

*Sandra Hunter*

## **In-Breath**

Up on her toes between the white gauzy curtains, Gul, skinny body arched like a bird feather, arms stretched up-up-up, breathes in earth-smell from yesterday's storm, another one coming in, bruisey blue and purple clouds sinking over the city. Almost lunch time. This afternoon, best friend and just-like-brother Hari Prinsloo, seventeen and nearly four years older than Gul but the same height, big-teeth-and-all, is going to win the Underbone 115cc event at the Petronas Asia Bike Championships. First time ever in Chennai, *bhai*. But how will he do it if the stupid rain ruins everything?

Spins around and catches a flash of her untidy cloud of hair in the mirror. Better get dressed. Ma busy in the kitchen will shout upstairs for help any minute now. Saturday is Papa's sleeping-in morning but even he'll be getting ready, putting on extra-nice kurta for the fiancé visit.

Steps out of her room, head tilted for anything the house might say. Silence. Trails a hand along the old bumpy wallpaper along the corridor to Papa's meditation room. Even before she's there, she feels it. Papa has left his body again in that melting way that makes the whole upstairs slump and slide with him into its own meditation.

Papa lies on the pink, brushed cotton sheets on-sale-from-Amy's. But his quick and calm self—the one that can still pick her up and twirl her around, that eats chili peanuts with her on the back steps—has gone somewhere else.

Chest lifts slowly, pause, slow release. One and a bit per minute. It will become less until a single breath might last an hour. Papa is a sainted Guru-ji, like his father and grandfather before him, giving blessings-and-all to the faded-cotton-people who wait silently on the verandah to scurry in to touch his feet and scuttle away, who leave gifts of fruit, bundles of cloth and sometimes exciting fat rolls of cash on the back doorstep. Papa has always been here-one-minute-gone-the-next to Commune with the Universe. Sometimes he comes back happy as a lamb and ready for kesar ice-cream, sometimes he just seems *so* tired. "This cosmos business, beautiful and divine essence and all, Gul-Gul, but it's not for the faint of heart."

Ma gets mad with Papa's journeys. Gul and her older sister, Rishi, will wake up to Ma's loud whispering *Mr. S? Mr. S? Are you still here?* And then her signature groan *Not now*. Gul, bare feet silent on the wooden floor, follows Ma downstairs. Peeping from around the old grandfather clock unsteadily ticking as though it's on board a tipping ship, Gul watches Ma: *Guru-ji is in the heart of God. He will not be receiving today*. The faded-cotton visitors peer into the house, looking up at the ceiling as though Papa is hovering just above the orange and pink lamp. Maybe they're hoping for some last faint blessing, like waving goodbye to someone on the train.

Gul knows, for all the hushing and *you girls keep your voices down*, Papa can't be disturbed. He just doesn't hear anything. Sometimes heart hurts, isn't it, with missing him. She'd been small when she started sitting on the bare floor by the foot of the divan, waiting for him to come back. Little by little, slowly by slowly, she shifted onto the rug. No lightning bolt to punish her for seeking comfort for her aching bottom. Next step was *just* one finger to touch the holy feet, the holy stomach, the holy hand, even the holy beard. Nothing. No sudden opening of the

eyes or seizing of the naughty finger. Papa's spirit was really gone, maybe flying out somewhere across the galaxies like a big blue kite.

He looked like the dead saints, may-they-be-blessed, in pictures at school. So she started talking to him in small whispers. It became normal to slip into the meditation room and tell him about boring old History, the two-foot-long dead cobra in the gutter right outside the temple, the chai-wallah who gave her free sips of tea on the way home from school. And then the secrets: she'd eaten the last of the rose petal jam, stolen five rupees from the tea caddy where Ma kept house-keeping money, smuggled a cookie into temple and eaten it when she was meant to be praying.

It was *so* comforting to go to bed at night, knowing she'd told Papa everything. Almost like never having done anything wrong and much better than praying to a picture. So no need to tell Ma anything, isn't it?

Best of all, Papa never remembered any of it when he came back from pilgrimage. Just happy to see everyone. A little thin sometimes. Pilgrimage took days or even a whole week. And no food. Ma fasted on all the holidays and once made Rishi and Gul fast for a whole day. Rishi just went back to bed. Holy time, Ma said. Think about your sins and how to improve. But all Gul could think about was when-when-when she could finally eat dinner. Watching the clock creep jelly hands until she could only think of the horrible song, *chapati, dhal with aloo, raita and some pickle-oo*. And Papa could go for *days* without food, so he was very holy.

Ssh, ssh, slipping out of chappals, tip-toe in, step over the squeaky floor-board and the one with the loose nail. Sits down quietly on the small rug. Bends her head. "Papa, it's Gul." A deep, groaning sigh. Gul snaps upright. Is he angry? Is he speaking to her from his place of communion? Is something stuck in the holy windpipe? What if he were to choke? Would she be allowed to wake him? But Papa's breathing settles back, slower, slower, slower.

She leans over the divan and whispers, "Papa, did you forget Rishi's fiancé is coming today?" Twirls a loose thread hanging from the pink sheet. "I have to sit on a *stool*, Papa, just because I'm younger. And he goes on and on about how *backward* Indian women are and how American women are so this-and-that. I wish he'd just go and marry one of them. But then Rishi would be sad and I don't want that." Tugs the thread gently. "But, Papa, how could Rishi want to marry someone with such yellow eyes? Rishi says gold-green but *I* don't think so." Papa's face is calm, the eyelids peacefully closed, deep lines on either side of the nose and mouth, the long thin cheeks, the curling grey hairs in his eyebrows. What will happen if Papa doesn't come back? Heart beats loudly. Puts her hands over her heart to cover the noise.

"Don't stay away too long, will you?" Is it a sin to ask the Guru-ji to return? She wants to kiss his cheek, touch his hand, but that is forbidden. Is this Papa the same as the Guru-ji now far away? Jaideep is America-returned and *he's* different.

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