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Sold

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Extract

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A TIN ROOF

One more rainy season and our roof will be gone, says Ama.

My mother is standing on a log ladder, inspecting the thatch, and I am on the ground, handing the laundry up to her so it can bake dry in the afternoon sun. There are no clouds in sight. No hint of rain, no chance of it, for weeks.

There is no use in telling Ama this, though. She is looking down the mountain at the rice terraces that descend, step by step, to the village below, at the neighbors' tin roofs winking cruelly back at her.

A tin roof means that the family has a father who doesn't gamble away the landlord's money playing cards in the tea shop. A tin roof means the family has a son working at the brick kiln in the city. A tin roof means that when the rains come, the fire stays lit and the baby stays healthy.

"Let me go to the city," I say. "I can work for a rich family like Gita does, and send my wages home to you."

Ama strokes my cheek, the skin of her work-worn hand as rough as the tongue of a newborn goat. "Lakshmi, my child," she says. "You must stay in school, no matter what your stepfather says."

Lately, I want to tell her, my stepfather looks at me the same

way he looks at the cucumbers I'm growing in front of our hut. He flicks the ash from his cigarette and squints. "You had better get a good price for them," he says.

When he looks, he sees cigarettes and rice beer, a new vest for himself.

I see a tin roof.

BEFORE GITA LEFT

We drew squares in the dusty path between our huts and played the hopping-on-one-leg game. We brushed each other's hair a hundred strokes and dreamed of names for our sons and daughters. We pinched our noses shut whenever the headman's wife passed by, recalling the time she broke wind strutting past us at the village spring.

We rubbed the rough-edged notch in the school bench for good luck before a recitation. We threw mud at each other during the long afternoons stooped over in the paddies, and wept with laughter when one of Gita's mud pies hit her haughty older sister in the back of the head.

And in the fall, when the goatherds came down from the Himalayan meadows, we hid in the elephant grass to catch sight of Krishna, the boy with sleepy cat eyes, the one I am promised to in marriage.

Now that Gita is gone, to work as a maid for a wealthy woman in the city, her family has a tiny glass sun that hangs from a wire in the middle of their ceiling, a new set of pots for Gita's mother, a pair of spectacles for her father, a brocaded wedding dress for her older sister, and school fees for her little brother.

Inside Gita's family's hut, it is daytime at night.
But for me, it feels like nighttime even in the brightest sun without my friend.

THE NEW STUDENT

Each morning as I go about my chores—straining the rice water, grinding the spices, sweeping the yard—my little black-and-white speckled goat, Tali, follows at my heels.

"That silly goat," Ama says. "She thinks you are her mother."

Tali nudges her head into the palm of my hand and bleats in agreement. And so I teach her what I know.

I wipe the hard mud floor with a rag soaked in dung water and explain: "This will keep our hut cool and free from evil spirits." I show her how I lash a water jug to the basket on my back, not spilling a drop on the steep climb up from the village spring. And when I brush my teeth with a twig from the neem tree, Tali copies me, nibbling her twig as solemn as a monk.

When it's time for me to go to school, I make her a bed of straw in a sunny corner of the porch. I kiss her between the ears and tell her I'll be home in time for the midday meal.

She presses her moist pink nose into the pocket of my skirt, searching for a bit of stowaway grain, then settles down, a jumble of elbows and knees, burrowing into the straw to nap.

"What a funny animal," Ama says. "She thinks she is a person." Ama must be right, because one day last week

when I was sitting in the schoolroom, I heard the tinkling of her bell and looked up and saw my little speckled goat wandering around the school yard, bleating in despair.

When finally she spotted me through the window, she *bahhed* with wounded pride, indignant at being left behind. She marched across the yard, propped her hooves up on the windowsill, and looked in with keen and curious eyes as the teacher finished the lesson.

When school was over and we climbed the hill toward home, Tali trotted ahead, her stubby tail held high.

"Next week," I promised her, "we will work on our spelling."

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

In the morning, Ama bends down to stir the kitchen fire and to plait my hair before I go to school. All day, as she trudges up and down the mountain, a heavy basket braced on her back and held fast by a rope around her brow, she is bent under the weight of her burden.

And at night, as she serves my stepfather his dinner, she kneels at his feet.

Even when she is standing upright to scan the sky for rain clouds, my ama's back is stooped.

The people who live on our mountain, a cluster of red mud huts clinging to the slope, worship the goddess who lives there, on the swallow-tailed peak. They pray to the goddess whose brow is fierce and noble, whose breast is broad and bountiful, whose snowy skirts spread wide above us.

She is beautiful, mighty, and magnificent.

But my ama, with her crow-black hair braided with bits of red rag and beads, her cinnamon skin, and her ears hung with the joyful noise of tinkling gold, is, to me, more lovely.

And her slender back, which bears our troubles—and all our hopes—is more beautiful still.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SON AND A DAUGHTER

My stepfather's arm is a withered and useless thing. Broken as a child when there was no money for a doctor, his poor mangled limb pains him during the rainy months and gives him great shame.

Most of the men his age leave home for months at a time, taking jobs at factories or on work crews far away. But no one, he says, will hire a one-armed man. And so he oils his hair, puts on his vest and a wristwatch that stopped telling time long ago, and goes up the hill each day to play cards, talk politics, and drink tea with the old men.

Ama says we are lucky we have a man at all. She says I am to honor and praise him, respect and thank him for taking us in after my father died.

And so I act the part of the dutiful daughter. I bring him his tea in the morning and rub his feet at night. I pretend I do not hear him joining in the laughter when the men at the tea shop joke about the difference between fathering a son and marrying off a daughter.

A son will always be a son, they say. But a girl is like a goat. Good as long as she gives you milk and butter. But not worth crying over when it's time to make a stew.

BEYOND THE HIMALAYAS

At dawn, our hut, perched high on the mountainside, is already torched with sunlight, while the village below remains cloaked in the mountain's long purple shadow until midmorning.

By midday, the tawny fields will be dotted with the cheerful dresses of the women, red as the poinsettias that lace the windy footpaths. Napping babies will sway in wicker baskets, and lizards will sun themselves outside their holes.

In the evening, the brilliant yellow pumpkin blossoms will close, drunk on sunshine, while the milky white jasmine will open their slender throats and sip the chill Himalayan air.

At night, low hearths will send up wispy curls of smoke fragrant with a dozen dinners, and darkness will clothe the land.

Except on nights when the moon is full. On those nights, the hillside and the valley below are bathed in a magical white light, the glow of the perpetual snows that blanket the mountaintops. On those nights I lie restless in the sleeping loft, wondering what the world is like beyond my mountain home.

CALENDAR

At school there is a calendar, where my young, moonfaced teacher marks off the days with a red crayon.

On the mountain we mark time by women's work and women's woes.

In the cold months, the women climb high up the mountain's spine to scavenge for firewood. They take food from their bowls, feed it to their children, and silence their own churning stomachs.

This is the season when the women bury the children who die of fever.

In the dry months, the women collect basketfuls of dung and pat them into cakes to harden in the sun, making precious fuel for the dinner fire. They tie rags around their children's eyes to shield them from the dust blowing up from the empty riverbed.

This is the season when they bury the children who die from the coughing disease.

In the rainy months, they patch the crumbling mud walls of their huts and keep the fire going so that yesterday's gruel can be stretched to make tomorrow's dinner. They watch the river turn into a thundering beast. They pick leeches

from their children's feet and give them tea to ward off the loose-bowel disease.

This is the season when they bury the children who cannot be carried to the doctor on the other side of that river.

In the cool months, they prepare special food for the festivals. They make rice beer for the men and listen to them argue politics. They teach the children who have survived the seasons to make back-to-school ink from the blue-black juice of the marking nut tree.

This is also the season when the women drink the blue-black juice of the marking nut tree to do away with the babies in their wombs—the ones who would be born only to be buried next season.

ANOTHER CALENDAR

According to the number of notches in Ama's wedding trunk, she is thirty-one and I am thirteen. If my baby brother lives through the festival season, Ama will carve a notch for him.

Four other babies were born between me and my brother. There are no notches for them.

CONFESSION

Each of my cucumbers has a name.

There is the tiny one, Muthi, which means "size of a handful." Muthi gets the first drink of the day.

Nearby is Yeti, the biggest one, named for the hairy snow monster. Yeti grows so fat, little Muthi cowers under a nearby leaf in fear and awe.

There is Ananta, the one shaped like a snake; and Bajai, the gnarled grandmother of the group; Vishnu, as sleek as rain; and Naazma, the ugly one, named for the headman's wife.

There is one named for my hen and three for her chicks, one for Gita, and one for Ganesh, the elephant god, remover of obstacles.

I treat them all as my children.

But sometimes, if my water jug runs low, I scrimp a bit on Naazma.

FIRST BLOOD

I awoke today—before even the hen had begun to stir—aware of a change in myself.

For days I have sensed a ripening in my body, a tender, achy, feeling unlike anything I've felt before. And even before I go to the privy to check, I know that I have gotten my first blood.

Ama is delighted by my news and sets about making the arrangements for my confinement.

"You must stay out of sight for seven days," she says. "Even the sun cannot see you until you've been purified."

Before the day can begin, Ama hurries me off to the goat shed, where I will spend the week shut away from the world.

"Don't come out for any reason," she says. "If you must use the privy, cover your face and head with your shawl.

"At night," she says, "when your stepfather has gone out and the baby has gone to sleep, I will return. And then I will tell you everything you need to know."

EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW

Before today, Ama says, you could run as free as a leaf in the wind.

Now, she says, you must carry yourself with modesty, bow your head in the presence of men, and cover yourself with your shawl.

Never look a man in the eye.
Never allow yourself to be alone with a man who is not family.
And never look at growing pumpkins or cucumbers when you are bleeding.
Otherwise they will rot.

Once you are married, she says, you must eat your meal only after your husband has had his fill. Then you may have what remains.

If he burps at the end of the meal, it is a sign that you have pleased him.

If he turns to you in the night, you must give yourself to him, in the hopes that you will bear him a son.

If you have a son, feed him at your breast until he is four.

If you have a daughter, feed her at your breast for just a

season, so that your blood will start again and you can try once more to bear a son.

If your husband asks you to wash his feet, you must do as he says, then put a bit of the water in your mouth.

I ask Ama why. "Why," I say, "must women suffer so?"

"This has always been our fate," she says.
"Simply to endure," she says, "is to triumph."

WAITING AND WATCHING

For seven days and seven nights, I lie in the darkness of the goat shed dreaming of my future. I bury my nose in Tali's fur and breathe in the smell of her—sweet green shoots of grass, afternoon sun, and mountain dirt—and imagine my life with Krishna.

Ama says that I must wait until next year when she visits the astrologer to fix a date for our wedding. But I would go live with him in the mountains tomorrow if I could.

We could eat riverweed and drink snowmelt and sleep under the silver-white light of the mountain. And someday, we could hang a cloth from a tree branch and put our baby in it. And she would sleep with the bleating of the goats as her only lullaby.

Until then, I will content myself with watching him.

I was watching when he won a footrace against the fastest boy in the village. And I was there the day he put a lizard in the teacher's teacup. I was at the village fountain when the other boys teased him for hauling water for his mother. And I was peeking out from around the corner of Bajai Sita's store the time he smoked his first cigarette and he coughed until he cried.

Krishna is shy when he passes me in the village, his sleepy cat eyes fixed on the ground in front of his feet.

But I think, perhaps, that he has been watching me, too.

ANNOUNCING THE DRY SEASON

The wind that blows up from the plains is called the *loo*.

It churns all day, hot and restless, throwing handfuls of dirt into the air and making the water in my mouth turn to mud.

It cries all night, too, blowing its feverish breath through the cracks in our walls, speaking its name again and again. "*Loo*," it wails, announcing itself all over the land.
"*Looooooo . . .*"

FIFTY DAYS WITHOUT RAIN

The leaves on my cucumbers are edged in brown, and Ama and I must each make twenty trips down the mountain to the village spring, waiting our turn to bring water up to the rice paddy.

My stepfather dozes in the shade, wearing nothing but a loincloth, too hot even to climb the hill to his card game.

The baby wears nothing at all.

Even the lizards lie gasping in the heat.

MAKING DO

Today the village headmen announced that they will ration water.

Tonight Ama and I scrub the cooking vessels clean with a mixture of earth and ash.

SIXTY DAYS WITHOUT RAIN

The rice plants are brown and parched, coated in dust. The wind rips the weakest of them out by the roots and tosses them off the mountainside.

Tali creeps over to the creek bed and rests her chin on the bank, her tongue searching for water that isn't there.

The baby's eyes are caked with dirt. He cries without fury. He cries without tears.

MAYBE TOMORROW

Today, like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, the sky is deadly blue.

Today, like each day before, the water in the rice paddy drops a little farther, and the plants hang their heads a little lower.

I watch as Ama makes an offering of marigold petals, red kumkum powder, and a few precious bits of rice to her goddess, praying for rain. But the only water that falls comes from Ama's eyes.

I go back to mopping the baby's face with a damp rag. As Ama goes past, I touch the hem of her skirt.

"Maybe tomorrow, Ama," I say.

My stepfather rises from his cot. "If the rains don't come soon," he says to my mother, "you will have to sell your earrings."

Yesterday, or the day before, or the day before that, Ama would have said, "Never." She would have said, "Those are for Lakshmi. They are her dowry."

But today she hangs her head like the paddy plants and says, "Maybe tomorrow."

The next morning, I rise before the sun has climbed over the mountain and walk down to the village spring, my feet making tiny dust storms with each step.

When I get home, I notice that my stepfather's cot is empty—he's behind the hut, I expect, in the privy. Before he can return to start calling out orders, I sneak over to my garden plot, with the first of the day's water for my thirsty cucumbers. I lift the leaf where Muthi likes to hide.

But all I see is a stem, looking surprised, lonely.

Ananta the snake, and even big fat Yeti are also missing, as are all the others.

I understand slowly, then all at once, that my stepfather has taken my cucumbers to Bajai Sita, the old trader woman, and sold them. I understand, too, why his cot is empty. Most likely, he has spent the night gambling—and losing—at the tea shop.

I know this is so when Ama comes out of the hut and does not meet my eye.

She takes the urn from my hands, pours the water over the few rice plants that remain. We strap the jugs to our backs, head down toward the spring, and do not speak of what is missing.

WHEN THE RAIN CAME

I smelled the rain before it fell.

I felt the air grow heavy like roti dough and saw the leaves of the eucalyptus tree turn their silvery undersides up to greet it.

The first few droplets vanished in the dust. Then bigger drops fell, fat and ripe, exploding the earth.

Ama came out of the house, pulling her shawl over her head. Then, slowly, she lifted the folds of fabric away from her brow and, like the leaves of the eucalyptus tree, raised her waiting face toward heaven.

I ran across the yard, released Tali from her wooden peg, and led her to the creek bed, her tongue unwilling to trust. Then, little by little, a trickle of muddy water came hopping down the gully.

Tali lapped and snuffled and snorted and sneezed and drank herself silly, her bony sides billowing with water.

I shut my eyes tight, letting the tears that had been gathering there finally spill down my cheeks, where they could hide inside the rain.

STRANGE MUSIC

I awake the next day to a forgotten sound.

Even before the rest of us have stirred, Ama has spread pots and pitchers around the floor of the hut to catch the water seeping in through the gaps in our roof.

I climb down from the sleeping loft, stir the fire, and brew a new pot of tea from yesterday's leaves, not daring to meet Ama's eyes, each drip a reminder of the tin roof we don't have.

Then the baby awakes. And with each drip
and *plink*
and *plop*
and *ping*
he laughs and claps his hands.
Each drip new.
Each *plink*
and *plop*
and *ping*
fresh and strange and musical to his tiny ears.

Ama wipes her hands on her apron, looks up at our old roof with new eyes, and lifts the baby from his basket. She twirls him in the air, her skirts flying around her ankles the way the clouds swirl around the mountain cap—her laughter fresh and strange and musical to my ears.

MAYBE

That night, after my stepfather leaves for the tea shop and the baby falls asleep, Ama reaches behind a big urn for a smaller one. She feels around behind that urn for an even smaller one, reaches inside, and pulls out a handful of maize.

"I set this aside in the dry months," she says, "for a night"—she gestures to the falling rain outside—"like tonight."

She pours the kernels into the skillet, sits back on her heels, and we watch as they burst into flower. I offer to share the little bowl of popcorn with her, but Ama has another surprise in store.

She unwinds the fabric at her waist and pulls out one of my stepfather's precious cigarettes, and I see, in that moment, the mischievous girl she was at my age.

We sit together, each savoring our secret treats and dreaming of the days after the monsoon.

"The first thing we'll do," I say, "is patch the roof."

"No, child," she says, solemnly blowing smoke in the air. "First, we'll offer thanks to the goddess. Then we'll mend the roof."

She inhales. "Perhaps this year we can beg some new thatch

from the landlord," she says. "Maybe this year you can tie it down while I pat it fast with mud."

Somehow, as she smokes her stolen cigarette and I eat my popcorn, she makes the job of thatching the roof sound like a joy.

"With the money from this year's crop," she says, "we may have enough to make you a new dress. Perhaps from that red-and-gold fabric you've been eyeing at Bajai Sita's store."

I lower my eyes, embarrassed and glad all at once.

"Maybe," I say, "there will be enough to go to Bajai Sita and buy sugar for sweet cakes."

"Maybe," she says, "we can buy extra seed this year and plant the empty field behind the hut."

"Maybe," I say, "we can borrow Gita's uncle's water buffalo.

I can drive the plow and you can spread the seed."

We sit there in the flickering light of a shallow saucer of oil, already rich with harvest money.

As we linger over the last of our luxuries—Ama inhales her cigarette down to a stub, I wipe a stubborn last kernel from

the bowl with my fingertip—we don't say what we both know.

That the first thing we must do is pay the landlord.
And Gita's uncle, who sold us last season's seed.
And the headman's wife, who would not trade cooking oil for work.
And my teacher, who gave me her own pencil when she saw I had none.
And the owner of the tea shop, who, my stepfather says, cheats at cards.

Instead, we linger over a luxury that costs nothing:
Imagining what may be.

WHAT THE MONSOON DOES

It doesn't rain constantly during the monsoon.

There is usually a shower in the morning that leaves behind stripes of color in the sky.

And another in the afternoon that leaves the rice plants plump and drowsy.

But all night, there is a long, soaking rain that leaves the footpaths sloppy and hearts refreshed.