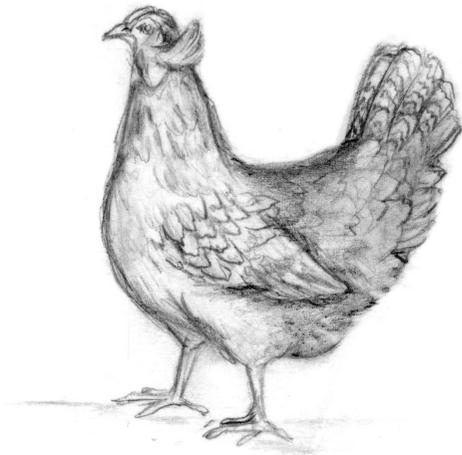




WHEN I WAS a kid, my parents would dress my two sisters and me in traditional Indian garb and cart us off to the Hindu temple in Richmond Hill, where portly bare-chested Brahmin priests in white loincloths chanted sacred Sanskrit prayers in front of huge granite idols. The stone gods were brilliantly dressed in bright red, yellow, purple, and green silks, flower garlands, and jewelry encrusted with precious gems. I was in heaven. Brass bells ringing loudly, ancient fire rituals, and hundreds of other Tamil people packed into the temple, each vying for a glimpse of the idol. Looking up at the smiling face of Vishnu, who would give me whatever I asked for if I prayed hard enough, was something that filled my little two-year-old heart with immense joy.

My religious fervor wasn't restricted to just Hinduism. My Irish aunt Brigid (my uncle had scandalously married outside the Tamil race) took me to Catholic Mass with her on Sundays, and here was yet another story, another house of God soliciting my devotion. A bit more gruesome, with blood dripping from the wounds of this white man hanging on a cross, but still otherworldly. It didn't matter that I couldn't understand a word of Latin, or that I wasn't allowed to go up with Aunty Bridgy to get that little piece of Communion bread and sip



of wine—she'd always sneak back a piece of the wafer for me, whispering that this was where I belonged.

One Sunday, Aunty Bridgy assured me it was okay that we were missing Mass—the Holy Mother had appeared to a farmer in a small town three hours away from Toronto, instructing him to gather the flock, for she would come again for those who believed. So there we were in the car, driving for ages along a lone country road, with the hopes that she (excuse me, *She*) would show herself to us. We joined hundreds of others who had staked out a claim with their picnic blankets and folding chairs in the farmer's field on that sunny fall afternoon. We never did see Mary, but Aunty Bridgy assured me that She was there, in all our hearts. Frankly, just between you and me, I would have preferred to have actually seen what color robe the Blessed Virgin had chosen to wear that day.

Being encouraged to have faith in something that was so incredibly fantastical was fuel for my wild imagination, especially as I got older and it started becoming clear that I wasn't really allowed to live my life in the story-filled world I loved. Ma would throw open my bedroom door on school nights and catch me in the act of jumping off my bed, dressed up as a Greek warrior, practicing my sword-fighting drills, or ceremonially draping a towel over my head and shoulders, a lone Bedouin preparing to cross the Sahara—then she'd reprimand me for neglecting my math homework. But I couldn't help myself, and I continued to find ways of blurring the lines between the fictitious realm in which I wanted to live, and the real one I was born into.

Our house backed onto a huge valley that bordered the Toronto Zoo, and in the evenings I'd hear elephants, lions, and wolves through my bedroom window. I was twelve when I was overcome with the need to play zookeeper myself and build a chicken coop in my backyard. My dad loved the idea, but there was much protesting from Ma. We already

had a pet, she said, our little shih tzu named Meesha. Which I had to share with my sisters, I argued; I wanted chickens for myself. "They smell, child," Ma insisted impatiently, "and they make noise. And I doubt it very much that we are allowed to have chickens in the backyard."

I heaved the giant telephone directory onto the kitchen table one afternoon, looked up the number for the city zoning office, and eventually ended up speaking to a woman who sounded like she was fed up with the mundane questions she had to answer all day.

"No," she grunted, "you're in a residential zone. No animals of a barnyard nature can be legally kept in your area." We lived in Scarborough, the most eastern suburb of Toronto, in an urban subdivision where the houses were only twenty feet apart. There was a pause, and then she continued, "But . . . we won't know about it unless one of your neighbors complains."

"Does that mean I can keep them, if they don't bother the neighbors?!" I asked excitedly.

"We won't *know about it*," she repeated, louder this time, ". . . unless your *neighbors complain!*"

Ma finally caved and I filled my coop with Araucana hens—a South American breed that lay beautiful blue- and green-shelled eggs. The backyard, laden with the trumpeting of elephants, the occasional roar from a lion, and finally, the soothing sound of six little hens clucking away became my own little kingdom. I was mayor of Chickentown, keeping a watchful eye on my flock and breaking apart petty squabbles as the hens established their pecking order. Giddy with excitement, I'd wake up every morning at five and rush down to the backyard to greet my hennies as they emerged from their brooding house, bleary-eyed. They'd move lethargically and let out long, drawn-out squawks. I'd echo back their noises while I filled up their feeding trough and replenished their water. A handful of kitchen scraps never failed to send them into an instant flurry,

rummaging fervently through bits of cabbage, carrot skins, and apple cores.

At thirteen, I took my love of quiet, nostalgic domestic practices, like tending to livestock, to the next level when I began volunteering at Black Creek Pioneer Village—a historic site just north of Toronto, where a collection of buildings from the 1800s depicted life in a typical rural Ontario village in the nineteenth century. Twice a month, I'd change into my pioneer costume and apprentice with the blacksmith, the cabinetmaker, the baker, or the weaver.

I first went to Pioneer Village on a school trip in second grade, during a mandatory unit on pioneers. My classmates and I were sitting on the pine floor of the farmer's log cabin as the tour guide warned our class not to touch anything and then started her spiel, but I couldn't hear her—I was completely in awe of the huge squared pine logs that made up the walls and ceiling, the fieldstone fireplace, the flaking red paint on the harvest table and the gnarly wooden bowl that sat on it. Everything here was two hundred years old, yet I felt so at home.

I was always more at peace in my imaginary worlds than beneath the actual roof I lived under. Things weren't always pleasant growing up.

I must have been about three years old when my big sister and I were drawing on the concrete walls of our basement with sticks of chalk one evening. A door slammed loudly, jolting us out of our coloring daze, and we turned to face each other, fearing we were about to be caught in the act. Ma was running down the stairs, still dressed in her office clothes—a knee-length blue-and-white dress and sheer, black pantyhose.

“Come. Come here, baby!” Ma called to me, smiling. There was something disturbing about her smile though; her lips were quivering as she extended her arms toward me, her fingers frantically gesturing for me to run into her grasp. There was the usual sweetness in Ma's

voice but she was panting heavily. I dropped my chalk as she scooped me up and gently rested my head on the thick shoulder pad of her dress. I inhaled Ma's scent—a soothing mix of fresh laundry and Avon lipstick. Another door slammed, closer this time, and suddenly we could hear my dad's slurred shouting, booming down from the top of the stairs.

“Come, darling, quickly,” Ma whispered to my sister, taking her by the hand while looking over her shoulder. I lifted my head to follow her gaze and caught sight of my dad, running at us with a butcher knife. He continued to yell as he stumbled forward, shirtless, his legs pulling his faded green cotton sarong taut with each stride, his bald head and his flat nose glistening with sweat under the lone lightbulb that hung from a wire in our unfinished basement.

Just hours before, he had been feeding us a dinner of rice and chicken curry, while Ma was still at work. Now, his bloodshot eyes were bulging out of his head as he lunged toward us. My eyes fell to my sister below, scurrying alongside Ma as my head bobbed up and down while we ran up the stairs to the main floor. My dad wasn't far behind and he lifted the knife high into the air as he chased us from room to room, continuing to yell at the top of his lungs, a deafening, growling sound full of fury. Ma was managing to stay ahead of him, until he cornered us in the study room—the tiny side room off the main hall where a lone desk stood beside a big, gray melamine pantry cupboard that held Ma's excess cooking ingredients—large glass jars of spices, sugar, rice, red lentils, and packets of plastic-wrapped tamarind.

Ma pushed my face into her shoulder while she shouted out frantically, her voice breaking. I could hear her crying as she barked back at my dad. There was a brief moment of silence. I jerked my head up to catch my dad on the floor with the knife beside him and Ma opening the other door of the study room—the one that led to our garage. The garage happened to be open to the street and there was still some light out

on that summer evening—Ma scurried down the three plywood steps into the dim garage and the spring-loaded door slammed shut behind us. She was putting me down when the door flung back open with my yelling dad silhouetted in its frame, knife in tow.

“Run, children!” Ma shouted, crying while darting her eyes between us and my dad. “Run outside!”

“No, Ma, *noooooooo* . . .” I bawled, grabbing on to the hem of her thin dress just as my dad pressed the large, white, square button for the garage door. The creaking mechanics came alive with the heavy sound of rattling metal and the garage started getting darker as the paneled wooden door descended.

“Run, baby, go!” Ma pushed me away from her and I took my sister’s hand, running with her. We made it outside and turned to face Ma but she was still inside. I can clearly remember standing on the pink concrete pavers of our driveway watching in complete horror as that huge door moved down in front of us.

I stopped breathing and started gasping for air, not knowing whether I would ever see Ma again. And there, behind us, in the street on that humid summer evening, the neighbor kids were playing basketball and laughing cheerfully.

There was only about a foot of space left before Ma finally rolled out of the darkness and onto the driveway. She brushed herself off, stood up quickly and then readjusted her dress, turning her head to see whether the neighbors were watching. I looked up at her—two wavy black lines ran down her cheeks and circled her fuchsia-colored lips. Her mouth was still quivering as she smiled down at me. She looked up toward the sky and blinked her eyes repeatedly, running both her index fingers along her lower eyelids and partially smearing the wavy black lines on her face. And then she picked me back up and took my sister’s hand.

It took a few years for me to realize that my dad had a problem—

one that was linked to the glass bottles he’d bring home in a paper bag every few days and swiftly escort down to a corner in our basement.

While I eventually grew out of my religious obsessions, Ma continued to turn in solace to the elephant-headed god, Ganesha, Lord Overcomer of Obstacles. I’d sometimes spot her praying to the idols in the linen closet that had been converted into a mini shrine, her eyes pursed shut and her hands pushed together in prayer. I wondered what she was asking for.

I had developed my own ways of coping.

Escaping to the worlds in my head became so appealing to me I eventually began thinking about making it a real part of my life.

Ma wasn’t supportive or enthusiastic about me pursuing yet another distraction from school, but when I landed my first official audition at twelve years old, I begged her to drive me downtown. She didn’t say much as she reluctantly maneuvered our giant white Buick along narrow one-way streets, making our way into the heart of the city.

“Don’t be nervous, darling,” Ma uttered finally, as she led the way up a steep flight of creaky wooden stairs to the casting office. There was a warmth in her tone that surprised me, and I sensed that her impatience with my outlandish endeavors might be fading away.

The audition was for an episode of a spooky kids TV series called “Goosebumps,” based on the novels by R. L. Stein. I have absolutely no recollection of what happened during the actual audition. What I do remember is that I went home and immediately checked the answering machine, disappointed that there was no call. The next day I was fidgety in school, dying to return home in the hopes that there was a message from my agent, Clibby. I took matters into my own hands, and began calling her every couple of days, only to hear that she didn’t know yet. And then eventually I called and asked, yet again, “Have you heard back, Clibby? Did I get the part?”

“No, kid, you didn’t. And if you had, I would have called you, okay? You can’t call me after every audition, okay?” It took a couple of years before I could go to an audition, give it my best try, and then forget about it.

I knew I needed a teacher, a coach, who could help me look at my work in a constructive way.

Marcia was well-known in the circle of young Toronto actors; she taught regular auditioning workshops and was hired by major television shows as their on-set acting coach. She was also a veteran character actress in her fifties, with dozens of small roles on television shows, movies, and commercials. I would see her on TV regularly, while flipping through the channels—playing the role of a sweet-natured grandmother in a weekly movie or touting the noteworthy traits of a special denture grip in a popular commercial.

I started bi-weekly private coaching classes with Marcia when I was fifteen—I’d get on the bus after school and travel in the direction opposite home, heading out of the suburbs into the city proper, to a slightly sketchy part of the downtown core.

There was a turning point in my meetings with Marcia. She had given me a scene from a movie in which a boy is sitting on the bedside of his dying father. It was meaty stuff to work with—letting go, last words, tears . . . high drama. I had memorized my lines before arriving at Marcia’s house and was ready to give it my best try. The scene took place in a hospital room, so Marcia pulled a chair next to the sofa, where she lay down to play the father, and we both cleared our throats, took our places, and began the scene. Marcia had the first line, “Where’s your mother, dear?”

“She just stepped out to make a call, Dad; she’ll be back soon,” I said.

Marcia’s eyes and mine were locked together; a beam of orangish light from the setting sun was streaming in through her window. She was staring deep into my eyes as I said my line and then she squinted

a bit, looked away, and looked back at me before she said, “You know, dear, I remember how horrible it was when my father passed away.”

“I’m sorry, Marcia,” I said.

She looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry—about your father,” I clarified.

“Oh, no, dear, that was in the script.”

I had been waiting for her to say her line, “You know, dear, I remember how horrible it was when my father passed away.” I had *memorized* it! I knew it was coming! But when Marcia looked me in the eyes, and then *looked away*, I thought, “Oh she’s going to tell me something *real*.” As she spoke about the horribleness of her father’s death, I felt for her, and reacted. We both laughed about the misunderstanding, but I had learned a valuable acting lesson; when Marcia said her lines, she *was* telling me something real. What she was saying was so true that I forgot what I was doing—which was pretending. Marcia wasn’t pretending; she wasn’t reciting lines she had memorized; she was living them.

On the long bus and subway ride home that night, I mentally put together my Oscar speech:

“I used to think that *love* was the greatest gift that a person could share with someone else,” I’d begin, holding my precious golden statue at waist level. “But it’s not . . . because love is fleeting.”

The rose-colored rims of Meryl’s tired but all-knowing eyes would meet mine from the front row where she’d be sitting. “*Where is he going with this*,” they’d say.

“*Knowledge* is the greatest gift you can give another person,” I’d continue. “*To teach* someone something—to give someone else a skill that they can carry with them for the rest of their life, long after the two of you have parted—*that* is the most valuable thing a human can give another.” Meryl would nod wisely, in agreement. I would have to remember to catch up with her later at the *Vanity Fair* party, and

subtly quote a famous line from one of her movies. “Sabu, dis’ is a chief. You-are-not-a-chief!”

My acting endeavors were put on a brief hiatus when I was sixteen. It wasn’t related at all to the continuing trauma at home, my dad still drinking and picking fights with Ma on a regular basis. No, this was something that caught me completely off guard—my agent died. Poor Clibby had a heart attack, leaving me orphaned in the acting world, scrambling for representation. I found a new agent in the form of a Daddy Warbucks figure named Gerry.

I jumped for joy when I landed my first acting job in a local kids’ TV show. We put on comedic sketches and reenacted bastardized versions of famous movie scenes. Once, I had to wear a diaper for a skit called “Days of Blunder,” in which my costar and I raced each other on tricycles. The costumes weren’t exactly made to measure, and when my left testicle fell out during the first take, I panicked. But we just cut the camera and I discreetly tucked in the fugitive genital before continuing. Everything would be okay; it was safe. Here, the beginning, middle, and end of the story were plotted out beforehand—all I had to do was dive right in, completely committing to the prescribed set of parameters. Done. To me, this was the ultimate escape, and I was being paid to do it. There were no surprises in this scripted world where the highs and lows of life had neatly been laid out on paper.

When the audition for *Mean Girls* came up, I was sent in to read for the part of the gay kid, Damian. I delivered what I felt was a decent audition. I didn’t hear back from the casting director for a few weeks, so I assumed that I was out of the running. *Maybe I was too nervous? Maybe my performance wasn’t as strong as I thought and I was playing it too safe. Or Maybe I just wasn’t gay enough? Maybe I should have cocked my hip and fluttered my eyes a little more?*

Then Gerry called and told me they wanted to see me for another

part, a rapping mathlete named Kevin Gnapoor. I did my best to memorize the incredibly long rap contained in the eight pages of my audition script. At the audition, the waiting room was full of Chinese guys and I wondered if the role was meant to be Chinese and they were simply “trying out” the character as Indian by asking me to read for it. Regardless, I was thrilled to be reading for a role that was atypical to the ones I usually tried out for. As a young, skinny, brown actor in Toronto, nine out of ten auditions that came my way were for terrorists, assistant terrorists, or techies working in call centers in India. The character descriptions for these roles were always the same—“gangly, awkward, with a bad haircut”—but the probability of landing the job was high, as there were essentially only three of us brown guys who showed up to every one of these auditions. Between Ishan, Ali, and me, one of us would be bobbling our heads slyly and planting a bomb in the next episode of whatever crime drama was shooting in the city that month. I longed for the day when I’d be auditioning for an epic character of *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Out of Africa* proportions, the chances of which seemed pretty bleak at the time, when the only lead role I had gone up for by then had been in *Harold and Kumar*, with the audition scene entailing trimming my pubic hair into the shape of Osama Bin Laden’s beard. Mm-hmm, yeah. This is why I was pleasantly surprised when I was asked to audition for the role of a gangsta math enthusiast. Despite the fact that I was terrible at math and had to drop out of calculus because I was failing miserably, high schools in Scarborough had no shortage of brown guys who walked with swagger as their baggy Enyce jeans slumped down past their asses, revealing their underwear—and although these chameleons put on the airs of complete thugs, there were many of them who got straight As in their math and science classes. I knew the mindset of this type like the back of my hand.

The casting assistant walked out and called “Rajiv Surendra” and

as I followed her into the room where the casting director and camera guy were waiting, I desperately hoped that I wouldn't forget any of the rhyming couplets of the rap. But that didn't happen. I kept screwing up the lines and they'd restart and give me another try. And after four tries, I conceded to the casting director that I wasn't going to get it, but that I had given it my best shot. I left the room rolling my eyes.

A week later, I was caught completely off guard when I was invited to a callback where I'd be auditioning with the director and executive producer in the room.

I arrived at the casting office and the waiting room was empty. As I took a seat, a pretty brunette came out of the washroom nearby and joined me on the long bench I was sitting on. She smiled and extended her hand, "I'm Rachel."

"I'm Rajiv," I said, shaking her hand. "What part are you reading for?"

"The bitch, Regina George," she said, raising her eyebrows.

*She sure doesn't seem like the "bitch" type, I thought to myself. Maybe she's just a really good actress.*

The casting assistant emerged and asked me to follow her into the room.

"Good luck," the brunette whispered.

The walk down the corridor to the auditioning room felt like I was being escorted along the yellow brick road to meet the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz. The assistant opened the door and stepped in, bidding me to enter behind her. There I was, being invited to cross the threshold between my real and imaginary worlds, and now it was no longer a childhood habit or a game in the basement . . . now it was officially a very big deal. I stepped in, and the assistant closed the door behind me.

"Everyone, this is Rajiv. Rajiv, this is Mark," she said, extending her

hand toward the man seated in front of me, "our director. And this is Jill, who's producing." The smartly dressed woman seated behind Mark gave me a tiny wave. Behind both of them was the casting director I already knew. I was nervous, but in a good way.

I did a couple of the scenes assigned, and Mark chuckled. "Nice, I like this," he said, and then proceeded to give me directions, tweaking minor details. When it came time for me to do the rap, in a tiny moment of clarity, I reminded myself that I wasn't *pretending* to be a rapping mathlete—I *was* one. Cloaked with pure confidence, I let it rip, effervescent lyrics bubbling out of my mouth. Mark's guttural, baritone laugh filled the room and egged my rapper ego further. I threw my arms into the air and swaggered from one side of the room to the other, increasing the volume of my voice in competition with the growing laughter.

I had fully transformed into the rapping mathlete. The words on the page had become my own, and for those few moments, the world of the script was the only one I knew.

It paid off. I got the part.