The Missionary’s Wife (1824)

Janet Chalmers

It is still remembered how, at age 18, one cloudless day, she slipped off her shoes, rose from the wheelchair, and walked into the lake’s cold baptismal waters.

How she traveled the Sittang Valley, ox cart filled with pamphlets and sacks of flour, alone with the tigers in the cool jungle night. How he rendered the scriptures with gold ink on palm leaf fronds. Never without a tin of tea, snakes curled into the straw of their marriage bed.

Wherever we went the people pulled away the ladders and set the dogs on us. Several times they tried to burn the church down.

After the heat, wingbeat, lizards and hunger, the elephant lodged in the peacock’s eye, her crushed bonnets and crinolines annotated bible, journal, and letters shipped home in a plain wood box.


Mr. Abhyankar Learns to Drop Bombs

Prasad Bodas

I call upstairs, and there’s no response. I call again, and again only silence. My son is in his room, listening to music and ignoring my cries. Still, he is home, hence my heart is aglow. Eventually he comes downstairs to have dinner with his mother and me. I say something along the lines of “nice of you to join us,” and he rolls his eyes. At me! His father!

I wonder sometimes what might have been had we never come to America, if instead Mala and I had stayed in India where sons listened more or less to their fathers and loved them, or at least minded them with obedience that passed for love. I realize that this is something older immigrants do, imagining ideal versions of their original homes that may have never existed, and now I do this, too.

We were younger when we moved here, newly married and eager for reinvention. We found an apartment in New Jersey. I widened my lapels and Mala cut her hair in a sharp new style. One evening after a long walk under a darkening sky lit by the city lights she kissed me openly in public, knowing that our relatives who would have disapproved were eight thousand miles away. We were thrilled with assimilation, utterly sincere in our citizenship. Mala learned to cook hamburger. I even bought a gun, partly to address vague fears of security, and partly just because I could. Eventually we had our own son and as he grew we became versions of our own parents. By then I was no longer worried about self-defense. I had more parental concerns. We wanted for our son the perfect childhood we imagined we’d had, in what must have been an easier time.

All this goes through my head as I watch my teenaged boy Rabindranath, who we’ve called Nathu for short ever since his first meowing, when fresh from his mother’s womb at barely five and one-half pounds, breathing like a hummingbird through lungs still
choked with amnion, his first cry was as thin and small as the tail of a krait. It seemed then that his fragile body wouldn’t have tolerated the full four syllables of his given name with the hard, rolled “R,” the accented, percussive “BIN,” and the sawtooth “dra.” He is bigger now, and strong, but we still call him Nathu.

Who can guess how we’d be different now had things been different in the past, or even if we’d be different at all? More then half my life I’ve lived in the United States. I am a real and naturalized American. I believe that we make our own destiny, but I’ll concede that sometimes things just happen. Maybe Nathu would have been the way he is regardless of circumstance. Even in India, living in apartments with our relatives stacked one atop the other like lunch tiffins surrounded by love, he might yet have been afflicted with his almost congenital sadness. And on the eve of his adolescence at twelve years old we might still have found him kneeling in the corner of his bedroom with the lights off and the shades drawn, hugging his knees with his arms and repeating, over and over “Why can’t I feel anything? Why can’t I feel anything? Why can’t I stop feeling this way?”

We found an empty bottle of ibuprofen on the floor, and an old package of Flintstone vitamins, all the pills he could find in the house.

If we’d never come to America and his grandparents weren’t able to blame the vibrations of our new culture they would have found something else to hold against me, and Mala and I would have found some other reason to blame ourselves.

Nathu stands before me now, earphones in place, white cables running to the three hundred dollar cellphone in his pocket that has practically become an accessory organ; receptive and expressive. He is never without it.

“Nathu!” I shout, and then “Rabindranath!” He cocks his head, recognizing a connection between my moving mouth and the voice he hears faintly calling his name in the background behind the thumping beats and solid grooves of his rap music. I resist the urge to reach out and pull the wires from his ears only because, as if through headphones of my own, I hear his child psychologist, a wizardly old man who advised us to respect Nathu’s autonomy and personal space.

“What?” he says, removing one ear bud. I hear lyrics. A tiny voice exclaims bass! then death row! and asks what a brother know? Allusions are made to copious rhymes and murder threats that might be actual murder threats, or metaphorical expressions of the tiny man’s lyrical superiority. I can’t really tell.

“Dinner is ready,” I say. I ask Nathu to set the table because clear expectations are something the psychologist says I should provide.

Nathu is fifteen years old. He is an alumnus of the inpatient psychiatric program at the Overlook Hospital for Children, and a graduate of longer stays at various private facilities in upstate New York. He is a veteran of lithium, SSRIs, and cognitive-behavioral therapy. He’s been exposed briefly to Buddhism and karate. A guru of Expressive Therapy informed us that when Nathu is fully centered he has the inner strength of a banyan tree and the longing, like that very tree, to grow and place roots at the same time. I don’t know what to do with that information so I feed him a cocktail of medicines in which I have implicit faith. Once each week I take him to see a therapist. Her office is in the mountains, and I like to watch the trees through big windows in her waiting room while they spend their hour together. On clear days I can see New York City across the river, and I believe that he is becoming normal again. I allow myself to imagine his future.

Dinner is uneventful. Since Nathu has come back to us we keep the emotional temperature of our home between sixty-eight and seventy degrees. Warm enough to nurture, but not so warm as to provoke overheated feelings. We keep the actual temperature there as well, and we’ve removed the drapes to provide ample light with just the right tone. A practitioner of Sensory Living with a degree from Columbia helped us replace our regular bulbs with LEDs that emit the calming wavelengths of sunlight. The despairing mind of a male adolescent is murky and opaque but with the help
of professionals Nathu has made steady, if sometimes glacial progress. I can again enjoy the harried pleasures of fatherhood as we sit each night for a family meal.

Nathu is much better now, and it’s a comfort to know that his sullen moods and long periods of non-verbosity are probably not predictors of a future suicide. They are simply the common features of a modern American teenager, or perhaps sometimes signs that he hates me. When he mimics my accent it stings, though I know he doesn’t mean to be mean, and he’s only having fun as he sorts out his own identity. I don’t sugarcoat it, but I also try not to over-react. His Sullen Periods, as Mala and I have come to call them, are no longer pathological. I’m too sensitive. He is a boy becoming grown. His stormy moods will pass. Still, I long for conversation, the occasional filial touch.

“How was school?” I ask.
“Fine.”
“How are you feeling?”
“No.”
“Do you ever think of hurting yourself?”
“Is your heart filled with unnamable sorrow?”

It pains me when even before standing to clear his plate his phone is on and the headphones are out. He presses play and faintly I hear about a crack dealer by the name of Peter who needed putting down with a nine-millimeter. Then the buds are back in his ears and we’re in separate worlds. I am left wondering what happened after Scott LaRock pulled up in his all black BMW.

We know he’s getting better because he has friends again. Boys his age come over to our house, or have him over to theirs. They sit at their computers for hours on end, FaceChatting with other friends or playing online games in which they command roving Orc armies or manage small farms. They trade files and infringe copyrights, sending each other the latest dope tracks. Joel Blum is a boy who lives several blocks away in our sub-division in a house exactly like ours but with faux stone-facing where we have faux brick. Cesar Shah lives a few miles away. His father teaches at the university where I work. The boys say “What up, dawg?” and they call each other “my nigga,” without irony. Their mothers drop them off at the mall and they wander together for hours in a pack. Mala will take them there tomorrow, Saturday, to while away the day.

Once when Nathu was out with his friends and Mala was buying groceries at the discount club I let myself into his room. I didn’t consider that an intrusion. As a boy in my own father’s house I knew that the room I slept in was his, not mine, and I had fewer rights than a renter. I realize that times have changed and boys today need to feel that they own their territory. Still I had at least an hour by myself, and only the best intentions.

I was an archaeologist, discovering Nathu’s strange and alien culture through artifacts. The books I’d given him years ago were still there, well worn, on the shelf. Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn. I wanted to, but did not look for a diary. I found no evidence of cigarette smoking or other illicit activity. No condoms, dear God. He’d lined up his prescription bottles neatly on the bedside table.

I sat at his computer and listened through large padded headphones to a random sample of tracks on his hard drive. The tiny voices which had leaked from his ear buds were now rich and deep, full of braggadocio and chauvinism. The words became instruments of melody and rhythm, devoid of specific meaning. Enthralled by the beats and the raw proto-emotions they inspired, I lost track of time. When I returned downstairs I was surprised by Mala who, back from her mega-grocery shopping, was loading the fridge. She held a jar of pickles as big around as a small rain-barrel.

“What were you doing up there?” she asked.

“What, I said. “Just taking a nap.” I felt guilty for invading his space.

On Saturday we eat breakfast together, and I ask Nathu if we can listen to the music on his phone. He looks at me, his mouth full of eggs. Mala’s eyes sparkle with benign mischief.
“Oh,” she says, spatula in hand. “Your old Papa thinks that the beats will make him feel cool!” Nathu looks at her. Years ago he would have laughed, sharing her joke. I’m the straight man in their comedy. I plug his phone into the stereo and the room fills with a party beat. Get up get up, get down! a young man implores. 911 is a joke in your town! He goes on to describe the uneven provision of civil services in black neighborhoods. I feel like dancing. I tap out the rhythm on the table with my fingers and Nathu rolls his eyes. But he stays in his seat, doesn’t storm out or stare blankly into his plate. He makes eye contact, chews and swallows his food, and generally acts as if he’d prefer to be alive.

Give me your number I call you up. You act like a bitch ‘cause you won’t… Mala looks annoyed.

“That’s enough,” Mala says.

Nathu unplugs the phone, slips it into his pocket. “Whatever,” he says. He finishes eating, gets up from the table, and the headphones go back in his ears.

I used to walk each morning from the PATH train to my office at NYU while scanning the sky nervously for planes. That anxiety soon passed, replaced with other anxieties. We worried about square footage and the cost of living and good schools. Now my teenage son nods his head to vintage hip hop, trying on different affectations and adapting poses he doesn’t fully understand. Hungrily, the world around us scratches against our screen-door at night, but I care about none of this because he is home. I look at Nathu immersed in his music, walking upstairs with his back to us, and then I watch Mala as she watches him, feeling as I feel. This is life. Morning light pours through the window, lighting up everything. Mala’s eyes, Nathu looking up, not down, and me, seated at the table, my toast half eaten, orange juice in my glass, the three of us and the air between us. Everything shimmers.

I’m the mack daddy.

Mala and Nathu leave together. I stay behind and finish my breakfast.

I’m still at the table when Mala returns from the mall. She’s left Nathu there with the other boys. She is no longer scared to let him go, for a few hours at least. We’ve been rediscovering what it’s like to spend time with each other while not consumed with worry. After so many years we are still in love, but it’s nice to be reminded. A few weeks earlier when we had an afternoon together like this we made love. It was still cold outside. Nathu had been home for several months. He was fine, or nearly fine, his doctors said, and it was imperative that we acted normal around him. So we didn’t hide his belts or purge the house of sharp objects. We let him go to the mall with Cesar and Joel. We made sure he had his cellphone, and then waited for him to call us. It was cloudy and the sky was grey. The trees were barely in bud, but in late March the air was damp and had begun to smell of spring.

“When will you bring him home?” I asked.

“Joel’s mother will get them,” she said. We were just waiting.

“Oh,” I said. I looked at Mala’s phone on the coffee table. She pushed her hair back from her eyes.

How long had it been? My body was slack and loose, my muscles free of tension for the first time in as long as I could remember. Mala reached for me, I reached for her, and we fell into one another. We were as tentative and awkward as teenagers, and we were slow, as people our age will be. Afterwards it seemed that the recent years of worry and discontent had been a terrible dream or a bad story that was finally over. A few hours later Mrs. Blum dropped Nathu at our house and we spent an utterly ordinary evening at home as a family.

Today Mala and I spend our afternoon reminiscing. We are upstairs, looking through shoe boxes filled with old photographs, when Mala turns towards me and asks if I’ve gotten rid of our gun. Sheepishly, I admit that I haven’t. This makes her unhappy.

“What are you waiting for?” she asks.

I have no answer. “Please,” she says. “I don’t want it in the house.”

I know that. Since Nathu’s come home she’s wanted it gone. She’s never cared for it except briefly, when I first brought it home. We lived then in Jersey City, on the fourth floor of an old
townhouse. The halls were marked with graffiti. Our Vietnamese landlord was a mean man. He drank and gambled to excess and he held a master key to our apartment. We wore bright, strange clothes and spoke with thick accents. I am slight of build, and Mala is beautiful. I felt that we were easy targets. One day while returning from work I stopped at K-mart and bought a revolver and a box of bullets. I'd had a harder time buying wine at ShopRite the week before.

Mala and I practiced loading and unloading the gun. We made a game of it, timing each other with the second-hand of my watch as we'd seen in the movies. It was exhilarating. We remembered the American films we'd watched at a theater in Bombay, one of the few places then where we could enjoy air conditioning. That night with the gun we felt a little bit like action heroes. Mala was faster with it than I was, and she quickly became bored.

We never fired the thing. Eventually we put it away at the bottom of a locked metal box with our passports, Mala's wedding jewelry, and a few Indian currency notes we'd kept out of nostalgia. We hid it on a high shelf in the back of our bedroom closet. I brought it with us when we moved, and then forgot all about it. The novelty had worn off.

But Mala has not forgotten. She is quietly angry now but she's used to giving me second chances. Sell it, she tells me, or keep it in our safe-deposit at the bank. Or give it to the police. We go to the bedroom. The box is still there, in the closet, lighter than I remember. With a few easy clicks it's unlocked and open (I'd set the combination to Nathu's birthday). We take out the jewelry and I'm dazzled by the buttery gold, sculpted to look like vines inset with tiny roses carved from salmon-colored sea coral. The sight of it takes my breath away because it reminds me of our wedding. The years have passed, but Mala doesn't look older to me.

Below the jewelry the box of ammunition rattles as I move it, no longer tightly packed, as if a few bullets are missing. The gun is also missing. I see that, and the ground gives way beneath me. I'm falling an infinite distance. The old, vague anxieties have been replaced now with a sharp and specific fear as I dig inside the compartment where I'd kept the revolver. Nothing. Nathu could have easily guessed the combination. It occurs to me that one can love somebody completely and without reservation, and still never guess at the things they might do.

The phone rings, and Mala goes to answer.

"Hello?" she says, and then, "Yes, Joel, what is it?" I don't like her tone, or her sudden pallor. I take the receiver when she passes it to me.

"What is it, Joel?" I say.

"Mr. Abhyankar?" he asks. "I think you'd better come. Something's wrong with Nathu."

I drop the receiver and imagine a thousand terrible futures. We get in the car and I drive quickly to the mall. We find Nathu at the bookstore with his friends. It is now Saturday afternoon. The coffee shop is filled with people drinking coffee, reading magazines. Children run back and forth, and people line up at the cash register. The store is brightly lit and jazz plays over the loudspeakers. I imagine the damage one person could do here. The boys are at the back of the store. Joel leads me to the travel section where Nathu sits on a stool, hugging himself with his arms and rocking slowly to and fro. Cesar stands with him. They say that he's been like that for nearly an hour, not answering his friends, asking to be left alone.

"Nathu," I say.

He says nothing.

"Oh Nathu," Mala says. He remains silent. He cradles his small shoulder bag. The boys all have them. They call them man-bags and fill them with music players and video-game systems and packs of gum, I suppose. Nathu's man-bag is full and bulging. I wonder what's inside. I want to hold him. I want to go to him and take the bag. I want to ask him about the gun. I don't move.

Mala goes and tries to put her arm around him.

"Why did you come here?" he asks. "Please leave me alone." I feel flushed and my vision goes dim around the edges. I can hear
my heart, the rush of blood in my ears. Nathu stands up suddenly and pushes Mala away. The beat gets stronger.

“Nathu!” I say. I’m shouting.

Stop! I say. Collaborate and listen! My accent is thick and sharp, undiluted despite my years in the US. My words crack like a whip. Please look at me. Please hear what I’m saying! Mala looks at me. Joel and Cesar look at me. Other shoppers begin to notice us. Nathu’s satchel hangs heavy across his shoulders. Your self-destruction, it’s got to STOP! Now check out the rhymes that I’m ready to DROP! In a cluster, like a goddamn BOMB! I know what’s going ON! I am swaying now from one foot to the other, jabbing my index finger in the air. I jerk to one side, shaking and twitching. My hips gyrate, my body in motion. Tears pool in my eyes. I blink them away, but still more come. They spill down my cheeks. I begin beat-boxing, spitting rhythm into my closed hand.

A crowd forms around us. Mothers pull their younger children in close to them. A small Hispanic girl, maybe nine years old, taps a beat with her fingers on a wooden bench. A little boy dances and people start clapping, but still, Nathu is alone. I begin singing in a high falsetto.

We are every day people! Oh oh oh! I repeat this, over and over.

The store manager makes his way towards us accompanied by two armed security guards. Nathu straightens up. Already, he is taller than me. He shifts the bag across his chest, onto his hip. Now if he wanted to he could easily slide his right hand inside it. Children dance at point blank range. My heart stops. The Hispanic girl continues tapping away. A ten-year-old calls “Can I getta?” and someone answers, “What WHUT?” I continue my crazy dance.

“Dad!” Nathu exclaims. “What are you doing?” He begins to smile. I punch the air. I grab my crotch. It feels good, but wrong for the particular moment. Somewhere, a parent gasps.

“Oh my god, Dad!” Nathu says. “Seriously, cut it out!” His face turns red. I wish that it was like he was waking up from some altered state, or like the clouds parted for the sun, but it’s not like that. He rolls his eyes and smiles a thin smile. But then he laughs. The laughter just falls out of his mouth and then more, so that it’s difficult for him to speak. Cesar and Joel have moved to the edge of the circle, eyes aglint, hands covering their faces, but when he laughs they laugh, and it spreads. Infectious. Like my beats.

He laughs like he did when he was a little boy, when I used to tickle him by rubbing my head against his belly. I surge at him and take up his lanky frame in a tight bear hug, securing his satchel against my chest. He can no longer reach its contents. I feel his arms relax, and I slip the bag from his shoulder onto my shoulder. The people who were clapping out a rhythm now begin to applaud. The manager is perplexed. The security guards smile. Mala joins us and we move with Nathu towards the exit. I hold the bag tightly. For the moment we’re together, the three of us, safe in the rhythm I’m rolling.