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Written by James A. Levine

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The Blue Notebook

James A. Levine



PHOENIX

The blue notebook

I have a break now. Mamaki Briila is pleased with me and she should be! I have worked hard all morning and now that I tell her I am tired, she smiles at me. "Rest, little Batuk," she says. "Today will be brimming with riches." Actually, I am not tired at all.

My name is Batuk. I am a fifteen-year-old girl nested in the Common Street in Mumbai. I have been here six years and I have been blessed with beauty and a pencil. My beauty comes from within. The pencil came from the ear of Mamaki Briila, who is my boss.

I saw the pencil fall from Mamaki's ear two nights ago. I had just made sweet-cake and she bustled into my nest with an immense smile, leaned over, pinched my cheek, and kissed the top of my head. As she bent over, the giant sacs of her breasts were thrown in my face so that I could actually see the sparkling of sweat between them. She smelled like us, but worse.

She had to hold her back and lurch to get upright again, and as she did her breasts swayed as if they were pets hanging from her neck, dancing. She pulled the pencil from behind her ear and withdrew a palm-sized yellow notebook from an inner fold of her sari (or maybe her skin). As she opened the book, she peered down at me and another smile spread over her red face like water soaking into dry stone. She made a pencil mark in her book with a flourish of her bloated hand. She said sweetly,

"Little Batuk, you are my favorite girl. I thought you were going to disappoint me tonight but in just an hour, you have made me love you." I am sure she was about to remind me of her thousand kindnesses to me but she was interrupted by a shriek from Puneet.

Puneet is my best friend and occupies the nest two down from me. Puneet rarely cries, unlike Princess Meera, who cries every time she makes sweet-cake. Puneet only cries when he has to and the shriek he emitted that moment could have split rock. It was a single piercing yell, not of bodily pain, because Puneet feels no pain, but of terror. Mamaki knew this too. Puneet is the most valuable of us all because he is a boy.

Puneet's scream killed the night silence of the street and the smile dropped from Mamaki's face like a coin falling to the ground. She turned her street-wide rear in my face and fled from my nest. I was impressed that an object set on earth as she is can move with such speed, when it has to. As she flew from my nest, the tails of her sari caught the breeze and reminded me of the sheets used to protect the crops from the summer sun. That is when the pencil slipped from behind Mamaki's ear, lubricated by her unique brand of body oil.

In Mamaki's wake, the pencil dropped to the floor of my nest, bounced a couple of times, and then stopped moving. I sprang from my bed and threw myself upon it. The pencil was mine by divine decree.

I lay upon the small object, silent and motionless. My mind went back to when I was a little girl in Dreepah-Jil, my home village. I would perch on a rock in the sun, sometimes for hours, even in the heat of midday, and imagine myself melting

into the rock. Eventually from between the rocks or through the grass would scamper a little lizard. With its quick tight movements, it would look around and see nothing moving and feel safe. The lizard would relax and sun itself below my rock or sometimes even on it. I would not move, even if it sat right next to me. I would control my breathing and melt deeper into the rock until I became stone. I used my mind to control the mind of the lizard. I would speak soothingly to the lizard through the upper air. "Relax, little lizard, you will soon be mine."

You can look upward and see a raindrop that is destined to hit you. You see it, you know it is falling ever faster, and you know it will hit you, but you cannot escape it. So it was for the lizard. As I sprang upon the lizard, we might lock eyes for a hair of a moment. Then I would land on it, sometimes with so much force that I would kill it; if so, such was its fate. As I lay on the stone floor of my nest, I had a pencil because that too was fate.

I got off the floor, climbed onto my throne, lay down with the pencil under my belly, and fell asleep. When I awoke in the morning, the pencil was where I had left it but it had become warmed by my dreams. I lay in the first light with my eyes fluttering awake and asleep as I gazed through the entrance to my nest. I knew that there was not enough of this little pencil to write away my life, but there was enough to start.

My break and my faked tiredness are nearly over. In a moment I will replace this writing book inside the rip I made in my mattress. Today as I lie making sweet-cake, I will feel it against my back and know that it is there.

❖

You should have heard Mamaki that night when she ran into Puneet's nest at the speed of gunfire. Her scream was almost as loud as Puneet's had been. His had been an expression of terror whereas hers was meant to generate it. There had been two servants paying homage together to Prince Puneet when the commotion erupted, a practice that is entirely acceptable to Mamaki if the gifts to the prince are correctly apportioned. In this case, the gifts were of less importance as the devotees were two high-ranking police officers. Although they had initially undertaken the acts of baking (I heard Mamaki bless the visitors when they arrived), things got out of hand. Puneet was ripped apart by a police stick.

Mamaki threw the officers into the Common Street with one massive shove. Pah! to the officers. As I watched them from my nest, they got up, brushed the dust off their tan uniforms, laughed like brothers, and ambled away into the night. One of them had his police stick dangling from his wrist. Puneet fell to the ground from it—drip, drip, drip—as if the earth needed to feed on Puneet just as they had done.

Forgive me, please, for I am being dramatic. This is not only because Puneet is my beloved but also because I have a sense of drama. Mother always scolded me for this, perhaps because my playacting delighted Father so. When the family was together I would put on shows. I would mimic Navrang, the village lunatic, or Uncle Vishal ("Uncle V"), who was so fat he fell asleep in his soup. Mother would shake her head in grumbling dis-

approval whereas Father would laugh until he cried. I have always had a talent for such things.

As a reward for my drama, Father would take me into his arms and, if I begged him, he would tell me the story of the silver-eyed leopard. Every rendition had different embellishments and the story could last for hours, depending on how tired Father was or whether I fell asleep.

I loved my story. On some nights, I would pretend to be asleep when Mother walked through the bedroom filled with my brothers, sisters, and cousins. If I was still awake when Father returned from the fields and from the woman with the lavender scent, I would rush to him, fold myself in his lap, and beg him to tell me my story. "Not tonight, Batuk," he would often say as I cuddled into him and felt the vibration in his chest as he spoke. Twenty minutes or so later, as he brushed the last rice off his mouth, he would invariably give in and start telling me the story to my whoops of delight. You see, I was always Father's silver-eyed leopard.

Puneet has been ill but Mamaki says he is recovering. Between baking classes, I call to him two nests down and he calls back. Initially, Hippopotamus (this is how we secretly refer to Mamaki) forbade our volleys of chatter during work hours, but soon she realized that it lifts Puneet's spirits and now allows it.

Puneet is not yet ready to bake with us. If Puneet is so injured that he cannot work with us, or if he dies, then who will be there for me? I suppose that is a selfish way of thinking, but such is the whim of the dramatic soul.



There is a short break. Mr. Floppy Ears baked only the smallest sweet-cake with me. I can hardly claim to be tired.

I write in pencil. So how do I sharpen it, you ask? I smile at you. Not my "come and adore me" smile but a sly smile. I sharpen my pencil with the quickness of my wits.

Two streets down from my nest is the Street of Thieves. Here you can buy everything from an airplane to a cloak that makes you invisible—or that's what they say. One of the barrow boys who carts goods to and from the Street of Thieves I call Bandu. Bandu the barrow boy passes in front of my nest at least twice a day. I know when he is coming because the barrow's wheel is steel and it makes a terrible racket, which I can hear from streets away. In the early morning, when he passes by, his barrow brims over with bits and pieces, and in the evening when he returns, the wooden box is almost empty. There are occasions too when he makes extra trips, presumably for special deliveries.

Bandu is about my age and fine to look at. Even over the last year he has become more masculine and taller. He has large oval eyes that stare at me every day and, without fail, stare away whenever I catch his gaze. I think he sleeps with me in his mind from time to time.

As my pencil became blunt I, the sly girl that I am, started smiling more avidly at him. I would tilt my head and show my lips. As I ensnared him to my will—like the lizard—his stare would linger and sometimes he would hold my gaze for a full second. On occasion, his eyes flicked, like the lizard's tongue, to

my thighs or my small breasts. I sat in my nest as I had sat on my rock many years earlier, waiting for the barrow boy to sun himself under my shadow. He began to slow down as he approached my nest, and a few days later he grunted at me in that primal way shy men do.

After three days of grunting and my feigned embarrassment, I beckoned him to me. My gate's lock does not drop until after Hippo's first morning tea and cake, but I lowered my head below his, looked at him through my locked gate, and said, "My name is Batuk. I desperately need your help." I paused and smiled. "You could get me a sharpener for my pencil."

I was a little annoyed that he took a full two days to bring the sharpener to me. But when he did return, late, after Hippo's third tea, with it clasped in his street-worn hand, I smiled as if he had brought me a ruby. I then kissed him. There was no gate between us. I had intended to peck him on the cheek because I felt that was all he deserved, but instead I kissed him straight on the mouth. I searched my tongue for his and felt his tongue flee to the back of his mouth like a cowering dog about to be beaten. He started to push his tongue forward to meet mine, but I thrust him away with both my arms. This whole exchange of thanks took less than a few seconds but I knew that my taste would linger in his mouth all day. His want of me would soak his mind for far longer than that.

I do not know why I behaved in such a disgraceful manner, but I have my pencil sharpener and I never spoke to or acknowledged Bandu the barrow boy again.



The doctor came again yesterday to see Puneet and left after only ten minutes. This is probably because of the stench of Mamaki at close quarters and because Mamaki only pays a quarter of the doctor's fee. This doctor comes here frequently, though, Princess Meera being his first choice when it comes to topping off his bill.

The news from the doctor was good. It is only four days after Puneet's visit from the policemen and he is free from danger. I knew that I was being overdramatic! On a break, I leaned out of the entrance of my nest and called to Puneet, as I have been doing constantly, knowing that he is not working. He called back to say that he feels his strength returning. He did not want to say that he feels good because I know he fears the ears of Hippopotamus and wants to stretch out his recovery as long as possible.

Puneet will soon mature to manhood and I can see this in his body. His shoulders are becoming defined and his muscles more obvious. His thighs are bulging more and there are a few hairs on his shiny chest. His voice occasionally crackles. Although we have laughed about this we both know what it means. Soon a decision will need to be made about Puneet and he will not be the one to make it.

If Puneet is to lose his bhunnas they will need to do it soon (I thought that while the doctor was here, they would go right ahead and do it). If he is allowed to enter manhood, they will need to train his bhunnas and give him a new style. It is possible that as a man he may become more beautiful but there is

also a chance he would become ugly and in that case he would need to be discarded. My vote would be to remove his bhunnas now. He will then always be as beautiful as he is today and he will always be there for me. There is no one who can make me laugh as hard as Puneet.

Regardless of what transpires, Puneet's eyes will be constant. I have looked into his eyes and there I see his laughter and his mockery of the nest, Hippopotamus, and the Common Street. As I stare deeper into him, I watch his disdain for those who adore him and a red splash of evil. Deeper still, I see a bottomless well of cool water that is love.



My nest is a womb of gold.

Picture me illuminated in white light. This light, if you could put some in a bottle and examine it, is composed of a dervish of all color but also of laughter and joy. As you hold the bottle and peer at it, your hand is warmed and you feel my grace. Should you open the bottle and be nimble enough to pour its contents into your mouth, you will never hunger again but instead catch fire—and so be light too. From my face emanate rivers of brilliance that seek out all specks of darkness, and this is how I light my nest. My nest is glowing in my light, for there is no other light.

My nest, as I call it, is my throne room. For all the many ravines and indentations within its interior, its external shape is simple—a rectangle. Stone, and a blue gate; that is all.

As I contemplate my physical surroundings, I can never

reconcile how Father allowed me to come here. For all his tales, for all his wild laughter (where he would throw his head so far back I sometimes thought it would fall off), and for all his self-assurance that a bountiful destiny was mine, how could he let his silver-eyed leopard land here, laid upon this sacrificial altar?

That is unimportant for now. Look carefully at the walls of my throne room and you will see gold leaf hammered over every inch of brick. Where there was once gray brick, the foundation of the Common Street, here all you see is gold sparkling and winking at you in my bright light. Moreover, if you look carefully at the gold on the walls you will see the most intricate carvings. The craftsmen have depicted my life in its every detail. Look! There to my right are carvings of my cousins and sisters and strong brothers (except for Navaj, who is a year older than me and who was handicapped at birth). Look! There on the left toward the ceiling you see my family seated in the robes of the Spring Festivities. Look up on the roof—there! I am carved swimming at the river's bank, a naked unashamed six-year-old, and look, there is Grandpa, whom I barely remember (my goodness, he looks so thin). Around me, beaten and etched in the gold of my walls, is my likeness. The intricacy of the craftsmanship stands equal to the intricacies of my life, except there is no carving of slavery.

Against the innermost wall of my rectangular nest is my throne. The dim-witted say that I should have a throne of gold with pearl inlay and legs of ivory, and they ask why I chose instead the simple wood of the daruka tree to sit upon. This wood is said to be a thousand years old and has seen cities built and destroyed. The wood whispers the tales of warriors, of the great teachers and princes—you only have to ask it. Daruka wood

may be strong and dense, but remember that it can be destroyed by a single match, just as a life of a thousand happenings and a million memories can be extinguished in a second.

Carved behind my throne in purest ivory is a silver-eyed leopard. Its white coat is speckled with diamond dust. The leopard's eyes shine like polished silver coins.

Man comes here to worship from every kingdom, and from my throne I cast dominion over my subjects. You cross my threshold and I welcome you at the gate, but ultimately it is my throne you seek to lie upon.

Simple as my throne may be, magnificent are its adornments. Its long cushions are filled with the under-feathers of a hundred fledgling eagles, which carry the young's flight of innocence. The feathers were collected from far-off lands, the names of which I do not even know. The cushions are encased in the hand-weaving of the youngest Kashmiri children, who performed this act of servitude with smiles and laughter, for they knew that upon their hands' work I will lie. The sunshine they work in is captured in the essence of the weave; the cushions are the orange-yellow of the last light of day. Woven into the cushions are patterns sewn with thread dyed in the blue blood of a secret sea creature; their ancient shapes convey mathematical and mystical meaning for those who understand them. I do not understand because I am a simple baker of sweet-cake.

You see, I lie on a bed of everlasting youth, and those who lie with me taste youth. It is not a bed of eternal life, for my life will only be eternal when I die.

Sometimes I pretend that I am deranged; it simply comes out of me. When I was a child, Mother would often harshly

scold me for the tiniest of sins. "Did you steal your brother's milk?" "Why did you not clean as I told you?" "Where is that sash you borrowed from your sister?" I would love to just stare at her as she screamed at me. I would look up into her eyes, look beyond her eyeballs, and stare into the emptiness that I knew left Father lonely. My eye-locked silence enraged her even more. She would then turn up the scream volume, increase the speed of spit coming from her mouth, deepen her breathing, sweat a little bit more, and, before me, become more putrid. All because I saw her for what she was.

Mother would often swipe me because my resilience was too great. Her red palm would slap my face with such vehemence that I felt she might break my neck. Before I howled in pain at these quite frequent assaults, I would try to hold back my scream because I wanted to build up my ability to reside within myself. Nowadays the strikes are not with the open henna-reddened hand of Mother but from the pounding of man's hips on mine. Mother trained me well, though, for now I do live within myself.

No! I am not deranged. I do not believe for a second that I lie each day in a nest of gold with attendants and creamy foods. My cell, with its steel bars, is the size of a toilet. That is my home. I wait for the gray concrete night to become day—not that it matters a speck, for the walls never change. The dirt slowly accumulates with each entrant. When man makes sweetcake on me, my bedding is so thin that I feel this notebook's staples against my back. The only reason that I am fed is to keep my breasts filled and my bottom rounded and desirable. Man thereby feeds me.

I am not deranged, for I know that man spends a hundred rupees to have his bhunnas in my face or in my legs, or two hundred in my brown hole.

I am not deranged. I do not really see gold on my ceiling when I look up and I do not smell perfumes in the air. Neither do I smell the rancid stench of my cell or my bed because I am accustomed to it. I do, however, smell man's smells. No man who visits me is clean; on some I smell their wives' cooking and on others, their perfume. On some men I can taste the lipstick of other kisses that have been placed on his lips hours or minutes before mine.

I am often confused. I am confused as to why day always follows night when there is so much variability in everything else. I am confused about why beauty resides in variability rather than in constancy. I suppose that there must be forces that exceed my ability to understand them. But that is neither delusion nor insanity.

I am not deranged, but there are countless days I wish I were.



I arrived in Mumbai with Father. During the week before we left, there was an unusual hush at home and so I knew something was up. Mother and Father did not argue even once, and there were no whiffs of perfume on Father's sweat-drenched work clothes. I knew too that somehow I was responsible for this tranquillity, in part because Mother was kind to me even when

she should not have been. Father was different; there was a new sad feeling between us that I later came to realize was regret.

I am now an expert on the regret of men. Regret does not obey the rules of class or money. The husband, priest, father, teacher, doctor, businessman, son, banker, thief, politician all have the capacity for regret. From that day Father showed me his capacity for regret, I came to recognize it in all the men I met. When the soy farmers need to protect their crops from the harsh sun, they use veils of white plastic cloth with string woven through it; despite being lightweight and almost transparent, it is indestructible. Entire fields are swathed in this material, which resembles enormous sails. The white fluttering sails do not stop the sun from entering and making the crops grow; the clarity and intensity of the sun is dulled, however. This is true of regret. It is a veil, and like all human emotions it serves to soften the impact of reality. It is a failed belief that we cannot experience the true brilliance of the light, but it is through fear that we veil ourselves from that brilliance.

We cloak ourselves in layers upon layers of regret, dishonesty, cruelty, and pride. Father, the week he brought me to Mumbai, was veiled in regret.

I found out that I was leaving for Mumbai when I attended my goodbye party. It was not like a birthday party but rather was a gathering of people who were all uneasy. No one knew what to do or say and I did not get any presents. Everyone there, except me, knew that I was leaving. As the sweet-cakes and biscuits were passed around and the bowls of dahl slopped out, we were not burned by the afternoon sun, as the entire village was shrouded in a thick veil of regret.

Everyone said goodbye to me. My brothers, sisters, and cousins cried and my baby brother Avijit wept. As I tried to work out what was happening, I decided that I was ill. I thought I was going to die from some disease that no one would tell me about.

When Mother explained to me that Father was going to take me to Mumbai I therefore assumed it was to see a doctor, although normally we would go to Bhopal for serious medical matters. I concluded that I must be terminally ill. Then everything made sense: the party, the tears, Mother's kindness, and Father's gloominess. I became scared, which is unusual for me because I am the silver-eyed leopard.

The journey to Mumbai necessitated a great deal of walking and my first journey on a bus—just Father and me. I started out holding Father's hand, chatting with him about the party and giggling about Uncle V, who fell asleep again while eating. By the time we had reached the main road my hair was sweaty and dusty and my hand separate from Father's. Father and I shared few words as we waited for the bus. We sat in the shade of a dull green woody tree that had spent its entire life waiting for buses.

Father sat looking outward with his back against the tree, his knees bent and his feet flat against the red-brown sand in front of him. He stared out across crops cloaked in white sheeting. The landscape was speckled with occasional trees that stood either alone or in groupings of two or three. The heat was excessive and the sky was a pale blue. After about ten seconds of watching my silent, folded-up father, I started to unwrap the food bundle that Mother had given me. She had wrapped several delicacies in a red-and-green square of cotton that I

recognized from our hut. My eyes lit up; there were sweet-breads, nan breads, chutneys, and relishes (they were all leftovers from the party). Best of all, there were flour balls sweetened with dust-sugar, white sweet-cakes with swirls of green inside, and red sweets sprinkled with sparkling sugar crystals. Each item was so carefully wrapped and so easily unwrapped!

"Batuk," Father snapped, "if you eat everything now, you will have nothing for the journey." "Hmm," I said, and then started to munch. The white sweet-bread with the green swirls was delicious. "Father, why are we going to Mumbai . . . am I ill or something?" "No, Batuk," Father said in an irritated tone, "why would you think that? You are not ill." I was relieved beyond belief. We sat in silence for a few minutes more and then I asked, "Then why are we going there . . . where will we stay?"

"Batuk, you will find out soon enough." Father's voice was dry and he was irritated with me. "Now be quiet and don't eat anything else—I told you. The bus will be here soon." I was silent after that.

I decided to get up and talk to the tree. I asked the tree, "What is it like for you to wait all your life for buses and never get on them when they come?" The tree was initially silent but then answered me a little rudely, "Did you not hear your father? Be quiet and wait for the bus." There was a pause, and then the tree realized that I was going to take myself away and leave him alone. He cleared his woody throat. "You know, Batuk, I could tell you what it is like to wait many lives for many buses . . . but, sweet girl, I am thirsty and can barely talk." I thought for a moment and cried, "Wait!" I ran to my bundle, grabbed my skin of water, and ran back to the tree's roots and poured my water over them.

"Batuk!" Father screamed at me. "What the hell are you doing! Stop! Stop!" "But Father, the tree is so thirsty. His voice is hoarse," I answered. Father looked up at me from the ground and his face reddened from his neck upward. He was just about to scream at me again but stopped himself. "Come here, you little devil," he called, and opened his arms. I ran over and jumped into Father's arms. His work clothes were soft from their million washings and I could smell Mother's cooking on him. In his arms, I melted into him and became him, for that is what I am—his. He was my father, who was taking me, his silver-eyed leopard, all the way to Mumbai. In the middle of nowhere, under the tree, I shut my eyes. I recognized that everyone's regret at my leaving was only because they wished to be where I was now, in the arms of Father waiting for our bus.

The tree was watching me as Father and I sat there together as one. The tree spoke, "Batuk, why don't you stay here with me? I could teach you all the mysteries of the world. My leaves have heard the laughter, words, and cries of every living thing. My roots have tasted water from across the earth. My bark holds the map to the secrets of all knowledge. My seed was blown here from a tree in the great garden of the Taj and so I know perfect love too. Come, Batuk, leave your father and melt into me."

"But tree," I said from my father's arms, "you know everything there is to know, and still you stay here waiting for a bus but never get on it. So what is your service?" "My service," said the tree, "is to provide you with shade." I thought about this in the long silence that followed, Father having fallen asleep. I wiggled out of Father's arms and went over to the tree and

scrutinized its bark. All I could see were little insects crawling in the crevices and cracks. Some insects seemed to have purpose and others wandered hither and fro, but they were all just insects scurrying around on a great tree. I said to the tree, "I cannot stay with you. I must go with Father to Mumbai on the bus."

I saw the distant cloud of dust from our bus approaching. "Father, Father, our bus!" Father woke up and started to collect his few things as the bus approached. The tree said to me, "I have one more thing to tell you, Batuk." There was no malice in the tree's voice, just regret. "Yes, great tree?" I asked. The tree answered in a voice so soft that you had to concentrate intensely on his leaves to hear it, "The whole world, Batuk, was created for you alone and no other."

As I turned to Father I noticed that the water I had poured over the tree's roots had risen to Father's face, for there I saw it, dripping from his eyes.