The Cambridge Curry Club

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Extract

Prologue

THE SLY OCTOBER wind tore through Cambridge, boldly lifting the prim skirt of the Junior Bursar as her court shoes, indignant at a male colleague's promotion, clicked briskly through a college archway to meet the waiting porters and bedmakers. It scattered the papers of the student vaulting fluidly over the rhododendron bush near the Buttery, and waltzed through the hoary trees of the College Backs, rocking *Venezia*, a derelict punt on the river. It tousled the hair of the Japanese tourist posing in front of the Victorian pillar box and the lamp-post outside King's College. A few yards away on King's Parade, a passerby lingered inexplicably in front of a Bible in the display windows of the Cambridge University Press, and the bells of Great St Mary's chimed grandly as a bird wheeled through St Edward's Passage, past *G. David, Booksellers since 1896* and over the Fen farmers unloading produce at Market Square.

The wind paused to reflect on its own past glory; in its time it had circled the Roman settlement at Castle Hill and rattled the round-headed Saxon windows of St Bene't's Church. At Christ's College, it had swept the

conversations of Charles Darwin and John Milton, two centuries apart; at Corpus Christi it had been Christopher Marlowe's whirling Muse. The wind also shook the trees in the orchard of Isaac Newton's family home in Lincolnshire. An apple fell.

The wind had been the harbinger of revolt urging the students fleeing the Oxford riots in 1209 towards Cambridge; it had hastened their staggering steps to the medieval brothels in the area surrounding Magdalene College. It knew where Oliver Cromwell's head was secretly buried in the chapel of Sidney Sussex College. Centuries later, it still whispers envy to townspeople pausing to watch new graduates in gowns and hoods file through the streets towards the Senate House.

The bird perched on the segment of missing stone ball on the parapet of Clare Bridge until the wind whipped its wings, whirling it into the autumn sky. Together, bird and wind sailed jauntily through the Gate of Humility in the Master's Garden at Gonville and Caius College, departing humbly through the Gate of Honour and soaring high over Parker's Piece and Fenner's Ground to seek the homely pleasures of Mill Road.

Colourful Mill Road bore no resemblance to the shops of elegant Magdalene Bridge, nor, for that matter, did Covent Garden, a side lane of Mill Road, recall its London namesake. No riverside café served steaming latte and mozzarella panini here, no leafy towpath walked the sluggish dog or mind; instead, a daily brigade of bargain-hunters sniffed their spoils, their hard noses pressed against the display windows of the charity shops. With its rows of small houses, ethnic

food stores, hair salons, curry houses, Internet cafés, bookmaker, health shop and dry cleaners, Mill Road was the city's pumping heart.

Spotting a homeless drunk lying outside the bookmakers, the wind swooped, tossing the shivering man into dreams of Salvation soup and death. Next, it flirted with a large Asian woman bent over a black bin bag on the pavement outside the charity shop called IndiaNeed. Lasciviously lifting her blue silk sari, it revealed sensible men's socks above sensible women's sandals. The large woman's neck showed traces of talc. A white van halted at the traffic lights opposite the shop. *Wish my wife was as dirty as this van* was scrawled on its dusty side. The driver leaned out of his window and whistled at the bending woman. She straightened hastily, feigning indignation, but a smile hovered over her lips at the moment that the bird circled above. Plop, plop, plop. Everything auspicious was always in threes; it must have been an Indian bird in a previous life. The green-white slime slithered down a rolling mountain of flesh, splaying rivulets over the plains of her unsuspecting back.

The bird hopped away, and the triumphant wind scampered back over Silver Street and across the Bridge of Sighs to slip into the waiting willows nearby.

CHAPTER ONE

Many hands make light work

SWARNAKUMARI WAS BENT, innocent and ungainly, over a black bag lying on the pavement outside the charity shop IndiaNeed, her posterior turned heavenward like an overturned duck scrabbling in the shallow brook that runs along the Botanic Garden overlooking Trumpington Road.

She hauled the bag from underneath the vandalised sign that read *Do lean bicycles against the windows please* and dragged it into the shop. Watching her from the windows of Flamenco, the salon opposite, the hairdresser James alias Juan slipped warm Mediterranean vowels into his Glaswegian accent and waited near the Rexine customer chairs. Once inside, Swarnakumari bent over the displays in the shop window. Three amused women watched from the till as she carefully placed a pink china plate depicting a grinning bulldog next to a framed Jubilee photograph of the Queen.

Heera leaned with both elbows over the counter. 'Just look at Swarna, how that woman bends . . . she can bend for England! You know, Durga, my grandfather used to go to the village temple and feed the cow there every day. He was such a naughty man! One day

he pretended to be blind and he patted a fat bending woman as if he was stroking a cow, and then he pulled her long plait just like a cow's tail. She thought he was blind, so she didn't get upset, but when she bent again to remove her slippers, what d'you think happened? He did it again!'

Heera dug an ebullient elbow into Durga, chuckling into the folds of her chin; her body shook under the shapeless black sweater and elasticated trousers she wore, and her short hair bobbed in mirth. Swarnakumari straightened, patted the flower in her neat bun and retrieved her handbag, calling over her shoulder as she headed for the Staff Area behind the green floral curtain, 'Window display is done now. Just going to wash my hands, *hanh*.'

Hunched over the till, Durga twirled a strand of shiny shoulder-length hair. She was slim in jeans and a cream turtleneck. Sudden laughter had creased the solemn lines of her face, skimming lips ashamed of their fullness. She observed, 'Every time she touches anything in here, Lady Macbeth washes her hands over and over with her Sainsbury's soap dispenser, but the damned charity shop spot remains like a turmeric blob on a white English hob, staining her Brahmin sensibilities.'

Eileen muttered, 'Sixteen times. Swarna washed her hands sixteen times last Thursday.' Eileen had been a gifted mathematics teacher; she knew her numbers. Born in Armagh, Northern Ireland, she was tall and wiry with wispy grey hair, and was dressed in a long black skirt and matching knit cardigan accompanied by a silver cross around her neck and silver bracelets on her wrist. Her mother had been a hungry seamstress

raising a family of six children; the exhausted father ran away and jumped aboard a ship called *Providence* bound for New York. Young Danny Watts of Cambridge met the twenty-year-old Eileen on a camping holiday in Cork and was entranced by her dark eyes and hair, creamy neck and ready laugh. The smile had faded first; her black hair followed twenty years later.

Swarnakumari's handbag contained the soap dispenser, a tiny towel, a prayer book, a tortoiseshell comb and the distinctive red Shantiniketan hand-crafted leather money purse. The colour of the folded towel was different every week.

On Thursday nights Swarnakumari lay in bed, eyes turned upward and away from her sleeping husband, Shyamal Chatterjee. On her bedside table stood a tube of Neutrogena cream; an application after dinner ensured that her fingers had shed the chalky film covering shop rejects and other rejections unnamed. Once the ceiling above her bed no longer reflected the passing lights of street cars and desire, unguent calm had been restored.

Swarnakumari was a charitable woman, and her thoughts, like her puja table for the gods, faced eastward. She had initially read fiction every Wednesday to Jean Ward, a blind woman in a Cambridge nursing home, but her strongly accented English proved too much for her elderly listener, who promptly fell asleep each time. Swarnakumari had enthusiastically recited an entire novel, unaware that her listener had not progressed beyond the first page. Jean Ward passed away peacefully in the Prologue of the second novel.

The charity's name, IndiaNeed, led Swarnakumari to volunteer in a shop whose proceeds benefited deserving

villagers in a desert region of Rajasthan in Western India. The director on the Board of the charity, Diana Wellington-Smythe, was mockingly nicknamed 'Lady Di' by her staff. Her hyphenated surname had found immediate approval with Swarnakumari's husband Mr Chatterjee. A link with a village project in West Bengal would have been ideal, but a Cambridge charity shop had its limitations, as did Mr Chatterjee, thought Swarnakumari.

Heera played idly with a basket of small leather purses. She wondered why Swarnakumari had volunteered at IndiaNeed; she had the look of a pukka Bengali madam in a paisley silk sari presiding over a sitar soirée, and on the first day of the shop orientation meeting with Lady Di and the volunteers two months ago in that very spot, she had known Swarnakumari would be a strange one – she simply didn't belong. Those silly Korean student volunteers didn't belong either, and were there to practise their English one afternoon in the week, but in the end they jabbered away together in their own language, and if a customer approached, they pulled out a superfast translator to slowly make a sentence and a sale.

Heera sighed and rearranged the brooches on the jewellery shelf. What could be cured in life was little, whereas what had to be endured was a coiled snake around the neck, her Aunty Buddi Mai used to say. Durga with her clever remarks was another strange one, thought Heera, and Eileen was even stranger. Those two were both so secretive about their lives that getting any masala – any juicy bits – out of them, was like trying to make a stubborn camel move. And why did those two *eediots* Bitter Butter Betty and Quite

Contrary Mary volunteer four days a week if they were going to complain all the time?

Swarnakumari returned, deposited her handbag on the table and held out a small plastic Tesco box sporting a humous label. Inside was a powdery concoction of sugar, ghee and roasted flour.

'My hands are washed now. Today is Her Holiness, my Guru Ma's birthday. I am also fasting today. *Cholo cholo*, come, come, hold out your hands and take *proshad*. Take more, Eileen,' she urged.

Heera, Durga and Eileen dutifully held out their palms and licked off the crumbs as she continued, '*Bhalo*. Good. We are all blessed now, and today will be a good day, so now we shall start sorting the bags that came this morning.'

They approached the long wooden sorting table directly behind the curtain that concealed the Staff Area. Above it was an oversized notice: *Sort out any bags stored under the table. Put all rejects into bags and onto skip outside. Do NOT take home, or throw away in bin. Remember to check the pockets of all clothing and contents of all purses, wallets and handbags. Do NOT take away contents, especially money or jewellery.*

Two entwined hearts and the words *Pamela and John forever* had been anonymously etched into the table's far right corner; eternity was evidently to be seen in a grain of wood.

The area under the large table was the depot for the black bags arriving from the pavement outside. The bags were wrung tight with yellow string, startled plump chickens strangled at the neck by their donors. After dark, the wind rummaged the other bags left in an alleyway outside the shop, and the crumpled plastic

morphed into flapping ghouls of the night. Black bags and charity shops were an inseparable pairing, like 'chicken' and 'egg', 'honour' and 'killing'. Like Pamela and John, forever.

Swarnakumari opened the first bag with suppressed excitement, gingerly retrieving lingerie and men's tweed trousers. She dropped the trousers in horror. '*Chee, chee*, I am not going to check another man's trousers; that too, the backside pocket. So dirty, *na?*' *Na* in Swarnakumari's speech was a statement of finality rather than a search for validation.

Holding the offending trousers by their waistband, Heera twirled them slightly. 'Yeah, they are quite manky. By the way, girls, did you know one in four Englishmen never washes his favourite underwear?'

Swarnakumari emitted an exaggerated wail on cue. 'You are always teasing me. You know I do not like touching unwashed clothes of others. What would my people in Kolkata think of me? Oh, look at this swimsuit, so transparent – you can see everything!'

'If you hate all this touch touch, then why so much rush rush to open the new bags? *Arre*, I know all your tricks. If there's something new or nice to buy, you'll say you saw it first.'

As the shop's manager, Heera could have vetted the goods first, but an Indian deference to age had prevailed. Swarnakumari was fifty-seven; Heera was forty-seven. Eileen was three years older than Swarnakumari, but showed little interest in the bags, only in the arrangement or disposal of their contents. The previous week Swarnakumari had profited from the delivery of a manufacturer's bag containing new sweatshirts in S, M and L sizes. After pricing them herself, Swarnakumari

purchased six for her favoured Kolkata nieces. Durga intervened; black sweatshirts would not find favour in India. Swarnakumari had hesitated, but in the end, the words *Cambridge University* emblazoned in red had settled the matter favourably.

'And by the way, this isn't a swimsuit, it's a teddy,' explained Heera.

'Teddy?'

Heera continued, 'Yes, teddy. Listen to this, Swarna. On Ritu's anniversary, Raj went home with one yellow and eleven red roses and two plane tickets; he made her pack her bags in one hour. First he gave her a flower, then he gave her one hour.'

'That's flower power,' interjected Durga.

'She told me they went to the Moulin Rouge. So romantic, can you imagine? He bought her a teddy in Paris,' Heera gushed.

Swarnakumari was perplexed. 'Why buy all the way from Paris? Ritu comes to the shop so often, and she could have bought the teddy bear cheap from here, *na*.'

'Not teddy bear, *teddy*. You really don't know what a teddy is, do you? *Arre*, can't you see it's so transparent, how can it be a swimsuit? It's lingerie. Underwear. Honestly, Swarna, sometimes you're worse than those Korean volunteers.'

'These young English girls are wearing anything nowadays, how was I to know? Shameless girls. Their clothes for wearing outside look like underwear, so *baba*, I am confused, *hanh*.' Swarnakumari fussed, 'Are these garments washed? Heera, I am asking you the same thing again and again – remind Mrs Wellington-Smythe, we must have gloves when we are doing the

sorting.' She retrieved further items in haste and distaste. 'And what is this, now?'

'A blond wig and a whip,' said Eileen flatly.

'And such tiny white knickers! They've got *Punish Me* embroidered in black. Let's write a note for Lady Di: *Awaiting instructions*. Then just watch the fun, because the knickers will disappear, poof, into the air. Like the inflatable doll that came in two weeks ago,' laughed Heera.

The inflatable doll had not mysteriously disappeared; it had been sold by the Korean volunteers to a dejected young man swathed in a black scarf. He carried it home for target practice and shot several toy arrows of rejected love into its plastic heart. As the doll collapsed, the air oozing out of its red duck lips, the student had opened a celebratory bottle of beer and slashed his wrists on its broken glass.

'What doll? I never saw it. You should at least have shown it to me. I love dolls; I used to buy so many. Heera, such good things have started disappearing from the shop: new video recorder, antique brooch, necklace, watches, camera. And tell me, what is the thief going to do with my reading glasses from Vision Express? Why did he steal them? Can it be he has the same prescription?' demanded Swarnakumari.

'One can only speculate, Swarna. Why don't you arrange the teddy, the blond wig, whip and knickers in the window? We could pull in a few more customers that way. And where's that magazine we got the other day, Heera? It could go into the display, too,' suggested Durga. 'It had a double-spread of a punk hunk who was once a monk.'

'I threw it out,' said Heera curtly.

'Fascinating, isn't it? The monk became a gay hunk. Maybe the pay was better,' continued Durga.

Swarnakumari was curious. 'What private talk is going on?'

'It's about a gay magazine. And don't pretend you don't know what that is,' teased Durga.

'Of course I know about these things. So unnatural, but anyway, thank God this problem is not there in good Indian families.' A practised angler, Swarnakumari fished in the black bag. 'Look, a fur coat. Fur. Can it be real?'

Eileen gave the coat a brief examination. 'Fake.'

Swarnakumari continued as she found a hanger for the coat, 'So many people have so many problems in this world; look at these poor villagers in Rajasthan for whom we are raising money. They have no running water, no electricity. Guru Ma says we must always remember there are many more who have much less.'

Durga mused, 'My former supervisor here in Cambridge was gay, and he had more than most. Termtime tutorial visits were only between one and three in the afternoons. Whenever I left at three, I saw a Lebanese student bounding up the stairs for "happy hour". And I could tell you a story or two about the Formal Hall dinners. Some female students at the tables wore more or less nothing under their gowns. You might say those who had less had much more.'

Swarnakumari looked shocked as Heera asked, 'Really? I always wondered what went on behind those college gatehouses. What's a Formal Hall dinner?'

'College dinner in an echoing hall a few times during term. Stern portraits on the walls. Sherry in the Fellows' Drawing Room. Grace in Latin followed by

dinner of warmed tart of broccoli and red onion topped with Emmental and watercress, escalopes of beef, dauphinois potatoes, apple and cinnamon flan with vanilla ice cream, finishing with coffee and Cambridge mints. Everyone waits until High Table departs, and then the fun begins.'

There was the sound of a drill. Heavy boots crossed the floor overhead.

'There he goes again,' cried Heera in irritation. 'Vroom vroom. One of these days, I am going to ask that man what he is doing in the room upstairs.'

'Perhaps he could use the blond wig and whip?' suggested Durga.

'Who?' asked Swarnakumari.

'The man upstairs, who else could we mean?' replied Heera.

'What do you want to do with these crutches?' demanded Eileen. 'They were lying next to the same bag.'

'Crutches and whip from the same donor? Which of the two gets a person walking faster?' wondered Durga.

'Heera, why should we keep these crutches in the shop? Can we not offer them to Ritu's mother-in-law? You told me she has recently broken her leg, *na*,' proposed Swarnakumari kindly.

'Has she really broken her leg, or has her son broken her heart by marrying Ritu?' Durga was intrigued. 'Anyway, who is this ever-ready to beddy, teddy-wearing Ritu?'

'She lives on Fendon Road. Her husband Raj always looks deep into her eyes. He squeezes her waist like a lemon all the time,' sighed Heera wistfully.

'Juicy stuff,' was Durga's comment.

'How is it that they can always be so romantic, even after so many years? It must be all those dates they ate when they were living in Dubai,' concluded Heera spitefully.

'Fake,' repeated Eileen before disappearing to replace a roll in the till machine.

Raj was inseparable from Ritu's waist at parties, and as soon as the women disappeared into the kitchen and the men held their whisky glasses aloft in the living room, he challenged other husbands into true confessions. When was the last time they had sent flowers or chocolates to their wives? He, on the other hand, knew the gift for Ritu's every mood. Her favourite bouquet consisted of eleven red roses and a single yellow stem. Wispy teddies were her undoing, he admitted with a wink. Mohan Karnani bent forward in bluff incomprehension. What were 'teddies'? Raj roared, patting Mohan's shoulder affectionately as he described the garment. It was short and didn't stay on long, he said, with another wink, as the other men shuffled with guilty feet.

'If only Raj would escort his mother to the Moulin Rouge instead, voilà, she would ditch the crutches and kick the stick habit,' said Durga.

'So what do you want to do with the crutches?' asked Eileen doggedly, as she reappeared clutching a book on mountaineering in the Balkans.

Every object handled by Eileen had its place, a number, a weight, a size, a shape and a space at IndiaNeed – and in her ordered universe. Chaos belonged to scientific theory, not in a charity shop.

'How many are there?' inquired Swarnakumari.

'It's a "Buy one, get one free" deal,' teased Durga.

'Two. Do you think we all need crutches, metaphorically speaking, that is, to get through life?' She gazed at the passersby bent against the curling wind. 'Perhaps crutches can never be given up or away. They are the desire and the dream that keep us breathing. And from walking. Away, that is.'

Durga was accustomed to the silence that invariably followed her observations. Eileen hovered until Heera spat impatiently, '*Arre*, just put them anywhere.'

'And what is this, now?' demanded Swarnakumari, retrieving a large box. 'Oh, it says on the cover that it is a machine for checking blood pressure.' She forced open the lid.

'It's a toy gun,' said Eileen with her usual grim composure as Swarnakumari recoiled at the contents. 'What do you want to do with it?'

'Scare the Korean girls? Price it and put it in the window?' mocked Durga.

The shop bell tinkled, and Heera emerged from behind the curtain as a young woman entered.

'Oh, hello, where are the children's bicycles?' asked the eager customer. 'I'm looking for one for my little girl, a pink Barbie one.'

'I'm sorry, but we don't have any.'

'You did have one. I saw it outside your shop last week,' insisted the woman.

'Yes, but we sold it, madam. You can see for yourself, there are no more bicycles here.'

Heera returned to the Staff Area as the customer departed. 'If we get one bloody bicycle in six months, does this mean we've become Halfords?'

'We could rename the shop Wellington's Wheels and Deals, or Smythe's Bikes for Tikes,' quipped Durga.

As she returned to the table, Heera continued, 'Girls, today's black bags are very strange. First manky trousers, then blond wig, knickers and teddy, then whip, crutches and blood-pressure kit with a toy gun inside.'

'Send the whole lot to Rupert darling,' Durga drawled.

'It is rude to talk about the husband of Mrs Wellington-Smythe like that,' admonished Swarnakumari.

'D'you know, the Heart to Heart shop got a 1917 diary the other day?' revealed Heera. 'A woman had sent love letters to her soldier fiancé, and she kept writing to him even after she knew he was dead. It was in the papers, didn't you read about it? And look at us – when we got a decent oil-painting two weeks ago, those stupid Korean girls sold it while it was waiting to be valued.'

'You mean the portrait of the dimpled heavenly cherub? Its hands were a bit fluttery. I'd get rid of it in any language,' Durga ventured.

Swarnakumari was defensive. 'We do get good things in this shop. Otherwise I would not be working here, *na*.'

The shop items passing through Swarnakumari's keen hands underwent a primary test of usefulness to the Chatterjee family, other volunteers at the shop and selected members of the Cambridge Indian community, after which time-consuming procedure she reluctantly considered the items for window display. A consignment of red and black porcelain mugs with *Mad Cow Mother-in-Law Disease* inscribed above the face of a scowling woman left Swarnakumari unmoved despite the magic words *Made in England* on the underside.

Durga used one for coffee breaks at the shop, but the rest lay neglected on a shelf until purchased by a taciturn Bulgarian language student who was brilliant at mathematics but struggled with his English. Eileen had silently pointed to the words *Mad Cow Mother-in-Law Disease*, and he had merely nodded. The meeting of minds over mathematics never took place. It was one of those encounters bursting at the bud, like the thousands in the lifetime of an individual, that, but for chance or fate, lead nowhere.

Heera moved forward to answer the insistent telephone. 'IndiaNeed . . . Yes, Mrs Wellington-Smythe, it is Heera here . . . No, I'm sorry, I was a little late today because I wasn't feeling . . . It was only ten minutes after ten . . . Yes, the shop should be opened on time, I am very sorry. Next time I'll . . . Yes, it is important for the customers . . . Yes, they come first . . . No, we haven't heard anything new about the missing items . . . Yes, of course I shall let you know . . . You've found a new volunteer to join us? That's very good . . . Yes, goodbye.'

She stormed back to the sorting table. 'How many times does Lady Di need to ask me about those missing items? *Arre*, once they're gone, they're gone. Is the thief going to come back and say, "Here, you can have them back, I'm having a bad hair day, now please arrest me?" And making such a big fuss over my coming late this morning! I wasn't feeling well, and I almost didn't come at all. Everyone has his or her problems, right? And every time I answer the telephone, why does she ask me who's speaking? Shouldn't she recognise my voice by now?'

A female pensioner entered as Eileen continued to

count the pieces in the cutlery boxes. Despite her record as an inspiring mathematics teacher, Eileen had been dismissed by the Village College where she was Head of the Department, as soon as she crossed her sixtieth birthday in June. A number had been the final betrayal. Her husband, a plumber, had recently discovered his body's tendency to spring leaks of its own, and so the pipes were no longer calling 'Danny Boy' as he retired, driving Eileen out of their home in secret desperation.

There had been a child once; an engaging curly-haired boy of six, struck down by a speeding van outside the school gates as Eileen watched. For days she stayed in his room, rocking back and forth on his bed, hugging his clothes close to her chest. Mathematics and the Catholic Church had provided succour, and she had plunged gratefully into the worlds of numbers and rosary beads.

Eileen had been the shop's first volunteer. Every Thursday, she bustled quietly, her bright eyes inquiring of the objects she constantly rearranged whether life was an endless equation. The shop items became mathematical digits to contemplate in endless combinations: she placed a bunch of yellow recycled pencils at five pence each along with elephant key chains and beaded pens and colourful Rajasthani cloth puppets and McDonald's Happy Meal toys in a wicker tray near the till, returning almost immediately to remove the pens and look anew at the configuration.

Heera continued to fold the clothing in silence. She had been appointed the manager of IndiaNeed ten days after her seventeenth wedding anniversary, and sought solace in work with fierce dedication, a quality Diana

Wellington-Smythe astutely exploited. It was on their anniversary that Heera's husband Bob had told her of his terrible secret, unwittingly timing it to the day when she began her first course of hormone replacement therapy.