as if a small animal, a gerbil or a hamster, were being crushed between them, and trying to wriggle free. A fearful or excited quivering, unique to her. All the rest has faded.

After Matthew received the letter from the police, another friend, a lawyer, advised him to hire "local counsel," meaning a lawyer from Dover, or Kent County, who would know the prosecutor and the judge there. "Try to get a woman, too, if you can," the friend said. "That could help if you end up going before a jury."

Matthew had hired a woman named Simone Del Rio. During their first phone call, after he'd given his version of events, she said, "This happened last January?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think she waited so long?"

"I have no idea. I told you. She's bonkers."

"The delay's good. That helps us. Let me talk to the prosecutor and see what I can find out."

The next day, she got back to him. "This will come as a surprise, but the alleged victim here, at the time of the encounter, was only sixteen."

"She couldn't be. She was a freshman at college. She said she was nineteen."

"I'm sure she did. Apparently she was lying about that, too. She's in high school. Turned seventeen last May."

"It doesn't matter," Matthew said, when he'd absorbed this news. "We didn't have sex."

"Look," Del Rio said. "They haven't even served you with a complaint. I told the prosecutor they have no right to ask you to appear for questioning when they haven't done that. I also argued that no grand jury would indict for this conduct in this situation. Frankly, if you never come back to the U.S., you won't have a problem."

"I can't. My wife's American. My children live there. I do too. At least, I did."

The rest of what Del Rio told him wasn't so reassuring. The girl had deleted their texts from her phone, just as Matthew had. But the police had obtained a warrant to recover the texts from the phone company. "These things don't go away," Del Rio said. "They're still on the server."

The time-stamped videotape from the kiosk was another problem.

"Without being able to question you, their investigation is pretty much at a standstill. If it stays that way, I may be able to make this go away."

"How long will that take?"

"No telling. But listen," Del Rio said. "I can't tell you to stay in Europe. You understand? I can't advise you to do that."

Matthew got the message. He stayed in England.

From that distance, he watched his life implode. Tracy sobbing into the phone, berating him, cursing him, then refusing to take his calls, and finally filing for a separation. In August, Jacob stopped speaking to him for three weeks. Hazel was the only one who continued to communicate with him

the entire time, though she resented being the go-between. Now and then she sent him emojis of an angry red face. Or asked, "when r u coming home."

These texts had come to Matthew's UK mobile. While in England, he'd had his American phone turned off.

Now, in the taxi from the airport, he pulls his American phone from his bag and presses the power button. He's eager to tell his kids that he's back, and that he'll see them soon.

Two weeks passed before the town prosecutor called Prakrti in again. After school she got into the car beside her mother to drive to the town hall.

Prakrti didn't know what to tell the prosecutor. She hadn't expected to need witnesses to testify on her behalf. She hadn't anticipated—though she might have—that the man would be in Europe, safe from arrest and interrogation. Everything had conspired to stall the case and to stall her life as well.

Prakrti had considered asking Kylie to lie for her. But even if she swore Kylie to secrecy, Kylie would inevitably tell at least one person, who in turn would tell someone else, and before long the news would be all over school.

Telling Durva was impossible, too. She was a terrible liar. If she were questioned before a grand jury, she would fall apart. Besides, Prakrti didn't want Durva to know about what had happened. She had promised her parents not to say anything to her little sister.

As for her parents themselves, she wasn't sure exactly what they knew. Too embarrassed to tell them herself, she'd let the town prosecutor do that. When her parents emerged from their meeting with him, Prakrti was shocked to see that her father had been crying. Her mother was gentle with her, solicitous. She advanced propositions she would never have

come up with on her own and which must have come from the prosecutor. She asked if Prakrti wanted "to see someone." She said she understood, and emphasized that Prakrti was a "victim," and that what had happened wasn't her fault.

In the following weeks and months, a silence descended on the matter. Under the guise of keeping things from Durva, her parents didn't bring the subject up at home at all. The word *rape* was never uttered. They did what was required, cooperated with the police, communicated with the prosecutor, but that was it.

All this put Prakrti in a strange position. She was enraged at her parents for closing their eyes on an assault that, after all, hadn't occurred.

She was no longer certain what had happened that night at the hotel. She knew the man was guilty. But she was unsure if she had the law on her side.

But there was no turning back. She'd gone too far.

Over ten months had passed. Diwali was approaching again, the date earlier this year because of the new moon. The family had no plans to go to India.

In front of the town hall, the trees, which had been in leaf when she first came in, were now bare, revealing the statue of George Washington on a horse that stood at the end of the colonnade. Her mother parked outside the police station but made no move to get out of the car. Prakrti turned to her. "Are you coming in?"

Her mother turned to look at her. Not with her newly softened or evasive expression but the hard, strict, disapproving face that had always been hers. Her hands were gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles went white.

"You got yourself into this predicament, you can get yourself out," her mother said. "You want to be in charge of your

life? Go on, then. I'm finished. It's hopeless. How can we find another husband for you now?"

It was the word *another* that Prakrti latched on to.

"Do they know? The Kumars?"

"Of course they know! Your father told them. He said it was his duty to do so. But I don't believe that. He never wanted to go along with the wedding. He was happy to undermine me, as usual."

Prakrti was silent, taking this in.

"I'm sure you're thrilled by this news," her mother said. "It's what you wanted, isn't it?"

It was, of course. But the emotion that surged through Prakrti was nothing as simple as happiness or relief. It felt more like remorse, for what she'd done to her parents, and to herself. She began to sob, turning her face to the car door.

Her mother made no move to comfort her. When she spoke again, her voice was full of bitter amusement. "So you loved the boy, after all? Is that it? You were just fooling your parents all this time?"

In his hand, the phone begins to vibrate wildly. Months of undelivered texts and voice mails, flooding in.

Matthew is looking at the haze over the East River, and the huge billboard ads for insurance companies and movies, when the texts flood in. Most are from Tracy or his children, but friends' names fly past, too, and colleagues'. Each text contains its first line. A review of the past four months flitting by, the appeals, the fury, the lamentations, the rebukes, the misery. He shoves his phone back into his bag.

Into the Midtown Tunnel his phone continues to buzz, the fallout, unfrozen, raining down on him.

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"I'm not coming in," Prakrti said, in the doorway of the prosecutor's office. "I'm dropping the charges."

Her face was still wet with tears. Easily misunderstood.

"You don't have to do this," the prosecutor said. "We'll get this bastard. I promise."

Prakrti shook her head.

"Hear me out. I've been thinking about the case," the prosecutor pressed on. "Even without a fresh-complaint witness, there's a lot of leverage we have on this guy. His family is here in the States, which means he wants to come back."

Prakrti didn't appear to be listening. She was looking at the prosecutor with bright eyes as though she'd finally found what to say to make everything right. "I never told you, but I'm planning to go to law school after college. I've *always* wanted to be a lawyer. But now I know what *kind*. A public defender! Like you. You're the only ones who do any good."

The hotel, in the East Twenties, is one Matthew used to stay in years ago, when it had been popular with European publishers and journalists. Now it's been renovated beyond recognition. Techno thumps in the dungeonlike lobby and pursues him even into the elevators, where it becomes the soundtrack for lurid videos playing on embedded screens. Instead of providing a haven from the city streets, the hotel wants to bring them in, their restlessness and need.

In his room, Matthew showers and puts on a fresh shirt. An hour later, he's back in the lobby, amid the pounding music, waiting for Jacob and Hazel—and for Tracy—to arrive.

With a feeling of facing up to a dreaded task, he begins scrolling through his text messages, and deleting them, one by one. Some are from his sister, Priscilla, others from friends

inviting him to parties months ago. There are payment reminders and lots of spam.

He opens a text that says:

> is this still you?

Directly after that, another, from the same number.

> ok well I guess it doesn't matter. this is the last time i'm ever going to text and you probably won't either. i just wanted to say i'm sorry. not for you so much but for your family. i know what I did was a little extreme. i overreacted. but at the time things were legit out of control and i felt i had no choice. anyway, i've got a plan for myself. it's called try to be a better person. you might be interested. bye bye. t. f. p.

For months Matthew has felt nothing but rage toward the girl. In his head, and out loud when alone, he has called her all kinds of names, using the worst, the most offensive, the most vitalizing language. These new messages don't rekindle his hatred, however. It isn't that he forgives her, either, or that he thinks she did him a favor. As he deletes the two texts, Matthew has the feeling that he is fingering a wound. Not compulsively, as he used to do, risking reopening or reinfection, but just to check if it's healing.

These things don't go away.

At the far end of the lobby, Jacob and Hazel appear. Following them, a few steps behind, is someone Matthew doesn't recognize. A young woman in a maroon fleece, jeans, and running shoes.

Tracy isn't coming. Now or ever. To convey this message, she has sent this babysitter in her place.

Jacob and Hazel haven't seen him yet. They appear cowed by the sinister doormen and thumping music. They squint in the dim light.

Matthew stands up. His right hand, of its own accord, shoots straight into the air. He's smiling with an intensity he's forgotten himself capable of. Across the lobby, Jacob and Hazel turn and, recognizing their father, despite everything, come running toward him.

2017