

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Jati Kutta: the street dog, the servant, and me

ABSTRACT

Caste, class, race, and species collide in this narrative nonfiction piece about an injured street dog, his foreign rescuer, and her *Dalit* housekeeper in Ahmedabad, India.

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I saw him first in the spring, lying by the road as we drove through the outskirts of the arid village of Jagatpur in western India. Jagatpur stood like a speed bump between nearby Ahmedabad's urban sprawl and the outer state highway that circumnavigated the city. A few single-storey dwellings, once various shades of ochre and pistachio but now dulled to dun, spilled across the road onto the dry plateau south of the village. The Gujarati plains blanched in the furnace of the pre-monsoon heat as it approached its peak, parching life out of the earth and turning the landscape a depleted shade of beige. The emaciated mass lay motionless in the dirt a few yards from the road, a coat of filthy brown fur stretched taut over ridges of spine and angles of pelvis. As we drove by, I wondered how long the dead dog had been there lying in a heap on the roadside.

The road lay along the route to a college where I'd enrolled in a course. On my way to class the next day I caught sight of the twisted carcass again, this time further down the road, dragged there, I assumed, by a predator. It wasn't unusual to see dead and maimed dogs in India. Free-living dogs abounded in Indian cities. A census in Ahmedabad put their number at around 200,000 (Humane Society International, 2010). The urban spaces were also choked with hurtling cars, buses, trucks, motorcycles, and auto rickshaws. When the latter collided with the former, it was generally the dogs who suffered the consequences. In Jagatpur, where there were fewer people, there were fewer dogs and less traffic.

"Hey Mukesh," I said to the driver, "can you please pull over? Just here, by the chai stand." We were on our way to class

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again. I'd spotted a scrawny puppy near the roadside tea stall in Jagatpur and wanted to stop and feed him.

The makeshift kiosk, more a large cupboard than a shop, brimmed with brightly coloured packets of tea biscuits, paan—the Indian equivalent of chewing tobacco, made from betel nut—and other mysterious snacks hanging from the narrow beams that supported the rickety roof. The oily-haired chai wallah hovered over a battered aluminum pot simmering on a propane stove. Waves of cardamom, ginger, and sweat hit me as I gestured to the Parle G tea biscuits on the shelf behind him and asked for three packets. “Teen packet deejie.”

Parle G biscuits, a common snack among everyone from students to labourers to business people and truck drivers, were cheap and available at every roadside tea stall in India. They were also the de facto Indian street dog snack and befriending tool. Biscuits in hand, I made my way toward the pup, squatted down a few paces away, and opened one of the packets. Alerted by the crinkling of the wrapper, he looked over and eyed me expectantly. I broke off a piece and lobbed it gently in his direction. He got up and gulped it down. I tossed him some more, each time a little closer by. Soon he was right beside me, happily eating cookies while I stroked his tawny head.

As I played with the pup, I heard the rustle of something dragging through the dirt off to my right. I turned to look and stared, astonished. The crumpled canine heap I'd taken for dead was straining to pull himself over to me—or, rather, to the biscuits I was feeding the puppy. I could see he'd been run over. His back appeared broken, his hind legs limp and dragging useless behind him. He was jarringly thin and caked with mud, dried blood, and excrement. The front edges of his back

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legs were bloody, rubbed raw from constant dragging over the rough ground. His spine, ribs, and hipbones jutted out from his skeletal frame. I couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone able to make it over to me. He devoured the rest of the biscuits as I dropped them in pieces on the ground at my feet, along with a leftover granola bar and some crackers I retrieved from the car.

I only had a few classes left, but on each occasion over the next ten days I brought the broken dog a full meal and plenty of water. "Crumpletiltskin," as I initially called him, did not seem friendly. He wasn't aggressive towards me, but neither did he display any overt signs of warmth or appreciation, other than scarfing down the food I offered as quickly and desperately as possible.

Remarkable only for its dusty bleakness, the edge of Jagatpur always appeared deserted until we showed up. We'd pull over and get out of the car, then, seemingly out of nowhere, a handful of curious onlookers would trickle out and converge, forming a circle around us, staring intently while I fed the dog. I wished I could speak Gujarati.

"Mukesh, can you ask them what happened to this dog? How long has he been like this?"

A round of chatter ensued. One woman, sinewy and sun-darkened, spoke the most, and the loudest.

"She say one week, madam," said Mukesh.

She clearly said a lot more than that, but my lack of language skills precluded me from further details.

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I worried about what would become of Crumpletiltskin and how he would survive once my class ended. I wondered how best I could help him. I didn't even know if he would let me pet him or pick him up. Would he bite me if I tried? We had recently moved out of a hotel in nearby Ahmedabad and into a house with a spacious, walled garden. I envisioned Crumpletiltskin lying in the shade on the cool grass, out of the dirt and away from the dangerous road. I didn't know how long he would live, but if I could get him home with me, at least he'd be safe and cared for. I decided that if he would let me pick him up and put him in the car without biting me, I would bring him home to our garden and give him somewhere safe to live—or die—with dignity.

On the day of my final trip to Jagatpur my heart was pounding. I still didn't know if Crumpletiltskin would assent to being handled. I had no way of knowing how closely he had interacted with people before I'd met him. And if he did let me touch him, would he try to bite me out of pain when I tried to lift him? Even if he didn't object, I knew I would have to move quickly. If I took the time to feed him first, I'd risk drawing the unwelcome attention of the onlookers. Stealth and speed would maximize my chances of success.

All the way to Jagatpur I prayed under my breath, imploring the Maker of creatures great and small, including Crumpletiltskin, for help with my plan. I'd choreographed the whole sequence in advance with the driver, and together we talked through each step: stop, jump out, Mukesh opens back door, I grab dog. If dog bites me or tries too hard to fight, we abort the mission. If he doesn't, I place him in the vehicle, Mukesh slams door, we jump back in and wheel it out of there.

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As we approached Jagatpur, I scarcely breathed. I started scanning both sides of the road for Crumplestiltskin. What if I couldn't find him? What if he'd disappeared, or, worse yet, already succumbed to his injuries? Slowing down, we passed the little tea stall and crept forward. Ahead on the right, camouflaged in the dirt, lay the familiar brown heap of fur. I gasped. "There, Mukesh! He's there! On the right. Let's pass him and turn around."

We did a U-turn and pulled up close to Crumplestiltskin. As I jumped out, Crumplestiltskin raised his head, saw me, and eyed me eagerly, expecting a good meal. Just like we'd rehearsed, Mukesh left the car idling, hopped out, and went around to open the rear door. My heart still beating like a battle drum, I went straight to the dog, took a deep breath, and with my left hand gently took hold of his scruff. To my immense and immediate relief, Crumplestiltskin looked straight at me with his dark, liquid eyes and offered not a shred of resistance. I exhaled, then scooped up his broken, filthy hind end with my other arm, hurried the few steps to the car, and placed him on the quilt laid out in the back. Mukesh shut the door, we jumped back in, and sped down the road before anyone even noticed we'd been there. Mission accomplished. Spent adrenaline flooded my veins and left me feeling wobbly.

I sat sideways in the back seat, my arm stretched over the seat into the back, stroking Crumplestiltskin's head and ears, trying to comfort the nervous, whining canine passenger, who periodically emptied his bladder on the quilt. We pressed onward through the barren countryside, then down the perilous highway that ringed the city, and finally reached the potholed exit that led through Shilaj village. When we arrived at the house with the exhausted-but-bewildered Crumplestiltskin, I

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carried him through to the back garden through the servants' gate, and placed him on a clean blanket in the shade. Lakshmi, our housekeeper, stood cemented on the patio, glaring at the dog with undisguised revulsion.

I went to get some water and a bowl of food but when I returned, Crumplestiltskin had already fallen into a deep sleep, as if the blanket and the garden patch on which it lay were the nurturing arms of a mother pulling her child close and lulling him to blessed, safe, and healing rest. It was as if, somehow, Crumplestiltskin knew he had finally reached safe haven.

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“Do you want Lakshmi to stay on and work for you?” asked Mr. Desai when we first moved in. Mr. Desai was the owner of the house we'd rented in Kalhaar, an upscale gated community outside Ahmedabad. He was tall and fit, a handsome, affluent Gujarati with a warm manner, a head full of thick, short, salt-and-pepper hair, and perfect teeth.

Lakshmi, a widow from an area village, had been living and working at the house as a caretaker with her son, Lala, for several months so as not to leave the place empty between tenants. Named after the Hindu goddess of prosperity, Lakshmi was petite, stood erect, moved gracefully, and wore brightly coloured rayon saris. She knew no English, and barely any Hindi—only Gujarati, which she spoke in a strong, husky voice that belied her demure bearing. She smiled keenly when Mr. Desai introduced us. Something verging on charisma emanated from her dark, weathered features, a palpable enthusiasm that pulsed below the façade of deference.

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Mr. Desai had tasked Lakshmi with keeping out would-be intruders and cleaning the house daily, for which he paid her a meager salary. He'd been trying to teach Lakshmi's son, Lala, to look after the garden—to water the flowers and the parts of the lawn that didn't get adequately irrigated by the dodgy automatic sprinklers. The pond also needed daily topping up because it leaked, and the resident turtle was unable to get in and out unless the water was level with the edge. He was aiming to get Lala qualified to join Kalhaar's team of *malis*, or gardeners. "That way," he said, "Lala will learn some skills that will give him a career option." Unsurprisingly for a boy of his age, whatever that was—he was small but had the beginnings of a moustache—Lala did not display much interest in the task.

"You will need servants," said Mr. Desai, "someone to clean, a cook, and a watchman at least?"

I giggled nervously. I was unprepared for the question. The truth was that no, I didn't want servants. I wasn't averse to paying for someone to help with house cleaning now and again, but I didn't want to become a *memsahib* with a retinue of live-in servants. It made me uncomfortable. It struck me as servitude. My mother had been a *memsahib*, and I, a *miss-sahib*, back when my family had lived in India and Pakistan when I was a teenager. I remembered how my mother described the throngs of servants she'd had to supervise on our various overseas postings in the diplomatic corps. "It was like having a houseful of teenagers," she said, recounting what she'd perceived as one of the hardships of diplomatic life.

My intention had been to avoid the colonial quagmire altogether, as if by forgoing servants, I could retain some form of "racial innocence" (Kim 2015, 185) or position outside of

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power. That illusion quickly crumbled. By declining Lakshmi's services, I'd be depriving her of a livelihood. By employing her, I'd be taking advantage of her poverty. There was no clean option. Under the circumstances, keeping her on, which she wanted, seemed less objectionable.

I looked at my husband. He appeared to agree. He tilted his head toward Lakshmi and gave a subtle nod. We told Mr. Desai they could stay. I wasn't altogether comfortable availing myself of child labour, though. I asked Mr. Desai how old Lala was.

"Maybe 12 or 13," he said. He asked Lakshmi. She said she didn't know.

Noting my surprise, he continued. "These are simple people from the village. They don't use calendars."

"Shouldn't Lala be in school, instead of working in the garden?" I asked.

Mr. Desai, who struck me as genuinely well-meaning, explained that he had offered to pay Lala's full tuition at the local school, but that Lala wasn't interested, and Lakshmi wouldn't make him go. Besides, Mr. Desai thought this way at least Lala would gain some experience working at an "upper class" house, which might land him a "proper" job when he got older. I asked Mr. Desai, out of curiosity, how old Lakshmi was. Apparently she didn't know that either, but he guessed somewhere in her 30s.

Lakshmi had never worked as a paid housekeeper before, let alone for foreigners whose habits and tastes were completely alien to her own. I wasn't sure what I should expect. I asked

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Mr. Desai about her daily routine, and what her responsibilities should be.

“You have to train her,” said Mr. Desai. “These simple village folk”—by which he meant that subset of the rural poor who came from the low end of India’s socio-economic scale—“are the best to have working for you. They are honest. They know nothing, but they are hard working. The city people are lazy and dishonest, and they will cheat you.” He told us about the previous tenant, a well-to-do foreigner who indulged his servant, paid him too much, and gave him liquor. “The fellow became an unemployable, lazy alcoholic, and took to stealing to support his habit after the foreigner left. He ruined his life,” said Mr. Desai. “You cannot treat them as friends. You have to be very strict otherwise you will ruin them.”

The arrangement included Lakshmi and Lala staying on in the servants’ quarters of the house. All Kalhaar’s homes were equipped with such areas, wedged between one side of the house and the outer garden wall. The quarters consisted of a small bedroom, a closet-sized shower room, and a separate room with an Asian squat toilet. The three rooms opened onto a large, enclosed, outdoor covered patio space, which functioned as a utility area for doing laundry and miscellaneous chores. A door from the house kitchen opened onto the covered patio of the servants’ quarters—the “servants’ entrance.” By custom, servants didn’t use the front door. To leave and enter the property, they were to use a side gate from the covered patio to the outside.

I wasn’t sure exactly how I was supposed to “train” Lakshmi per Mr. Desai’s instructions. The only means of communication available to us were smiles, grimaces, grunts, and

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gesticulations. I opted for the path of least interference and left Lakshmi to her own devices. I watched from my desk as she cleaned and polished the floors of her own accord. She did this with a cloth and a bucket of water, squatting on her haunches.

Lakshmi appeared to take a great deal of pride in her work. There would be a sparkly swagger in her eyes as she walked into the living room in her colourful saris, silver anklets jingling, nose ring gleaming, stack of bangles jangling, bearing unsolicited tumblers of cold water on a tray when we returned home after a hot excursion to the city. On the days the *malis* didn't come to do the garden, every day but Tuesday, after polishing the floors to an immaculate shine, she would sweep the lawn of fallen leaves and branches with her short stick broom, again, squatting on her haunches, crab walking gracefully from one end to the other, leaving a pristine carpet of green.

There was something theatrical about the way Lakshmi went about her work, as if this were performance and I the audience. Every day, the star performer—confident, bold, and dance-like in her precise movements—dramatized her way through her broom-wielding *bharatnatyam*, frequently checking to make sure I, her adoring public, was watching. *Jingle jangle jingle jangle jingajing jingajing* sounded her anklets as I sat at my computer trying to write. The harder I stared at the screen, the longer the *nautch* seemed to last.

The neighbourhood into which we'd moved stood as one of the many posh gated communities that had arisen on the periphery of major Indian cities to cater to the swelling ranks of India's wealthy. The city's galloping growth meant the metropolis was gobbling up surrounding villages and farmland at a voracious pace. That made the gated community of Kalhaar

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all the more sought-after as a restorative oasis, and rendered it a preferred address for some of Ahmedabad's elite. Kalhaar was not the newest such community, but it struck me as the nicest. The ambiance was so peaceful—nurturing even—when compared to the frenetic atmosphere in the city.

A dreamy, unreal quality permeated the neighbourhood. The gentle hues of the houses—muted peach, soft beige, hushed Jaipur pink—and their broad verandas sat amid oases of green and colour bursts of bougainvillea, gulmohar, and jacaranda. Bursts of jasmine soothed the senses. The many fruit and flowering trees, lush foliage, green spaces, and garden ponds made it an inadvertent refuge for a plethora of bird species and other creatures in a region that was essentially a desert. Bulbuls shrieked from the border shrubs, kingfishers and egrets lurked by the ponds, and jungle babblers—known as “the seven sisters” for their habit of foraging in groups of seven—scoured the flower beds for bugs and worms. Roving bands of mischievous langur monkeys raided the mango trees. Even normally nocturnal owls sought afternoon sanctuary from the pre-monsoon cauldron in the palm trees that ringed the lagoons. It was into our own privileged Eden that we welcomed the weary Crumplestiltskin.

“Hey little one,” I said softly as I stepped out onto the patio and perched on the doorstep. My new furry charge lay a few feet away resting in the shade on a cotton sheet I'd folded and spread out on top of a thick yoga mat. He lifted his head and looked at me. Moments later his features drooped and he lay his head back down. For the first few days, Crumplestiltskin responded to my voice that way, by looking at me, but that was about it. He didn't give any obvious indication that he wanted to interact or receive affection.

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I soon realized, however, that Crumplestiltskin wasn't unfriendly. Something in his gaze when I spoke to him—his furrowed brow, inquisitive eyes, and perked ears—hinted at a yearning for deeper connection. I suspected he wanted to come over, get a pat, and stay close by, but he simply didn't have enough strength to do anything other than cling to life. What he needed most, after food and water, was a safe and comfortable place to spend the days sleeping and resting. As for his name, I knew "Crumplestiltskin" was only temporary. We were committed to his healing, and to providing him with as good a life as we could, for as long as he was with us. On his second day at home, as he looked up at me with those incredibly beautiful, dark, expressive eyes, it jumped out and practically hollered at me: "Piccolo!"

A neighbour recommended a veterinarian in the city, Dr. Tina Giri. Dr. Giri's clinic was located on the basement level of an office building in the city centre, just below the Chinatown Restaurant. Piccolo trembled and panted as I carried him from the car and down the steps to the clinic. A diminutive young man with a dark complexion and heavily oiled hair waved us in. Dr. Giri sat inside working at a small desk opposite a stainless steel examination table. She greeted me with a friendly expression and gestured to the table. I placed Piccolo on the table and held onto his collar, massaging his back with my other hand.

"What happened, na?" exclaimed Dr. Giri, coming over and addressing Piccolo. A natural dog person, she let him sniff her hand, then gently stroked his neck behind the ears. Piccolo whined and tried to drag himself to the edge of the slippery table. "No, no, stay beta," she said.

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“I have no idea how long he’s been this emaciated,” I said. “The people in the village said the accident happened a week before we spoke with them, so he may have been hit about two weeks ago.”

I recounted the details of how I’d found him as Dr. Giri palpated his back, took his temperature, checked his teeth, eyes, and ears, and listened to his lungs and heart with her stethoscope, Piccolo all the while emitting the occasional whine and trying to wriggle off the table. She was skillful and gentle, interacting with Piccolo as if she knew him well. Her assistant, the man who’d ushered us in, came and helped me hold him in place as Dr. Giri examined him. She proceeded to clean each of his hind legs with wet gauze and antiseptic. I winced as she softened and worked away the mud and dried blood. I was shocked to see how much of the skin he’d rubbed raw dragging himself around. The pink flesh finally emerged oozing and bloody in places.

After cleaning his wounds, Dr. Giri prescribed rest and a special feeding plan. I was to wash Piccolo’s hind legs daily with warm water and liquid antiseptic soap. Dr. Giri instructed me to buy children’s cotton socks, insert a drawstring in the top of each, and put them on his hind legs to give the abraded skin a chance to heal. She was obviously familiar with this kind of injury. As for the prognosis, Dr. Giri said we would have to wait and see. She was uncertain as to whether the extended period of starvation had damaged his organs.

“Is this a case in which you would consider euthanasia?” I asked, holding my breath.

“No, no, not at all,” replied Dr. Giri. “This kind of thing happens here. It’s terrible. The dogs suffer so much of trauma. But

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some of them survive and get used to using only their front legs to get around. I think he will be okay.”

I exhaled and blinked, trying to hold back the moisture that stung my eyelids.

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Piccolo’s arrival filled my world with a new sense of delight. I would rush to see him first thing in the morning. I wanted to be with him during the day, and make sure he was safe and comfortable before going to bed at night.

Piccolo, likewise, quickly grew to delight in my company. If I was away from him for any period of time, at the sight of me he would erupt in a series of dramatic squeals. When I’d get up in the morning, I had to sneak as quietly as I could into the kitchen to make coffee. If Piccolo saw or heard me, he would drag himself over to the patio door and launch into a canticle of melodramatic yowls, as if we’d been separated for years. As he grew stronger, he struggled to follow me wherever I went. The unanticipated—and clearly mutual—joy we brought each other pointed to a primordial blueprint: we were designed for connection.

Piccolo’s life and mine became intricately linked. This lovely, living, breathing creature—with his own personality and quirks and preferences—he was so fragile, so vulnerable, and yet so determined to hang on. He had suffered such agony, which had been compounded by the absence of gentle hands responding with help or healing. His life had been so harsh and had come so close to being snuffed out. Had Piccolo and I not met, had he perished out there on the roadway, that he had ever existed at all might not have mattered to anyone. This was

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incomprehensible to me. He was an entire universe all his own. He mattered. Period.

To name another, at its most basic, is to acknowledge that that ‘other’ matters, that the being named has significance in their own right, independent of the one doing the naming. In the Genesis creation story, God brings all the animals—every beast of the field and every bird of the air—to Adam one by one “to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living soul, that was its name” (Genesis 2.19 Jubilee Bible). It had always struck me as odd that various commentators interpreted that act—Adam’s naming of the animals in the Garden of Eden—as representing human power and authority over animals (text notes on Genesis 1.5 and 1.28, Reformation Study Bible, 2005). My experience with Piccolo afforded me a different perspective.

My heart was bursting for this wounded, vulnerable creature, in much the same way a new parent, gazing at her infant, is overcome by a surge of emotions, a chemical cocktail of attachment, protection, and nurture (London 2019). I was experiencing anew the power of love, connection, and relationship. When that name came to me, when I experienced the privilege of looking into Piccolo’s trusting eyes and naming him, it was simply this: an act of love, of devotion, and of promise—a sort of covenant. “You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord shall give,” wrote the prophet Isaiah. “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord (...) You shall no more be termed Forsaken” (Isaiah 62.2-4). In the human-centred world, I was in the position of an overlord, yes; but for me, the act of naming Piccolo, of stamping him with a mark, constituted not proof of human power over animals, but an acknowledgement of a bond forged by the reversal of forsaken-

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ness. Through our mutual bond, Piccolo was marking me as much as I was marking him.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, a person's name reveals a key aspect of their identity. The name "Piccolo" hadn't come to me through divine foreknowledge of the character of this particular canine, at least I didn't think so. It simply burst into my consciousness and reverberated inside me like a sounding gong as I looked into his eyes. Maybe that's how divine foreknowledge works. But I definitely wasn't thinking of the literal meaning of the word "piccolo" at the time: "a small flute sounding an octave higher than the ordinary one" (Lexico.com). Though his repertoire of squeaks and squeals fit the pattern, something else matched it even more.

In the Hindu pantheon, the deity Krishna represents divine love. Krishna is always portrayed with a flute, a symbol of the human heart, an instrument through which the love of God is played. Piccolo was the canine avatar of Krishna's flute, playing for me a sound so pure it hurt.

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It didn't take long for Piccolo to start feeling better. From our spot on the patio we watched him charge two-legged across the grass. A langur monkey sat on the garden wall nursing her tiny infant. The silver-haired, black-faced primates could be quite large, and they didn't scare easily. The langur looked down scornfully at Piccolo, decided he was a nuisance, and shot up into the thick canopy above, her baby clinging to her like Velcro. His job done, a satisfied Piccolo came and lay down on his thick mat beside me on the patio.

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“You gorgeous boy,” I said to him, stroking his soft head and ears. How enchanted I was to be sitting in this place, among these creatures, in this oasis carved out of the Gujarati desert. “Snapshots of Eden,” I thought to myself.

I imagined the original Eden as low maintenance, but our mini-Eden demanded active manual work on my part. In my post-Fall paradise perfection was always degenerating. “Piccolo” became “Pickles,” which soon became “Pickles the Incontinent of the Subcontinent.” When he’d peed on the quilt in the back of the vehicle the day I brought him home, I put it down to nerves. After all, he’d never been in a car before. On his second day, on the trip to the vet, he did the same thing. At home, when I picked him up to take him to the bathroom to wash his leg wounds as instructed by Dr. Giri, he peed all over me. Thereafter I learned to carry him facing away from me.

Pickles’ injuries had left him with little in the way of control of his bodily functions. Some years prior, the landlord had glassed in the broad, L-shaped, rear veranda of the house with floor-to-ceiling windows and installed glass doors at each end. The space looked out over the garden and pond. It had a *jungle* but protected feel. I loved it. We set up our living room at one end of the L, and I my desk and work area at the other. The advantage for Pickles (and me) was that there was no carpet in the room. The veranda floor was made of smooth tile. Pickles was able to glide across it easily, pulling himself along with his two front legs. When he had accidents, he left an easily discernible trail I would clean up with paper towels and spray cleaner.

“Sounds like ‘urine a pickle,’” wrote my punster friend when I said I found myself spending a lot of time on my hands and knees cleaning the floor.

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The little cotton socks on Pickles' hind legs acted like swabs, which meant I had to wash his legs and change his socks regularly. It also meant I had to wash a pile of smelly socks every day, which initially I did myself, by hand, out in the servants' quarters while Lakshmi looked on with disgust.

Lakshmi made no attempt to conceal her aversion to Pickles, scowling at him if she had to pass near him. She wasn't afraid of dogs; she just didn't like Pickles. Initially he was too weak and exhausted to pay her any attention. As he started to regain his strength, though, his healthy canine curiosity returned. He had learned that my husband and I were friendly and adored him. Maybe he thought he'd entered a new realm, one in which all dogs were loved by all humans. He certainly got excited when two washing machine repairmen came to the house. With the men sitting on the floor taking apart the entrails of the machine, Pickles acted as if they'd come with the express purpose of playing with him. He grunted with excitement, dragged himself over to them, and jubilantly inserted himself into the middle of their work, smelling their clothes and tools, poking them with his wet dog nose, and waiting expectantly for them to celebrate his existence. They tolerated him, but seemed uncomfortable with this strange, socked, dragging creature sticking his exuberant snout in their business. I had mercy on them and carried a happy Pickles into the house with me.

When Pickles first dragged himself over to Lakshmi, his hopes for a warm reception equally high, she spoke sharply to him, stomped her foot, and shooed him away. He quickly learned to avoid her.

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We soon took in two small puppies we found on a construction site. Button Sengupta and Lady Penelope Chatterjee deferred to Pickles as their pack leader, and Pickles enjoyed bossing them around, leading them on raids into the far corners of the garden, around the back of the pond, and deep into the bushes on the far side of the house. They would face off against intimidating gangs of langur monkeys who periodically swung by to raid the mango tree or drink from the pond. The canine trio chased squirrels and lizards, undertook canine excavations in the dirt, and barked out their boundaries to passing workers and roaming dogs.

As Penelope and Button grew bigger, Pickles grew stronger. His awkward two-legged drag developed into a swift, imperious glide. I was amazed to see that Pickles' socks were doing their job. The fur had grown back on all but one small patch just below each of his hocks. Those were the spots that bore the most pressure while he dragged himself across the ground, and without some form of protection, they were constantly bloody, dirty, and at risk of infection. He no longer needed socks, but he needed something.

I resolved the problem with a new invention: dog leg bands. I bought terry cloth sweatbands—the kind tennis players wear on their wrists—cut them to measure, then sewed Velcro on each end. I wrapped them around his legs below the hock, fastened the Velcro, and for good measure tied a length of cotton

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gauze firmly around each band. They worked perfectly. The dirty sock pile was replaced with a dirty leg band pile.

In the servants' quarters, under the covered patio was a concrete utility area with a faucet and a drain. Each time I changed Pickles' soiled leg bands, I would throw them down near the drain, as I had done previously with his socks. When we first got Pickles, I'd been washing the dirty sock pile myself, once a day. Contrary to the custom in local households, we didn't have Lakshmi doing the laundry or cooking simply because we were used to doing it ourselves. Not having to mime out every instruction also saved considerable depletion of my creative battery and charade skills. After a while I thought I might enlist Lakshmi's help with the washing of Pickles' socks. One day I motioned to her to come over to the faucet and watch me demonstrate.

"*Dekhiye,*" I said, meaning "please look" in Hindi, hoping she would understand. I took one of the dirty socks, rinsed it out under the tap, then soaped and scrubbed it. I rinsed it, wrung out the excess water, and hung it on the adjacent laundry line. I worked my way through the small pile till six clean wet socks hung from the line. I went and got Mukesh and asked him to explain to Lakshmi that I would like her to wash Pickles' socks daily, as I had shown her.

A short exchange ensued in Gujarati between Lakshmi and Mukesh.

"What is she saying?" I asked.

"She will do it," he replied.

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I suspected I didn't have the whole story, but that was all they divulged.

When the leg bands took the place of the socks, I again asked Mukesh for help explaining to Lakshmi that she was now to wash the leg bands the same way she'd washed the socks.

As soon as Mukesh conveyed the message, Lakshmi burst into a spirited tirade that sent Mukesh into fits of laughter. His laughter was contagious, and I too started to giggle. "What is she saying?" I asked him.

Between convulsive howls and snorts, he struggled to explain. "She say this dog is having disease. This cloth is having very bad smell."

Lakshmi held Pickles' dirty leg band up for Mukesh to smell, to prove her point, which made him buckle over in hysterics again. This elicited another prolonged outburst of irate chatter from Lakshmi. Mukesh laughed so hard he could barely contain himself.

When he settled down enough to speak, Mukesh continued with the translation. "Something wrong with dog. He is disease. No good."

"Lakshmi say," he continued, "she like nice dog. She take care pedigree dog. This dog is from roadway. No good and disease. She say her caste is not do this work. You must be hiring man from special caste to clean dog cloth. This not her caste."

I groaned. I knew Lakshmi was a member of the *Dalit* community, but what was only just dawning on me was that even among the lowest caste there apparently existed a purity-pol-

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lution, reverence-contempt spectrum. There were *Dalit* leather workers, for example, who were reviled by some among the higher castes but who themselves regarded sweepers with contempt. Yet how anyone could despise an innocent creature like Pickles who'd suffered so intensely and barely managed to survive confounded me. From my "single optic" perspective (Kim 2015), the injustice suffered by Pickles seemed far greater than the injustice Lakshmi felt I was committing against her by asking her to wash his leg bands.

It took me no small effort to try to see things from Lakshmi's point of view. She was telling me that she wouldn't have any qualms about looking after a purebred dog like a German shepherd or a golden retriever, but that her caste precluded her from proximity to a street dog. As far as Lakshmi was concerned, Pickles was "untouchable," a veritable "pariah dog."

In the field of cynology, the term "pariah dog" has been used for over a century to refer to indigenous dogs that conform to a universal physical type found among aboriginal dogs the world over. Use of the word "pariah" is problematic, however. When used casually as a metaphor, according to Rupa Viswanath, it bears remembering that the term "pariah" refers to someone or something that "deserves to be reviled." Because the origin of the term lies in such an odious social order, she, like many, equates use of the term to use of the 'n-word' (Viswanath 2014, xi-xii). The term "pariah dog," or "pye dog," is therefore subject to contention. Used initially by the British during the colonial era to refer to the free-ranging local dogs, it derives from "Paraiyar"—landless agrarian slaves in south India who lived under a brutally oppressive feudal system. The Paraiyar were drummers, a subsection among *Dalits*, who played the "parai," or drum, at religious rites and festivals. Their drumming was

not considered an art form, but rather part of their mandatory caste-based service. The material of which the drums were made, cowhide—a dead animal product—was deemed polluting by higher castes. So were the Paraiyars themselves. And so was Pickles to Lakshmi.

In India caste divisions occasionally spilled over into the canine world. In the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh, the pet dog of an upper caste family was disowned after it was discovered that a *Dalit* woman had fed the dog a roti. The family now designated the dog as “untouchable”, tied it to a pole outside the *Dalit* woman’s house, and insisted she adopt him (Gupta 2010). In some villages in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, village councils prohibit *Dalits* from owning male dogs as pets. The people belonging to upper castes in those villages claim that if male dogs owned by *Dalits* mated with their female dogs, it would “pollute the purity of their caste” (Tehelka 2014).

“Untouchability,” or discrimination on the basis of caste, was technically illegal in India and had been for decades. What Lakshmi was saying I should do—hire someone of a “lower” subcaste to wash Pickles’ leg bands because she considered it “polluting”—was actually against the law. I naively assumed Lakshmi knew this, and what’s more, cared, given that in many villages throughout India there stands at least a bust if not a full-sized statue of Bhimrao Ambedkar, the *Dalit* writer, dissident, and first law minister in India’s newly independent government. Although Ambedkar died in 1956, to this day he remains a hero in India.

In many *Dalit* households, Ambedkar’s shrine-like, garlanded photograph graces a prominent spot on the wall alongside

favourite Hindu deities. Lakshmi would have been well aware of Ambedkar and his anti-“untouchability” message; his blistering critiques of caste included the assertion that the caste system was a product of “the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set it in fashion, and who had the authority to force it on their inferiors” (Ambedkar 2004, 5[8]). That she was pulling caste rank baffled me, a sign of my cultural and social ignorance.

But something else Ambedkar wrote offered insight into Lakshmi’s ideas about what the division of labour should be regarding the washing of Pickles’ laundry. He said that casteism necessitated the constant oppression of all outside (namely, “below”) one’s own caste—or in this case, sub-caste; that in a caste-based society, one’s very well-being depended on perpetuating the oppression of the lower castes by the higher. People were not brothers, they were rivals (Ambedkar 1987, 98). Caste, said Ambedkar, could not be reformed. It had to be annihilated, and the only way to achieve that was to destroy Hinduism itself. He’d written that more than 70 years earlier. Hinduism and caste didn’t appear to be going anywhere.

To Mukesh, Lakshmi’s dog classification system was hilarious. To me, it was exasperating. According to her ideas of *jati kutta* (“breed dog”)—literally, dogs of a certain “caste”—Pickles was an “outcaste” among dogs, but not entirely for the reason I thought.

With help from Mukesh translating, I tried to find out more. “Mukesh, ask Lakshmi if she likes the two new puppies, Button and Penelope. Does she think they are nice dogs?” She’d

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made a display of cooing over them when we first brought them home.

Mukesh proceeded to relay my question, to which Lakshmi offered her reply. “Yes, madam,” said Mukesh. “Lakshmi like Button and Penelope. Very nice dogs. She say Pickle not nice. Pickle is disease.”

“Does she know that Button and Penelope are also street dogs?” I asked.

A brief exchange ensued between Mukesh and Lakshmi. Mukesh turned to me. “Lakshmi say Button and Penelope are very nice, not disease.”

I asked Mukesh to explain to Lakshmi that Pickles was not diseased, but that he had been hit by a car. That was how he became paralyzed. His socks and leg bands stunk because he had no control over his—here I made a “pssss” sound and acted out a dog lifting its leg to urinate. “The smell is urine, not infection,” I said.

Mukesh erupted in laughter again, then translated. Lakshmi remained unmoved.

I said to Mukesh, “Explain to Lakshmi that Pickles is like my baby, and this cloth is like his diapers. He is not diseased. He has smelly laundry just like a baby.”

After Mukesh’s explanation, Lakshmi burst into another animated rant, sending Mukesh into a new round of hysterics. What emerged was that Lakshmi’s objection to Pickles was not simply due to his lack of breeding and his smelly laundry. Lakshmi found Pickles repulsive because he was paralyzed.

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Disability is stigmatized everywhere. India is no exception. Reports abound of people with disabilities in India experiencing the same kind of treatment as those who endure caste-based discrimination (Harris 2014). The differently abled, like *Dalits*, are frequent victims of sexual violence. And the police are less inclined to investigate cases of sexual assault against disabled women, as is the case with *Dalit* women (DW.com 2020). Lakshmi was giving me a crash course on the collision of multiple forms of prejudice, including my own. I didn't stop to think about how I stood there as an embodiment of centuries of white and high caste overlords forcing *Dalits* to do the "shit" work. And while I didn't make an adequate effort to appreciate or understand Lakshmi's objection to washing Pickles' leg bands, Lakshmi, with her aversion to both disability and street dogs, replicated the attitudes of higher castes toward the lower, the able-bodied toward the disabled, and the human to the animal. Our "mutual disavowal" (Kim 2015) of each other's positions only served to breathe life into the unkillable ghosts of colonialism, casteism, racism, and speciesism, beneath which lay the ineradicable, human, caste-like impulse to animalize that to which we feel superior.

That I witnessed the residue of caste in various spheres of life in India was to be expected. Ambedkar likened caste to an infectious illness. Its viral filaments turned up everywhere. Despite decades of consciousness-raising initiatives and myriad attempts to combat the perversities of caste, including M.K. Gandhi's globally publicized and much romanticized efforts to abolish "untouchability" —but not caste—almost 80 years prior (Roy 2014), it remained intractably entrenched, not only in the minds of those it benefitted, but also in the psyches and lives of those it oppressed. It was Lakshmi's aversion to Pickles

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that brought home to me in a direct and personal way the enduring influence and power of “untouchability.”

The viciousness of the caste system and its feudal nature were hard for me to reconcile with a modern India that was sending spaceships to the moon and leading the world in software development. Simultaneous with these achievements, caste-based discrimination remained widespread, and caste-based violence was still rampant, including rape of *Dalit* women, and murder and other violent crimes against *Dalits* (National Campaign on *Dalit* Human Rights 2014). Over a million *Dalits* were still forced into the occupation of “manual scavenging” (International *Dalit* Solidarity Network), the removal of human excrement by hand. In rural areas, it was not uncommon for *Dalit* students to be made to sit in the back of classrooms, and to be forced to do chores, such as latrine cleaning, not required of higher caste students. They were frequent victims of harassment and torment from teachers and other students, leading to a high dropout rate and lower literacy level. Many families in India still openly admit they would not allow a *Dalit* into their kitchens or permit them to use their utensils, though they may deny practicing untouchability (National Campaign on *Dalit* Human Rights 2018).

I began to think of caste as a form of naming, but of groups rather than of individuals. The exclusion implicit in caste designations functioned in a way diametrically opposed to the spirit in which I had named *Piccolo*. Naming *Pickles* marked the redemption and inclusion of one who had been cast aside. It removed the stamps of worthlessness and forsakenness from his being, and declared him significant, included, and worthy of love. That he was taken in, restored, and named solemnized the connection between us, and my commitment to his flour-

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ishing. Caste classifications did the opposite. To the outsider they functioned effectively like curses. They said “you don’t count, and you are not worthy of inclusion in this circle.”

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Dogs, I noted, didn’t make caste-based distinctions. If Pickles perceived a person to welcome his presence, he would glide over, insert himself into their personal space, give them a happy snuffle, and naturally expect them to celebrate his existence with accolades and caresses. He, likewise, would celebrate their worth, innate goodness, and very “beingness” with a canine benediction, positioning his head under their hands, offering them the opportunity to bestow on him physical affection. Street dogs like Pickles had shown themselves particularly faithful in the vocation of affirming the worth of the reviled and the forsaken.

An Indian newspaper told the story of a newborn infant who was left in a laneway alongside a dumpster one night in Kolkata. Through the night, three street dogs faithfully stood guard over the baby girl until the next morning, when some passers-by discovered the infant and took her to a nearby police station. The dogs followed the good samaritans to the station, and watched from the door as the officer in charge laid the baby on a table. The canines stood vigil on site until the afternoon, when the baby was finally picked up and driven to an orphanage. Only once their task was successfully discharged did the dogs turn and walk back to their neighbourhood (Karlekar 2008, 25-26).

A similar incident made it into the news when a young unmarried girl, heavily pregnant, went from her village into the nearby forest in the hills of Karnataka state. She was followed

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by three dogs from her village. There the girl eventually gave birth and then returned home, leaving the infant behind. The dogs, however, stayed and protected the newborn from predators throughout the night. In the morning, a man drawn to the scene by the dogs' barking found and rescued the baby (ibid, 25).

Such tales of canine ministry aren't limited to India. Writing of a mysterious dog he encountered while a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas attested to dogs' capacity to subvert the dehumanization at the heart of caste-type social structures (Levinas 1990, 153). Treated harshly and considered subhuman by the guards and locals, Levinas and his fellow Jewish prisoners were marched back and forth every day from their prison camp to a work site. One day a roaming dog appeared out of nowhere and joyfully greeted the dejected prisoners as they trudged back to the camp. For a few delightful weeks, "Bobby," as they came to call him, faithfully appeared every morning and evening, celebrating their presence, "jumping up and down and barking in delight." In Bobby's eyes, writes Levinas, "there was no doubt that we were men." By bearing witness to and celebrating the prisoners' intrinsic worth, Bobby restored to the men the very personhood denied them by the guards and the townsfolk. He reminded them who they really were. In return, by naming the dog, the prisoners acknowledged the special bond they'd formed with Bobby, his "beinghood," and the sacred service he'd rendered by affirming their value and innate goodness.

Some say that animals were never expelled from Eden, that they still possess the unscathed purity long since lost to the rest of us. Perhaps in dogs the "spark of the spirit" within remains as "pure as when it left the Creator to inspire the creature"

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(Brontë 1897, ch. 6). In one of his novels, Milan Kundera's narrator suggests that an affinity with animals connects us to Eden (Kundera 1984, 297), and restores us to a realm in which our worth—unsullied in animals' eyes—is assumed and affirmed. The spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle calls dogs “the guardians of being” (Tolle 2009).

In our Ahmedabad garden, lush and fragrant and teeming with life, surrounded by my three beloved, redeemed, and thriving canine souls and the plethora of other creatures, I sensed I was part of a sacred assembly. The dogs' belief that I was profoundly good served as a cosmic cord that kept me tethered to a better version of myself. Lakshmi clearly did not see it—or me—that way. But the canine trio's guileless frolicking across the fresh morning grass, their exuberant, noisy pursuit of monkeys and squirrels into the thick canopy above, our afternoon siestas on the cool veranda, bulbuls and jungle babblers filling the air with their staccato refrains—their unquestioning faith that despite the cruelties they may have suffered this was precisely how dog life was meant to be lived held out a glimpse of what Tolkien called the transcendent “Joy beyond the walls of the world” (Tolkien 2008, 284). Their joy did not deny the existence of suffering and injustice, but it denied, in his words, “universal final defeat.”

4

By relocating to Kalhaar I had hoped for a respite of sorts from the aspects of life in urban India I found depleting and downright distressing. I was craving peace and privacy. In Ahmedabad's core, a maze of bustling, exhaust-choked streets teemed with people, cars, buses, auto rickshaws, motorized scooters, and an uncannily creative assortment of rattletrap

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carts, cows, dogs, and other scavengers who drew their lifeblood from the city's veins. I appreciated the vibrant urban rhythms, but living in the midst of it had become overwhelming.

The population of the greater metropolitan area was pushing six million and growing daily, augmented by a constant stream of migrants pouring in from surrounding areas. I would see them on my way into the city, huddled in disheveled groups at major intersections on SG Highway, the main north-south artery that crossed the city on its west side. Some of them had found work already, on construction sites or road crews, entire families chipping rocks by hand and carrying baskets of gravel or bricks on chalky heads to lay the foundations of Ahmedabad's new flyovers and glass buildings. The others sat and waited, setting up tent cities at the crossroads and vacant lots, their bare-bottomed infants hanging from spindly trees in makeshift rag cradles, the older children playing games they'd invented using sticks, plastic bottles, and other transformed treasures discovered on their roadside expeditions. The vast majority of these migrant labourer families were *Dalits* and indigenous peoples, known as Adivasis.

It wasn't only peace and privacy I craved. While the migrant labourer families poured into the city seeking to escape poverty, I confess that I longed to leave the city to escape witnessing poverty's pernicious effects. Periodic bouts of unease provoked by scenes of hardship started as tension in my chest, then progressed to a state of prolonged irritability born, I liked to think, of an acute sense of my own impotence in the face of injustice and suffering. I wondered, however, if there might not be more to my malaise. "In a society fraught with inequality it is impossible for there not to be a vast chasm between what

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one believes—or rather, what one would like to believe one believes—and what one’s actions show one believes” (Lahiri 2017, 200).

Frequent scenes of stark extremes played out before me. In Ahmedabad’s merciless traffic, at the peak of the searing pre-monsoon heat, a sinewy man in a grimy T-shirt and lungi strained to pull a wooden cart laden with heavy construction equipment. A politician in his white chauffeur-driven Ambassador car pushed in alongside him, horn blasting, forcing the man off the road. Elsewhere in the city, three young men thigh-deep in putrid sewage channels used their bare hands to unclog toxic city drains while a freshly pressed bureaucrat stood off to the side issuing instructions. My dysphoria was compounded by the seeming indifference of many to the oppressive status quo. I didn’t like who I was becoming. I didn’t want to become hardened to misery, but I could feel a bitter edge creeping in. One would have to become hard simply to survive. My response was to try to escape.

Sitting in the secluded back garden in the cool of the morning, watching marauding langurs frolic in the tree branches above while the dogs dozed in the early light and a kingfisher dive-bombed the pond, it felt like I’d stumbled into a supernatural portal to Paradise Restored. It wasn’t long, however, before the underbelly of paradise emerged and the portal doors slammed shut. Trails of silent, disheveled shapes trudged through the neighbourhood. They were the trash collectors, sweepers, construction workers, and maintenance staff on whose backs Kalhaar’s precarious perfection was built and maintained—a manicured perfection of which they were precluded from partaking.

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Like the city, the elite neighbourhood was expanding, perennially in progress, acquiring more and more of the surrounding farmland and transforming it into bloated mansions for the beneficiaries of India's formidable economic growth. And yet the vast majority of India's citizens were "excommunicated from the middle-class project of India's rise" (Dasgupta 2014, 265). The hungry thrust of progress was fueled, subsidized even, by the labour of the poor, who worked long hours, day in, day out, chipping rocks by hand outside Kalhaar's main gate, dredging its sewers, collecting its trash, scouring its homes, and sweeping its vast carpets of green.

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One day when the Gujarati plains were baking in the pre-monsoon cauldron that sucks the life out of all but the sewers, I went out to the front garden to visit Suzie and Frieda Pinto, two of our block's street dogs who had stopped by for an afternoon siesta. Every sector had its collection of resident free-roaming dogs. They knew innately which properties were dog-friendly and which weren't. White with tan patches, Suzie and Frieda Pinto looked like littermates and were very likely cousins of Penelope and Button's. Many of the street dogs in our area, including Button and Penelope, had a refined, whippet-like look—graceful limbs, narrow waists, deep chests, and slender abdomens sucked up high. Diluted descendants of Salukis who had accompanied Arab traders to India centuries earlier, the indigenous sighthound mixes were lightning fast and skilled hunters (Indog.co.in).

"Hey, sweet pups, how you doing?" I said, squatting down to stroke their soft heads.

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Two tails flopped receptively on the hard ground, wagging out their seeming reply: “We’re thrilled to see you but we’re not getting up because it’s way too hot to move.” They each lay in shallow, side-by-side holes they’d excavated under the mango tree, enjoying the cool earth just below the surface.

Just then, I heard some chatter coming from the road out front. Through the bushes I spotted a lone head. More chatter ensued, but still only one person. Curious, I got up and moved closer to have a look.

The lone head belonged to a man squatting beside an open manhole in the street. He was talking to someone, but there was no one there. I continued watching from my vantage point between the shrubs.

All of a sudden a grotty, matted little head popped up from the manhole. A little boy. The child disappeared down the manhole, then resurfaced carrying a mound of dripping, dirty refuse, which he added to the pile of stinking debris on a tarp. He was cleaning out the drains before the monsoon rains arrived.

I knew the drains were filled with toxic fumes, not to mention all kinds of rotting trash, and rats, dead and alive. There were stories in the local papers about urban manhole cleaners getting sick and dying from the occupational hazards of the work. Considered polluting by higher castes, the removal of human excrement from latrines and blockages from sewers and septic tanks, all with rudimentary hand tools, was relegated to *Dalits*. I hadn’t realized that included *Dalit* children.

“Mukesh,” I asked our driver, who sat nearby in the servants’ area, “why is that man making the little boy go down in the sewer? Why isn’t the man doing it?”

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“Men are cleaning the drains in Ahmedabad,” he replied, “in the city. In Kalhaar, drain is very small. Man is big. They can only use small boy.”

A gnawing chasm opened in my chest. Something about the scene—the road, the filth, the child’s matted hair and slight frame, his overarching vulnerability—evoked another chance encounter on another road, elsewhere: Pickles in the dirt in Jagatpur, like a thing discarded.

“The children have to work,” said Mukesh, filling the silence. “Their families are very poor.”

“Childhood,” writes Tripti Lahiri, “—as in a protected, cared-for period of life reserved for play and study—is a luxury the upper class can afford, not the poor” (Lahiri 2017, 46).

Here I came face to face with the cost of the escape Kalhaar provided—the little boy staring at me from the manhole in front of my home. The privileged existence Kalhaar afforded appeared to provide a respite from the harsh extremes in the city, but now their pervasiveness stood in evidence before me. There was no escaping the effects of caste and poverty in India, not for the boy in the drain, not for injured dogs left to perish on the roadside, not for Lakshmi and Lala, and not even for the elite who, like myself, found ourselves its beneficiaries. There was no white saviour band-aid I could pull out to dull the pang and kid myself that I was innocent or somehow outside the rot. I was actively complicit. Like Ambedkar said, in a caste-based society, one’s very well-being depends on perpetuating the oppression of the lower castes by the higher (Ambedkar 1987, 98). The truth, in all perversity, was that caste-based servitude subsidized and enabled my attempt to avoid witnessing the harsh effects of the privilege I enjoyed.

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One afternoon Mr. Desai dropped by for a “visit”, which he occasionally did. The dogs mobbed him for affection as he walked into the living room. I took advantage of the opportunity to ask him for some help communicating with Lakshmi.

“I’d like to be sure I understand if there is an issue with one of the dogs. Does Lakshmi have a problem with Pickles, the paralyzed dog? She doesn’t want to wash his leg bands,” I explained, pointing to the bands Pickles was wearing. “Is it really something she’s not supposed to do because of her caste?”

Mr. Desai tutted again and shook his head. “No. See here, let me talk to her.”

He called Lakshmi in and asked her a question in Gujarati, to which she offered an earnest response. Was she saying she thought Pickles had an infection? I couldn’t tell. He then continued, pointing to Pickles, then to the garden, then back to Pickles again, expounding something or other. As he drew his statements to a close, Lakshmi communicated her assent with repeated “hahn ji’s” and a series of graceful head nods.

“She says it’s not a problem. She will do it,” said Mr. Desai.

If this was a neocolonial drama, it was clear who the neo-Sahib was, and it wasn’t me. I was merely a supporting actor.

Mr. Desai had no interest in Lakshmi’s point of view, and she clearly wasn’t inclined to share it with him, like she had with me via our driver, Mukesh. Mr. Desai skipped right along from the dog laundry issue to that of an old unused sofa I’d moved from the upstairs veranda down into the servants’ area.

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“Why have you been moving the sofa downstairs?” he asked. “The servants will not work. They will only be visiting and talking.”

“It’s not being used up there,” I replied, “and Lakshmi and the driver don’t have anywhere to sit or rest while they’re taking a break.”

“They will only take breaks and do nothing else. You have to watch them.”

“Okay, I will,” I lied.

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Late one night while my husband was away on business, I went down to the kitchen to fill up the bedroom water jug. Fluorescent light from the servants’ patio streamed through the small window above the sink. I knew Lakshmi preferred to sleep outside in the summer to escape the stifling heat of the small maid’s bedroom, which had a fan but no air conditioning. I looked out the kitchen window, which offered only a view of the clothesline, and the outside wall. By stepping on my tiptoes and stretching as far as I could across the sink, I could glimpse a sliver of the patio. There I beheld Lakshmi, from shoulder level up, eyes closed, arms above her head, writhing silently on her *charpoy*, or string cot, in what appeared to be the throes of either real or simulated ecstasy.

“That’s odd,” I thought, as I turned and went back to my room.

I didn’t think anything more of it until after my husband returned. One day as we sat in the living room, I remembered the

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incident and told him about it. Just as I was acting out for him the ecstatic writhing I'd witnessed, Lakshmi walked in and, upon seeing my improvisation, burst into a hearty, raucous laugh. Whether she knew I was imitating her I couldn't tell.

Shortly thereafter I received a call from an agitated Mr. Desai. "Lakshmi has been having men visiting the house at night," he said, his tone short. "The servants at my friend's house across the road have seen it."

It took me a few moments to connect the dots. Unbeknownst to us, Lakshmi had been holding court at night in the servants' area, "entertaining men" until the wee hours on her *charpoy*. Mr. Desai was furious.

"I have fired her. She will be leaving today."

I was astonished. He had dismissed her on the spot, without consulting us, before we'd even had a chance to assess the situation.

"Shouldn't she be given a warning and a second chance?" I asked. What if it hadn't been "men" but a man, a lover? What if the accusations against her had been motivated by a dispute between Lakshmi and the neighbour's servants?

Mr. Desai wasn't open to negotiation.

"No. It's not safe. Some of these fellows are drunkards and thieves," he said, when I asked if he would reconsider. "I told her no visitors when I hired her. She knows the rules. She cannot stay." He clearly thought I was terribly naive, just like his last foreign tenant.

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I wondered if Lakshmi's nighttime liaisons were driven by business, or pleasure. The profusion of sex workers in India, mostly from *Dalit*, Adivasi, or other minority communities, were forced into the trade because of poverty.

A rickety lorry came that very day to collect Lakshmi, Lala, and their belongings, and take them back to their village. Pickles, Button, and Penelope stood barking at the suspect vehicle from inside the fence as Lala and the driver loaded it up. I paid Lakshmi her wages for the month, along with a severance package of sorts to help keep her on her feet for a while.

Lakshmi stood erect, moved with grace, and responded with smiling charm when I went outside to say goodbye. If she felt sadness or despair or regret, it didn't show. I certainly did. I felt that I'd failed her, that somehow if I'd made more of an effort to be an engaged memsahib, she'd still be employed. Lakshmi climbed onto the truck to where Lala sat perched atop the jumble of *charpoy*s and bundles of clothes and other personal effects.

"Where will she go?" I asked Mr. Desai. "What will she do?"

"She will go back to her village, to her late husband's family."

Off they went, teetering truck squeaking and groaning on its hinges over the dusty cobblestones, returning to where they came from, reclaimed by the tendrils of family and tradition. I never saw Lakshmi or Lala again.

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