



**YOU'LL**

**UNDERSTAND**

**WHEN**

**YOU'RE**

**OLDER**

**PARDEEP TOOR**



## AMERICA

My dad shot himself in the head on the morning of my twenty-first birthday. I didn't hear the gun go off. I was driving home from college for the celebratory weekend and was two hours away when Mom called to tell me "Dad is gone."

It was the second time she'd called that morning. The first time was to wish me a happy birthday. My nine-year-old sister was also on the first call. She sang our traditional hybrid Punjabi-English happy birthday song that sounded more like a jingle for a pizza commercial than an actual melody. Later, Mom told me that Dad was standing there too, but he never asked for the phone to wish me a good day or safe travels. He was lost in contemplation. He had a plan to execute that far surpassed the significance of my birthday.

Since Dad didn't leave a note, the degree of premeditation is debated in our family. Mom still swears it was an accident. She maintains that he didn't mean to pull the trigger. He changed his mind at the last second, after one of the nine-millimeter bullets from the semiautomatic handgun had already exploded out of the barrel and opened a three-inch hole on the left side of his cranium, exposing what remained of his brain.

Dad had registered the gun at the local police department on September 16, after his second attempt at the gun-safety test. He failed the first time because his English was mediocre. He spoke well enough to communicate with fellow factory workers during the day and relay the amount of a bill when delivering pizzas at night, but he was far from proficient in speaking and never attempted writing. He only passed the gun-safety test the second time because a police officer dictated the questions to him, as if they wanted him to have a gun.

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Two days before his death, September 21, Dad visited the local gun club in Calhoun County, Michigan, to request help with his new handgun. The owner of the club showed him how to load the magazine, chamber a round, and strip the gun for cleaning. Dad didn't write down the instructions, but he promised to return soon for a proper safety tutorial. On September 23, 2005, he took his own life.

### CANADA

My fondest memories of my dad are from our time working together in the suburbs of Toronto. At ten, I was too young and scared to stay home alone and wasn't allowed to accompany Mom on her hazardous night shift at the factory, so I delivered pizzas with Dad on many frigid evenings. My favorite game on these nights was "Guessing the Tip." He would drive up to a house with the pungent odor of pepperoni escaping the insulated pizza bags in the back seat.

"How much will we get?" Dad would ask me in Punjabi.

I would examine the houses, pretending to gauge the customer's generosity based on the cars in the driveway or the quality of Christmas decorations, and shout out a number.

"Let's see," Dad would say.

He'd leave the car running as he walked up to the house with the pizza bags. He never wore gloves or a toque, no matter how cold it got. The door would open, the pizza would be delivered, and Dad would count the cash on the way back to the car.

"How much did we get?" I'd ask.

The amount ranged from a Canadian loonie or toonie to five dollars. Dad would mark the amount with a dull pencil on the back of a receipt or used envelope. We found piles of these ledgers in his car after he killed himself. The math meant something to him but was indecipherable for those of us left behind.

Dad let me keep the tips on the nights we worked together and wager them on sports lottery tickets at the pizzeria. I

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wanted to prove my sports knowledge to him and the regulars who drank bottled beer behind the kitchen. Most of the old men recognized me as “Little Toor-ee.” Dad was, of course, “Toor-ee.”

As I filled out the lottery tickets, they kept their eyes glued to the small television mounted in a corner of the room. I often bet against the Maple Leafs, irrationally trusted the Raptors, and rarely picked a football game. I never had a winning ticket, but Dad always encouraged me to keep playing.

Between deliveries, Dad and I would go to the pizzeria basement to stockpile cardboard boxes. We folded the perforated boxes along their edges and stacked the smalls, mediums, and larges to the ceiling. Afterward, I'd have a slice of pizza upstairs, and Dad would drink a beer.

“Are you allowed to drink and drive?” I asked him once.

“You'll understand when you're older,” he said.

Eventually, I'd get tired of going out for deliveries and doing chores around the pizzeria and would fall asleep across multiple chairs among the rowdy regulars. Dad usually got off work at 1:00 a.m., but I only remember waking up beside him in bed the next morning.

Dad also wrote measurements at his day job at Pack-All International, where I worked with him during my last two high school summers. Pack-All was a factory that did exactly what its name suggested. It offered custom-packaging services for heavy machinery, cargo, and sometimes items in a shipping container. The factory was located beside the airport to expedite shipping. On the other side of the runways was the airport strip club, and in between was the Pack-All warehouse.

Everyone worked in pairs, and I partnered with Dad during those summers. Our daily task was to design and construct a secure custom box around an object to ensure it would be shipped and delivered intact. After the forklift driver placed the object on the crate, Dad pointed the measuring tape to assess all the angles and challenges while jotting down the math on scrap paper. I'd follow him around the crate, pretending to see what he saw. He'd then hand me the slip of paper with the lumber requirements. It was my job to cut pieces

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of two-by-fours, two-by-sixes, and sometimes four-by-fours necessary to construct the custom box. I spent hours at the handsaw repeating measurements and cuts until I had a cart full of wood. I neurotically checked Dad's written orders. It was mindless, mundane, and exposed me to how much effort it took to earn a living. The ten dollars that Dad left for me on the stairs every Wednesday for comic books suddenly felt immensely valuable.

Dad would often wander around the warehouse to talk to his coworkers while I cut wood. His entire body exaggerated his laughs as he hunched over, put a hand on a coworker's shoulder, and leaned his weight on them. It made sense that these were the guys who supplied Dad bootleg copies of WWF (now WWE) pay-per-views. They embodied the values of professional wrestlers through their bravado, relentless cussing, and crass comments about women. Dad permitted me to stare at the images of naked women in the factory breakroom during lunch. Although I'd seen similar images in magazines during an elementary school sleepover at a friend's house, this was the first time I saw them with Dad's approval. Women and power tools—Pack-All was my introduction to both.

"I'm ready to use the nail gun," I said, after I'd cut hundreds of studs.

"It's dangerous," Dad said.

"I need to learn."

"You'll use it when you're older."

After weeks of back-and-forth, Dad finally trained me on the nail gun. At first, I maneuvered it without the pressure hose. He taught me how to insert the nail cartridge and keep the safety on, demonstrated the force necessary to properly use it, and insisted on always pointing the gun away from my body. He was careful, protective, and never cut corners with safety or any of the machinery.

I got better with the nail gun and the job. By my second summer, Dad challenged me with design problems that helped me understand his craft. During my last week on the job, our boss handed Dad an envelope. He opened it, looked at it, then

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gave it to me.

“What does it say?” Dad asked.

“It’s a job offer,” I said. “They want me to keep working here.”

Dad grabbed the letter from me and pretended to read it again. I knew he wasn’t good with reading and writing English, but he still took his time with it.

“What do you want to do?”

“The hourly bump in salary will help me get a PlayStation.”

“What about university?”

I was scheduled to attend college in London, Ontario, the next month. Mom wanted me to be a doctor, but now I had something else to consider.

“The money is good here,” I said.

“You can’t stay here forever,” Dad said.

“Maybe for a year?”

“We can’t tell your mother about this.”

I neither accepted nor declined the job offer. At the end of the summer, I went off to college.

### AMERICA

My parents wanted to own their own business, so they moved from Ontario to Michigan in the fall of 2002, on the same weekend I was supposed to start college. I helped them first, so I missed freshman orientation, roommate introductions, and only showed up in time for the first day of class. My parents never went to college, so none of us understood the importance of the rites of passage during the first week of college.

Other family members had inspired my parents’ entrepreneurial spirit. Dad’s sister in Colorado operated a liquor store, another sister in Pennsylvania ran a gas station. They were both in America, so my parents decided that’s where they needed to be. They bought a thirty-room motel off I-94 in western Michigan in the middle of nowhere. It had once been a Best Western, but they renamed it “Super 9” because that was a higher value than the Motel 6 and Super 8 franchises.

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The motel was a one-story, L-shaped building spread across four acres. The roof was crumbling, and the driveway needed to be repaved. I had never seen broken toilet seats, rusted bathtubs, or such repulsive carpet stains before the Super 9.

The rooms opened to the parking lot on one side and an underground pool beyond repair on the other. We filled the pool with junk—old sheets and towels, abandoned shopping carts, broken air-conditioning units, and scrap metal—to save money on the amount of dirt we ordered to finish filling it in. Everyone in the family had to contribute, even my younger sister, who was tasked with throwing old phonebooks into the pool.

Mom managed the front desk, communications, and finances while dad focused on everything outside the office—laundry, landscaping, sweeping broken glass in the parking lot, and anything that didn't involve writing or arithmetic.

My mom and sister slept together on a mattress on the floor behind the office so the motel always remained open. A bell rang each time a customer entered in the middle of the night. The indoor office was locked, so they stopped in a glass-enclosed mud room for my sleepy mother to rent them a room through a small carved-out hole, like a bank teller's window.

Dad slept by himself in the apartment attached to the office. When I visited for the weekend or during college summers, I slept on a bed adjacent to his, in an arrangement that mirrored the double bedrooms of the motel rather than a home.

I was told that this was what it took to make it in America. You had to sacrifice everything—sleep, sanity, and safety—to be successful. There was no other way. At the time, I didn't understand that this also meant surrendering your once-healthy marriage and comfortable suburban home.

Our weekly gatherings with Indian family friends in Canada were exchanged for frantic NASCAR weekends when the motel overflowed with tailgaters heading to the nearby Brooklyn Speedway. Weeknights were spent ensuring the comfort of construction workers who were redoing the segment of I-94 that passed in front of the motel. Our family slept in separate, motel-like rooms in the service of cash-paying



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customers who often refused to provide identification, didn't accept phone calls, parked in reverse to hide their license plates, and only wanted to rent smoking rooms.

None of us were happy operating and living in the motel. It was a fabricated necessity that my parents stitched into their American dream. They embraced immoral labor and facilitated illegal activities for the sake of business. I'm not judging them for making money to survive but instead retroactively begging them to find another way, a simpler way to make a living, one that didn't require familial annihilation. There must have been other options. I could have skipped college and kept working at Pack-All. Dad and I were happy there.

We were all struggling in America, but it hit Dad the hardest. I first realized something was wrong when he refused to have a beer with me. The Detroit Pistons were in the NBA finals for the second consecutive year. I was a Raptors fan but could appreciate our new home team winning it all again. At the very least, a championship could be good for business.

"This is a reason to celebrate," I said.

We sat in Room 100, the first unit beside the office. I watched all the games in this sterile motel room, hoping I wouldn't be conscripted into menial tasks, like unlocking doors, providing extra towels, or helping clean a room after a customer had opted to leave after just a few hours. Dad wandered back and forth between doing these things and watching Game 5 with me.

"The Pistons look good," Dad said.

"Let's have a beer together," I said.

"I don't feel like it."

"What's there to feel? It's just a beer."

"You'll understand when you're older."

This wasn't the same dad who had given me sips of whiskey at family parties when I was five years old. He had started taking Effexor to (in my view) combat the loneliness of life in America. Running a business came naturally to Mom so she became engrossed in the motel. My sister went to elementary school, and I came and went from college. We all did what was required of us; however, in between our routines,

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Dad lost his purpose, beers with strangers in the back of the pizzeria, and wrestling banter with the regulars at Pack-All.

Our simple yet boisterous social life in Canada was gone. Instead, our family was providing hospitality to America's low-level drug dealers and hourly beds for pleasure-seekers. My parents had exchanged a comfortable suburban existence in Canada for a suspect life in America that Dad never adjusted to.

I don't have any excuses for ignoring Dad's depression. I saw it at the end of the summer of 2005, before I left for my final year of college. It was midafternoon, in the lull between cleaning rooms from the previous evening and waiting for repeat customers to arrive. Dad sat outside in a chair facing the parking lot with his legs crossed. He wore a gray polo with a black collar and an obscure company logo on the left breast pocket. His wind pants gripped his skinny legs. His chair was next to a clay pot filled with stems and leaves from a plant long dead. Dad mixed the decayed material with the soil.

"What are you doing?" I said.

Dad kept tossing the soil with a sharp spade. "I'm digging."

"Are you going to plant something?"

"No."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"I'm losing my mind. I'm going crazy."

"Stop it."

I walked away. That was the best I had to offer him. A brief scolding. A plea to stop whatever was happening, as if his suffering was voluntary. I could have sat down with him. Hugged him. Asked him how I could help. Instead, I left him aimlessly turning soil in a seedless pot. Those of us left behind often focus on the pain of the bullet hitting the brain while ignoring the relief Dad must have felt in the finality.

## MY BIRTHDAY

My college friends in London, Ontario, threw me a surprise party on September 22, the night before my twenty-first birthday. They knew I was heading home the next morning, so

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there was a cake, beers, and a small gathering. My memories of that party have been buried beneath thoughts of what Dad must have been thinking on his final night. Did he have doubts? Regrets? How did he decide this was the only way out? Was it empowering to be so in control of his life that he could choose the departure date? What, if anything, did he eat for his last dinner? Did he sleep?

As I drove home the next morning, Dad began his normal routine. He woke early, vacuumed the office, and assisted Mom in sorting the dirty motel laundry. He informed her that he was going to get gas for the mower and spend the afternoon cutting the four-acre lawn. He liked mowing the lawn. It was rhythmic and predictable. It reminded him of his past work at Pack-All. He was good at it.

Dad never went to get gas for the lawn mower. Instead, around 11:00 a.m., he walked to Room 125 with his black nine-millimeter, semiautomatic handgun. This room was at the back of the motel, about a hundred yards from the front desk. It was a basic room with a queen bed, wooden dresser with a spaceship-sized television, and end tables on both sides of the bed decorated with cheap lamps. Dad had put the used pillows and bedspread on the chairs by the window. He had already collected the soiled sheets from the room earlier that morning. He knew that Mom would be around with the housekeeper to clean it soon.

Usually, rooms that needed to be cleaned were left open to air out the previous night's smoke. Some rooms were supposed to be for nonsmokers, but nobody followed the rules, and my parents didn't bother enforcing them.

Dad walked into the room with the gun in his right hand. Once inside, he locked the deadbolt. He sat on the bed in front of the mirror hanging above the dresser. With his feet securely on the ground, he lifted the handgun to the right side of his head. Were his eyes open or closed? Did he look in the mirror before he pulled the trigger? What did he see? What was he thinking?

*Bang.*

His body slumped over. A trail of blood trickled down the bullet's point of entry on the right side of his head and ran down

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the side of his face. The force of the gun jolted his head to the left, causing the trail of blood to pool in his eye socket. The hole on the left side of his head exposed his brain. Pieces of Dad's skull scattered around the bed. Blood splattered on the wall and ceiling. A puddle of blood formed at Dad's feet. The gun remained clutched in his right hand. The bullet was at rest in his brain when the authorities took his body away.

Mom called me multiple times during the drive home on my birthday.

"Are you focused on the road?" she asked through her tears.

"I'm driving."

"I want you to focus on the road."

"What happened? This can't be real."

"Drive safe, and get here as fast as you can."

I sped up Dad's hand-me-down 2002 Chevrolet Cavalier to ninety miles per hour. The engine rattled, and the car began to overheat. I was alone in the car for hours after Mom told me what had happened. I couldn't fully process her words. They seemed as foreign as the motel I drove to. It wasn't home. The only life that had mattered to me was the one we'd left back in Canada. We were as temporary in America as the guests staying at the motel. This was a relocation gone horribly wrong.

Mom was hysterical when I arrived.

"He couldn't have done this if he was in his right mind," she said. "He must have been on drugs." Dad wasn't on illegal drugs, only antidepressants, a medicine he had assured me I'd understand when I got older.

My first task was to call family members. I was responsible for Dad's side of the family. He had five siblings—one brother and four sisters. I started with the eldest brother and went down the list. I didn't talk to any of the four sisters. I understood their performative grieving, the loud screams, whaling melodic cries, and rehearsed hymns from our village in Punjab, India. I still heard their violent sobs in the background as I explained to my uncles what my father had done. Dad's name was Jagjit, but everyone called him "Raja," or king, because that's what he was to his sisters. They had raised and pampered him, sponsored

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him to immigrate first to Canada, then America. Dad was as much their child as I was his.

I had mastered my speech by the fifth call. Dad's sister picked up the phone. I asked to speak with my uncle.

"Is everything all right?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "I just have a question for Uncle."

She handed him the phone. "Hello," my uncle said.

"Dad," I said. I bit my lip. My cheeks were numb. For the first time, my eyes swelled with an uncontrollable storm. I lost all my words. This wasn't a dream. It was real life. "He's gone."

"You didn't take care of him," my uncle said. "None of us took care of him."

My aunt grabbed for the phone on the other end as my uncle yelled at her to control herself before hanging up.

I wept into the silent receiver.

Mom rushed into the room. She held me as I cried.

"I couldn't say it," I said. By vocalizing it, I was affirming the truth of the unthinkable. Maybe it could be reversed if it was never said aloud, turned back, undone. I remember agreeing with my uncle. We hadn't taken care of Dad. His pain was foreign to us, so we ignored it until he resorted to violence as a pathway to be heard.

"We have to clean the room now," Mom said. "The police said we have to do it today."

"Is it safe to go in there?"

"He's not there anymore."

I followed Mom to the laundry room. She grabbed a few rags and spray bottles and asked me to carry the carpet cleaner. The cleaner usually removed the smoky smell in the rooms and preserved the lifespan of the carpet. Our pace slowed as we approached Room 125. Mom unlocked and pushed open the door. She signaled me to go in first. I hesitated, expecting to see Dad's lifeless body still laying on the bed. I lifted the carpet cleaner over the door frame and stepped in. Initially, it looked like any other room that needed to be cleaned after a guest's stay.

Mom wept. "That's where he was," she said, pointing to the dark spot at the foot of the bed. "You have to clean there."

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I filled the cleaner with water from the bathroom sink as Mom scrubbed the splashes of blood on the wall. I plugged in the machine, squirted water on the carpet, and adjusted it so it sucked the water back in. I had done this before and was accustomed to the dirty brown liquid that penetrated the transparent container of the cleaner, but this time it was exclusively Dad's red blood. I obsessively ran the cleaner over the dark spot. Liters of blood were sucked from the carpet. The cleaner clicked when the container was full. I unhinged it and opened the lid. Splashes of blood covered my hands as I drained the container in the sink.

I unplugged the machine and saw Mom standing on an end table, tears falling from her eyes as she reached for spots of blood on the ceiling.

"That's enough," I said.

I didn't want to be there anymore. I wanted to be as far from the room and motel as possible. The motel had taken my father as much as his illness. The business was the symptom and catalyst for the derangement of his thoughts. The daily chores of collecting and cleaning stained sheets triggered how far he had come from rural Punjab, then the suburbs of Toronto, to this nowhere interstate motel in Michigan. How was it possible that Dad, the same man who feared dogs during pizza deliveries, was obsessed with safety at the factory, and agonized over accidental cuts on his face after shaving had the nerve to violently end his own life? Dad had lacked the courage to do this. Impossible.

This was Jagjit, not my father.

Or maybe he was brave in a way I might never understand? I often got compared to him. My toes scrunch up over top of each other like his, we both curled our chest hairs under our shirts when nervous, both laughed with our entire upper bodies, and relentlessly invited others to drink with us to extend the night. Despite our similar mannerisms, I couldn't imagine doing what he did, feeling so desperate and overwhelmed, concluding that ending my life was the only reasonable option. Or maybe I just wasn't old enough yet to understand.

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My sister came home from elementary school shortly after Mom and I had finished cleaning the room. She wanted to celebrate my birthday. Mom and I agreed to celebrate before family members started arriving from Virginia, Indiana, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Canada. My sister wanted to wait for Dad. That's when we told her that there was a big accident that morning and Dad had passed away. She was too young to ask about the nature of his passing or understand the permanence of death. We insisted that it was still okay to cut the birthday cake. She sang the happy birthday song and fed me cake with a spoon, as tradition demanded. It was the last thing I ate for days.

### INDIA

As the only son, it was my duty to spread Dad's ashes in the holy rivers of India. Mom had to stay back to keep running the motel, so I traveled alone. The motel didn't stop for anything. Dad's death was just another cost of doing business.

I checked in a single suitcase. Most of it contained Dad's old clothes to donate to the village poor in Punjab. It was a bad omen to keep a dead man's clothes in the house because his spirit was supposedly attached to his belongings, which prevented departure to the afterlife. I didn't believe in these superstitions, so I kept a pair of Dad's blue indoor slippers that still had the store tag on them and his wallet, which was in his pocket at the time of his death and contained two hundred dollars and a few loose receipts. I scoured all the receipts for a note but only found incomprehensible calculations.

I packed the plastic box of Dad's ashes in my backpack. I didn't have a death certificate for them. Rules and laws, like depression, were viewed as a choice in our family. They were for other people to follow. Once on the airplane, I crammed my backpack underneath the seat in front of me, but it felt wrong, like I was stashing a life once lived on the stained carpet amid dirty feet and unsanitary pillows and blankets. As soon as the plane took off, I lifted the backpack into my lap and clasped my arms around it for the entire fifteen-hour flight. I lost count of

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the number of beers I drank on the flight with Dad's ashes in my lap. I realized this would be the only time we'd ever go to India together. I considered all the other things we'd never do together. We'd never work together again or have lunch at the Pizza Hut buffet. His New Year's Eve tradition of ordering a KFC Mega Meal would pass with him. I was one semester away from graduating from college. Dad wouldn't be at my commencement. He would miss my wedding and the birth of my children, his grandkids. Did I even want children? What if the darkness inside Dad was also within me? Would I one day abandon my children too? I decided not to become a father on that flight. I had to protect the unborn from the part of him that was inside me, my underlying darker self.

My grandfather and uncle picked me up from the Delhi airport in the middle of the night. I was hazy from jet lag and too many beers. They were surprised that I hadn't brought more luggage.

Delhi in darkness smelled like fried street food, exhaust fumes, and cardboard rotting in a nearby river. In the front seat of Uncle's sedan, I struggled to keep my eyes open.

"How's school?" Uncle said.

"I'm dropping out. Moving to Michigan."

"Are you still in science?"

"I'm not sure what I'll do anymore."

"How's your mom's business?"

"People always need a place to stay."

"Do you still watch wrestling?"

"It's been a couple years."

"You've lost weight."

"I was too big last time I was here."

The first time I had visited India, six years earlier, was an endless family reunion. I was paraded from villages to cities and introduced as a proud product of my parents. This time, I was shielded from these interactions. Relatives wanted to pay their condolences, but they were ignored given the short and purposeful nature of my trip. There was also familial shame due to Dad's self-inflicted death. It wasn't something that was talked about. It was referred to as "an accident," like Mom preferred to think of it.



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We stopped in Kiratpur Sahib, the holy Sikh shrine where ashes are traditionally spread. Dad was only culturally a Sikh. He never wore a turban or otherwise practiced the faith, apart from a month when he became obsessed with buying a drying fan for the bathroom in the local gurudwara in Canada. He believed the lone wet towel, where everyone attempted to dry their hands, was a detriment to cleanliness and therefore holiness. He saved money for months before finally donating the industrial dryer for the gurudwara bathroom.

At Kiratpur Sahib, I cleaned my hands and feet in holy water, even though this wasn't the final resting spot for Dad's ashes. Given the traumatic nature of his death, this trip required more consideration. Special prayers were necessary to ensure that Dad's soul could transcend his unfortunate fate. Nobody explained to me the origins or scriptural source of these beliefs. Despite my doubts, I never asked questions. We didn't help Dad when he was alive, so I didn't think there was anything we could do for him now.

The following day, we headed to Rajpura to visit "Rajpura Aunty," literally the aunt from Rajpura. I never learned her real name, but she served as our family's spiritual guide during this time.

Rajpura Aunty had dark skin and short, henna-dyed hair. She was missing one of her front teeth, which gave her an uneven smile. She spoke about her disabled son and the school she operated on the first floor of her house. We passed the row of uniformed kids reciting their multiplication tables on the way up to her second-floor study. My grandfather greeted her with his hands clasped in front of his chest. His reverence was rare, reserved for those he felt were closest to God.

We sat on couches arranged in a circle. A servant brought us water. Rajpura Aunty discussed the mission of her school, asked my grandfather if there was any progress in his village's land disputes, and how the visa process was going for Uncle's children. She seemed to know more about my family than I did.

Finally, Rajpura Aunty turned to me and said, "Your father's sudden death is a cause for concern."

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This was the first time anybody in India had directly mentioned Dad's death, and even then, they replaced *suicide* with *sudden*.

"There are a number of things we have to do to ensure he can travel to the next life," Rajpura Aunty said.

The servant brought us sugary tea as Rajpura Aunty described our next steps. Uncle took notes, and I reluctantly agreed to everything. What did it matter at this point? Dad was gone. The worst had already happened. I sipped my tea as the conversation shifted to more mundane matters—traffic, Indian politics, and increased pollution in Punjab. We were ready to depart when a couch cushion flipped and fell on the floor with a thud. None of us saw the cushion turn, but we all heard it land. Both the square cushion and couch were flat. There was no way the cushion could have fallen without a force displacing it. But there was no window nearby to blow the cushion off the couch, and nobody had walked past it.

"See," Rajpura Aunty said, "your father was here with us, benefiting from our conversation. He was sitting right there." She pointed to the couch where the cushion had fallen. "He was not sitting in our circle, which is good. He knows he's not one of us anymore, and he's not here to hurt us. But he made his presence known, and he approves of our next steps."

The cushion did fall. This is a fact. I saw it lying on the floor. But my dad had died in America, not India. He'd never even been to Rajpura. I was still carrying him in my backpack. The cushion must have been a trick that Rajpura Aunty had played to earn my trust. She was overselling her services, and I wasn't buying. But my entire family was enamored with her schemes, so it didn't matter what I believed.

Our next destination was Haridwar, a mountainous, religious town along the Ganges River. It's a historical haven for zealots from across India and the world. A row of ashrams lines the river with renunciates dressed in orange cloth and cheap sandals. They rely on alms from the ashrams for their daily meals. They eat one simple meal per day so as not to get bogged down by earthly pleasures. On Rajpura Aunty's advice, we

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donated the materials for an afternoon meal in Dad's name to one of the ashrams. Generous donations were supposed to assist the transition between the tragic end of Dad's life on Earth and wherever he was now. Donation capital was apparently crucial in the afterlife.

After this donation, we stopped at a store to gather materials one would need on a journey. There was a line of these stores in Haridwar, like rows of tourist traps selling useless trinkets, only these items were for the thriving economy of the dead. Uncle started listing items to the store owner. A handwoven straw bed, sheets, pillow, kurta pajamas to wear during the day and night, a sweater, flashlight, batteries, an umbrella, soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, undershirts, underwear, flip-flops, and shoes. These items were all piled on the straw bed as if we were embarking on a long camping trip.

I lifted the two legs of the bed from the back while my grandfather picked it up from the front. We balanced the bed to keep the pile of household items from falling onto the streets crowded with stray dogs and monkeys. Random pandits courted us to be their customers for Dad's final prayers. Uncle ignored their desperate pleas as he followed his handwritten notes in search of a specific individual. We turned into a small alley and went up a short flight of stairs onto a platform that overlooked the street and the Ganges River. A man wearing thick prayer beads and an orange wrap around his legs welcomed us to a small shrine. We placed the straw bed close to the platform and were instructed to sit around the fire. I removed Dad's ashes and placed them on the bed before sitting down.

Our pandit started his unintelligible prayers in an ancient script I couldn't understand. I stared at the straw bed during the prayers and imagined Dad the last time I had seen him, on the steel metal bed of the funeral home in Michigan. He was naked, and it was my responsibility, as his son, to dress him for the last time in preparation for the funeral. It was ritual to first wash the dead body in homemade yogurt for purification. The funeral director assured us that the yogurt wouldn't interfere with whatever they had done to treat the body and wounds.

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After this bathing, my uncles removed the tags from the new clothes as I struggled to maneuver Dad's rubbery limbs into clothes designed for living men. We started with the socks, then pants and shoes. But we weren't supposed to tie the shoelaces or button the pants, because that would restrict his movements in the afterlife. It took all our strength to maneuver his body from side to side to put on his dress shirt. The funeral director offered to help with the suit jacket, but we waved him off. This was something I had to do. It was my duty. My last task was to comb Dad's hair. I crept closer to his face and saw my future. Permanent marks from shaving, wrinkles under the eyes and on the tip of our shared large nose, and thinning hair starting at the back of the head, slowly making its way to the front. Three stitches held the right side of Dad's head together. I combed his hair back like he preferred it, hiding the stitches as best I could.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when periodically asked to pronounce Dad's name during the prayers. "Jagjit," I said. A few times I had to say the name of my other grandfather, Bachan Singh, who had passed away a year earlier. Then my own. This was a legacy prayer that spanned generations.

My legs were falling asleep when Uncle's phone rang. He stepped away from the prayer circle to take the call. He handed me the phone after a brief exchange. It was Rajpura Aunty.

"How are the prayers going?" she asked.

"They're ongoing right now," I said.

"Your dad is very happy with the red embroidery on the white kurta that you chose for him."

I stood up and scrambled through the items on the straw bed until I discovered the white kurta, still wrapped in a plastic sleeve. I hadn't even noticed what color we had purchased from the store. It didn't matter because, like everything else, it would be donated to the pandit after the ritual. Rajpura Aunty's description matched the kurta we had purchased.

"How did you know that?" I said.

"I'm in contact with your dad right now. He's wearing it. He said the umbrella is helpful too."

## ***YOU'LL UNDERSTAND WHEN YOU'RE OLDER***

I became paranoid of the religious chaos around me. Rajpura was 115 miles away from Haridwar. Was Rajpura Aunty here? Had she hired spies to make sure we conducted all the rituals?

“Your dad said there’s one problem. The flashlight isn’t working.”

The prayers continued behind me as I searched for the flashlight. “What do you want me to do?”

“Make it work.”

I clicked the button on the flashlight. Rajpura Aunty was right. It wasn’t working. I uncapped the top. There were no batteries inside. I found the pack of batteries on the bed underneath the walking cane and socks. My hands shook as I inserted the batteries. The flashlight turned on.

“He said it’s working now,” Rajpura Aunty said before I could make the announcement.

I turned off the flashlight and put it back on the bed. The pandit waved me back to the circle. He had slowed his prayer pace as I’d fumbled with the items on the bed.

“Anything else?” I said.

“One thing,” Rajpura Aunty said. “There is a pair of blue indoor slippers that he would like. He said they’re in his closet in America.”

I thought Rajpura Aunty could have spies in Haridwar, but how was it possible that she had insight into our life in Michigan? Was she really in touch with Dad? I didn’t know what to believe anymore.

“How do we get those slippers to him?”

“I’ll call your mom and ask her to place them in a moving river,” Rajpura Aunty said. “You don’t worry about that part.”

The conversation felt hysterical. This could be my chance to speak with Dad one last time. I could ask him anything.

“How is he?” I said, ignoring the glares of my grandfather and uncle, who continued to call me back to the prayer circle.

“He has a small scratch underneath his right eye.”

“How did he get that?”

“He said not to worry about him. He has everything he needs now.”

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Was this really happening? What should I ask Dad? How much of a tip was he getting to suddenly leave us? What about the math on his receipts? What calculation had conclusively told him that this was the only possible solution out of the hole that had been dug for our family? Was there anything I could have done to change his mind? What if I had skipped college and taken the job with him at Pack-All? Then we could have been working side by side in Canada, where we were happy. Why didn't he take the phone from Mom that day and wish me a happy birthday? I would have brought home a six-pack of Labatt. *Have one with me. Let's talk. I'm not mad at you, Dad. I'm only trying to understand.*

"Call me after the prayers are done," Rajpura Aunty said and hung up.

I returned to the circle just as the prayers finished. The pandit would keep the bed and all items on it. He instructed us to spread Dad's ashes in the river.

I stripped down to my boxers before setting foot in the polluted water. I clutched the ashes tightly as I stumbled on the rocks at the bottom of the river. I stopped when the water reached my knees.

"Keep going," my grandfather yelled from the shore.

"It's cold," I said.

"I'm going to walk out there and dump you in myself if you don't keep going."

I walked until the water reached my waist. I looked back for approval. Uncle said that was far enough. I shivered as I angled the ashes so they poured into the river, scattering around me. It all felt like a mistake. Dad had wanted to go back to Canada, to his predictable routine at Pack-All and the pizzeria, but instead we had brought what was left of him to India, disposed him in a seemingly holy river that he had never visited or mentioned. I tried pooling the ashes back into my hands, but they were beyond my grasp in the water. I remembered the words: *You didn't take care of him.* Now he had dissipated in the river forever, and there was no chance for me to ever correct my negligence.

## ***YOU'LL UNDERSTAND WHEN YOU'RE OLDER***

According to Rajpura Aunty, these ashes weren't Dad. He had already moved on with the necessary supplies. The ashes I held were merely an earthly remnant of Jagjit, not the elemental being of my father. Mourning skewed my reality, draped my experiences in a veil of religious tricks. None of this could be real. Real was what had happened in Room 125. That was matter that could be seen, felt, heard, and scoured from the carpet and walls. The rest was just fantasy.

I shared a room with my grandfather during this trip. His faith was firm, and he was known for his daily recitations of both Sikh and Hindu scriptures. He believed in the repetition of reciting and the routine of doing it every day. I asked him why Dad had ended his life. My grandfather never engaged in emotional or sentimental conversations. He dismissed my question by calling Jagjit a fool and claiming that his final act was "very stupid." That was as far as we ever got in these bedside talks. But I still wanted to push him on the events we had witnessed in Haridwar.

"Was all that real today?" I asked.

"It's real," my grandfather said. "It's in the scriptures."

"Which scriptures?"

"All of them."

"Where's Dad now?"

"You helped him move on today."

"Where did he go?"

"The next life."

"Where's that?"

"You're too young to understand."

"Where do you think he is?"

"He's moved on. And you should too."

### WHEREVER WE ARE NOW

I'm supposed to understand something as I get older. I'm happily married now and own a home in an American suburb. I've traveled extensively with my wife and friends. I enjoy my

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job. My first child, a son, was born in October 2021, followed by a second son in August 2023. Yet I'm still waiting to understand. The potential epiphany is an indefinite timer ticking inside me. I'm expecting it to ring, but the past has not become clearer with time. What is there to understand, anyways? Dad lived a mostly happy and prosperous life. To live or die, fight or flee, believe or doubt, nurture or abandon, these are choices everyone makes every day. Dad made the heroic choices every day, until Jagjit bought a gun and made a singular choice that has since defined his and my existence. Maybe he'd be remembered differently if he had left a note explaining what he understood and how that understanding had led to his final act. Instead, I'm left trying to understand him in these written words, the closest thing my family will ever have to a note.

I wonder if anything would have changed if he had spoken to me on the phone on the morning of my twenty-first birthday. He could have at least said happy birthday and perhaps asked if there was anything I wanted like he had every year before that. Maybe he would tell me that I was getting older but still not old enough to understand. I should have asked to speak with him. I could have accidentally said something kind and hopeful to potentially change his mind. Maybe if I had delayed my visit home, it would have postponed his actions to another upcoming momentous day, like Thanksgiving or New Year's. My questions indicate uncertainty, not understanding. Without answers, I've unwittingly learned more about Dad in his absence than I ever knew during his life.

It's clear from the timeline, the purchase of the gun, safety test, visit to the gun club, and time of death that Jagjit's decision built up to my birthday. September 23 was always his target date. I imagine he found some comfort in me coming home to inform family members of his passing, picking the casket, organizing the funeral, and performing the religious rites. Those were his final measurements, the last instructions for me. Although he never left us anything in writing, the timing of his final act ensured that his death would forever be mourned in tandem with the celebration of my life. I think he chose my birthday so we'd never forget him.