

Shah's Koli Cow

By Briarwood Bohemian

A historical fiction novelette

Dedication

A dear friend began a writing group and invited me to join. This piece began as a 400 word response to a prompt for our first session. I planned on leaving this little vignette as is. However, my fellow group members wanted to know more. Each session offered a different prompt and I grew the story through those prompts only. I peppered in research as well. The group provided consistent feedback, something I lack when writing solo.

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Chapter 1

It's 1970 and Shah is ten years old, living in (Bombay) Mumbai, India. She walks the busy streets alone, avoiding rickshaws, cars and street vendor carts. Shah's family were killed during the Bombay-Bhiwandi Riots, one month earlier. As a member of the Koli people (indigenous fishermen), she is used to seeing the erasure of her people. The Koli have inhabited the seven islands that make up Mumbai since the Stone Ages; Mahim, Mazagaon, Worli, Colbada, Little Colaba, Parel and Isle of Bombay. As the Indian population grew so did their need for land, it pushed the Koli further away from their ancestral home. Their very dark skin made them targets for racism and classism. Although they were once a ruling agricultural and fishing caste, they were now relegated to a lower sub-caste. Shah remembers her grandparents weaving fishing nets, her parents delivering calves and her uncles playing sitar at sunset. The sounds and smells of a modern Mumbai are overwhelming for Shah, much different from her coastal home.

As Shah walks down an alleyway she discovers a small, pure white Gyr¹ calf with black hooves. The calf's mother is several feet away, hit in a rare car accident and surrounded by police. It's said that when a cow dies in India, everyone mourns it and it's illegal to kill one. Shah comforts the little calf and pets it on the head. The calf gently nudges Shah's hand and bleats. We're both orphans now Shah said. 'I'll call you Pavitr Gaay, or Holy Cow in Hindi.' They have no money, no food and no home; times were looking bleak. As Shah and Pavitr Gaay walk along a quiet street near the alley, people pass by and rub Pavitr Gaay's head for good luck. Shah thinks to herself, 'hmm.' Another person shows up, she says '200 rupees to rub Pavitr Gaay's head and you'll live a long life.' The man obliges and gives her the money. After a few hours Shah has collected enough money for some food.

On their way they encounter a Hindu Temple and are welcomed in with open arms. The monks lay out beautiful blankets and cushions for them to sleep on. There

¹ Traditional Indian Cow breed

is a Gujarati kitchen that feeds temple goers 3 times per day; two large platters are brought out. As news of the Holy Cow spreads more people come daily to see Shah and Pavitr Gaay.

'My mind has gone blank, where am I?' Shah said out loud. As her head nuzzled Pavitr Gaay's warm and damp nose. A monk in a bright orange robe hears Shah and goes to speak with her. He says 'You came here with your calf last night. People are lined up to see you both, rubbing Pavitr Gaay's head for a long life.' Who? Shah said. The monk excused himself, bringing back chai for her and water for the calf. As Shah sipped her tea, she was struggling to remember anything, including family. Pavitr Gaay bleated as Shah stirred and began to cry, licking away her tears. 'Who am I? Where are my parents, grandparents and other family?' Shah said with a shaky voice. The monk leaned over to comfort her, but to no avail. Shah screamed 'I want to go home now!' As big hot tears rolled down her little face. The monk said 'Dear, this is your home for now, let's make the best of it.'

Two monks grabbed the giant wooden doors to the temple, bringing in floods of light, people and heat. Pavitr Gaay turned her head away as people came towards her. Some temple-goers went to pray and others went towards the kitchen. The smells of curry, coriander, turmeric and lentils hung in the air. Shah's stomach began to rumble as she smelled them. She looked at Pavitr Gaay as a group of adults and children sat at their feet. 'What do we do now?' Shah said as she let out a heavy sigh.

Shah's head hurt and all of the temple noise made it worse. She gently rubbed the back of her head, coming across a wet and tender spot. She immediately pulled back her hand and saw blood on her palm. 'I don't remember hitting my head.' Shah said to herself. Her pouch with the rupees she had collected was gone. Although the temple was a safe place, the doors were never locked and police rarely did detailed patrols there. While she and Pavitr Gaay were sleeping the night before, a Hinduvata mercenary hit Shah on the head with the butt of his gun. She had woken up while he was stealing her money and searching for more. The Hinduvata is an extremist Hindu ideology that emerged in the 1920's, still holding strong in 1970. Believing

their brand of Hinduism was the most pure; making it more about politics and less about religion.

Shah was experiencing so much turmoil and it was frightening for her. There wasn't anyone to comfort her. She was among a sea of people in Mumbai. It seemed like the only people who noticed her were those looking to inflict harm. How was she supposed to trust people again? Since the riots, Shah, like many other orphaned children, couldn't imagine a future for herself. Every waking moment was about survival and nothing else. The school she attended for Koli children had been burned down. Members from higher castes didn't want their children intermingling with lower castes; they feared it intensely. Despite that, taking water from the Koli was acceptable. The caste system truly damaged those on the bottom and emboldened those on top. Her very existence was a threat and she knew that. What could she do to change that? Losing her memory made this even harder. It was going to be a steep learning curve. The first step was radically accepting her new reality, which was a lot to ask of a ten year child. Shah's mother, Aarna, which means ocean in Hindi, used to say 'You can't change the wind, but you can choose which direction to walk in.'

Shah looked over at Pavitr Gaay and sighed; hours had gone by and hundreds of people had come to see them. Both were sweaty and exhausted. It made Shah smile that some people had left beautiful flowers and notes, even though they were only for the calf. Any money that was left was collected by the monks to run the temple. Pavitar Gaay was moving her back leg, something was stuck to her hoof. After lifting her hoof, Shah finds a flier on blue paper and the words 'You will be safe here' and an address. She feels confused, yet hopeful and puts the paper in her pocket. 'Okay let's go now.' Shah says to her calf, but as she gets up, the pain from her head injury was too immense. She falls backward onto the floor, passing out, while several monks and women stand over her. Pavitr Gaay steps over her cushion and lies down on Shah's legs. Her big blue eyes filled with worry and she huffs with uncertainty.

The crowd forming around Shah and Pavitr Gaay began to break up as two unusually large and muscular monks stood in front of them. Blocking the public from any more blessings from the calf today. There were some grumblings heard among

the hundreds of people in line. One woman took a red clay statue of Vishnu and smashed it in frustration. 'I've come here on three different buses and spent several hours traveling for what? Nothing!' The middle aged woman, dressed in a tattered yellow sari said. While ranting, this woman bumped into a young man with his eyes following Pavitr Gaay's every move. He then stepped on this woman's foot. It looked as if a fight was imminent, as frustrations among the crowd grew. Unexpectedly, the young man took a deep breath and continued walking towards the front of the temple. He brushed his thick, mopy hair with his hands and approached the two monks standing guard. 'Excuse me, I'm the calf's owner. That girl stole her from me. Well, it's actually my father's...' the young man said with a now shaky voice. The monks looked at each other, then looked at Pavitr Gaay's blue eyes and back at the man. She was very unhappy as Shah lay there. 'What color are the calf's eyes?' The monks asked the young man and he replied hastily 'hazel!' The monks shook their heads in unison and re-assumed their positions with arms crossed, scanning the crowd. The man sighed heavily and walked away defeated.

One woman dressed in western clothing cut through the crowd. She said: 'Someone called me about a patient, I'm a medical student and live next door.' The monks standing guard checked her identification and allowed her to examine Shah. She walked over to examine Shah, amid the stares from the women and monk surrounding the girl. 'I'm Kaya.' The medical student said with a nervous laugh. She lifted her small head, feeling around Shah's blood soaked hair for the injury. Although Shah was unconscious, her body jolted when the wound was touched.

'Why hasn't she been taken to a hospital? Where are her parents or guardians?' The medical student said in a firm, but nervous tone. The monk who had initially interacted with Shah answered 'Well, she came in from the street a few days ago with this calf, who has healing powers. There are still mercenaries that patrol the streets, I believe some broke in last night. The break ins are merely a warning of further violence, should we harbor her any longer. Before she lost her memory, she said that the Bombay-Bhiwandi Riots changed her forever. Normally we would have called the police, but they don't bother investigating violence against people in lower castes.

She is Koli, from a very low caste and life is not easy for them.’ The medical student’s face lost all of its color as she began bandaging Shah’s head. Pavitr Gaay bleated sadly and licked Shah’s hand.

Chapter 2

Kaya finished bandaging up Shah’s head and picked up her little body from the cold marble floor of the temple into a wall of heat. Pavitr Gaay mooed as Kaya moved Shah and put her hoof down to block further movement. ‘Is the cow staying here?’ Kaya asked the monk. The monk nodded his head yes and said ‘Pavitr Gaay will be safe here and we can resume visits from those seeking blessings. Kaya added ‘She’s very attached to this girl and already has a following. Why?’ The monk replied ‘She is a daughter of Kamadhenu, the Hindu bovine goddess who grants people whatever they desire. Kamadhenu is depicted often as a white cow, which makes Pavitr Gaay extra special. Thanks for your help Kaya.’ The calf’s big blue eyes were still locked onto Shah and missing her already.

Kaya brought Shah to her home next door. Home was a series of heavy duty white tents with a Red Cross banner across the front. It was filled with cots, volunteers in red t-shirts, doctors in blue shirts, primitive fans, generators and medical equipment. The tents were separated by floor length vertical sheets of plastic. One side was marked patients and the other staff. Kaya set Shah down on to a cot in the ‘patients’ section and went to grab more bandages from a giant red cabinet marked ‘supplies’. It was locked. She inserted her key into the main latch and it broke off inside the lock. ‘Uh-oh’ Kaya murmured under her breath, as her heart rate was increasing rapidly. She tried her spare master key for emergencies, but it didn’t fit. In fact, it didn’t fit any of the locked cabinets around her. ‘Why is this happening now?!’ Kaya said out loud with an audible quake in her voice, scanning for help from a coworker. An older woman in a red shirt at the far side of the tent makes eye contact with her. She has a kind face with cheerful eyes and many smile lines. ‘I’ve got a kid with a head injury and I can’t open this supply closet now!’ Kaya said. The older woman looked at the lock, took a paperclip, letter opener and was able to dislodge

the broken off key. She then pulled out the lock, opened the cabinet, took a new lock from the back of the cabinet and gave Kaya a new key. 'I'll install this when you're done, it happens all the time. They're not the best quality. Anything else you need?' The older woman asked. 'Yes, could you please hold my patient while I run an I.V. on her? I really appreciate you asking, it's been a tough day.' Kaya replied as she breathed an audible sigh of relief. 'She'll be okay' the older woman said.

Over the next several hours, medications flowed into Shah's veins and she began to rouse. It was dark now and the lights strung through the tents were flickering. 'Where am I?' Shah said as she attempted to sit up. She could see a few cots that were filled with dim figures, but nobody answered. After a few minutes, she asked again. Then, a distant voice in the darkness reached out to her and said 'You're safe.' Shah began touching the back of her bandaged head. The cotton bandages felt cold, sticky and slightly damp. She was frustrated that the voice in the darkness wouldn't answer her any further. Shah was bored and began looking for something to play with. She reached into the pockets on the front of her red salwar kameez, feeling the many holes and a folded up piece of paper. It was the blue flier that had been left for her at the temple with Pavitr Gaay. She couldn't quite remember why she had it. She read the address to herself several times and still nothing. Shah saw Trombay Island listed and it sparked a memory. Trombay Island was where her grandmother and other family members had lived. Shah's eyes became heavy and she began to dream.

Trombay is currently a 'koliwada', government constructed communities where Kolis were segregated from other castes. Several were specifically for Koli fishermen during industrialization. The drought forced her parents to migrate from Trombay to Mumbai in January 1970 and was still ongoing. The rest of her family moved into her grandmother's small concrete home. Some cousins were sucked into crime after being unable to pay back mobster loan sharks that ruled India. Uncles worked on the railroad with other untouchables, like the Marathwada. They were Buddhists from a nearby region, but much less educated and very culturally different.

Shah's father, Darsh was an unskilled laborer in Trombay and ended up getting a job in Mumbai for a wealthy family. Darsh never entered the home though, he cared

for the animals and his family lived in an adjacent barn. There was also a separate water supply for them from an aging well. Shah's mother Aarna was a gifted dancer, but her street performances in Mumbai proved dangerous. The riots broke out 5 months later. The wealthy family's home and property were destroyed after two explosions. Hinduvata mercenaries launched this particular attack, because they believed a Hindu shouldn't live so lavishly or retain a slave. Darsh and Shiva tried running away after the first explosion, but didn't get out fast enough. They were both wounded and unable to walk, but told Shah to run as long as she could and never look back. Shah ran until she hit the busier streets of Mumbai's central district and never looked back. She didn't know what to watch out for yet.

Still dreaming, Shah could hear someone calling out her name in the distance. Her eyes began to open and she saw a white light shining on her. She put her hand over her face to block the light. She felt a bigger but warm hand on her cheek. It was Kaya and the older woman. 'What do you want?' Shah said anxiously. ' We are just doing a quick examination, we won't hurt you.' The older woman said in a calm voice. 'Shah, can you see all right?' Kaya asked. Shah responded 'my vision is a little blurry and my head really hurts.' Shah looked at the older woman and asked, 'You look like me, are we from the same village?' The older woman smiled warmly and said 'you're right dear, we're both Koli, but I haven't seen you around here before. Where are you from? My name is Varna by the way (meaning protector in Hindi).

Shah was smiling from ear to ear. She stumbled over her words and said 'I'm not sure where I'm from. Wait, I have this!' Shah replied as she pulled out the blue flier from her pocket and proudly presented it to Varna. 'For some reason I have this. Look, it says Trombay Island. Are you from there?' Shah said as she clasped both of her hands together, hoping. 'I left Trombay Island probably before you were born, 10 years ago. I come from a family of Koli Weavers.' Varna said. Shah touched Varna's smooth and dark hands with tears forming in her eyes. 'I feel all alone in this world' Shah said through tears. Varna rubbed her back and Shah noticed some pink spots around Varna's eyes. 'What's on your eyes?' Shah asked while pointing at her own eyes. 'Someone threw acid in my face many years ago. My ex-husband to be exact. I

used to wear sunglasses all the time, so I wasn't shunned for my injuries.' Varna said while brushing a tear from her cheek. Shah immediately squeezed Varna's hands and said 'I'm so sorry!'

'Varna you never told me that story. I assumed you had a bad reaction to the skin lightening cream you used to use.' Kaya said with concern in her voice. Varna looked at Kaya with a serious face and put her index finger to her mouth. 'Let's talk about that later Kaya, not in front of patients please.' Varna began to feel flushed after reliving those memories and was ashamed. She didn't want Shah to make the same mistakes she made. Varna was forced to use skin lightening cream by her ex-husband who said she was too dark. Kaya felt guilty about upsetting Varna, so she quickly finished examining Shah, switching out her i.v. bag and re-applying new bandages. 'All good Shah, can I get you anything?' Kaya asked. 'May I please have some mangoes and water?' Shah asked a little more calmly. 'They're my favorite summer fruit, second only to Tadgolas (Ice Apples), which taste like hardened fruit juice. Shah said with a cracked smile. 'Of course, I'll grab those for you and be right back. Please stay with Varna!' Kaya replied and disappeared outside of the tent. Shah turned to Varna and asked 'were you the voice in the darkness?' Varna winked at her and nodded. Both began to giggle and couldn't stop.

'Varna, we needed that big belly laugh!' Shah said through tears of joy. Varna nodded again. Moments later Kaya arrived with three small mangoes and a plastic bottle of water with a red cross label on it. Shah's eyes widened as she licked her lips in anticipation of the sweet and sticky fruit. Kaya ripped a piece of thin doctor roll from an empty cot for Shah to use as a napkin. Before taking her first bite, Shah hugged Kaya tightly and said 'Thank you!' 'It's my pleasure Shah, I'll do my best to get you healed up soon and comfortable while you're here. I know it's not home, but we're here for you.' Kaya said, smiling widely.

Shah took the mango, sunk her teeth into the red and golden skin. She felt euphoric as the soft, stringy flesh enveloped her taste buds. She was so hungry that she cleaned the pit of that mango in under 5 minutes, quickly moving onto the second and third mangoes. By the time she finished, her whole face and both arms up

to her elbows were covered in sticky juice. Shah grabbed the water bottle, which stuck to her hand and ripped apart the label. 'Oops, I messed up this bottle. Am I in trouble?' Shah asked as she looked up at Kaya and Varna. Both adults chuckled and said 'No sweetie, you're not in any trouble.' Shah exhaled as her shoulders moved away from her ears, but feeling less playful now. 'Let's get you cleaned up. Finish the rest of the water and I'll grab some soap.' Varna said as she went over to the big red supply cabinet. 'Well, no more small soaps left, just rubbing alcohol and disinfectant Kaya. I'll clean up Shah and call for more supplies in an hour.' Varna said to Kaya.

'Wait! If my head doesn't get better will I die?' Shah asked in a subdued tone sitting upright in the cot. Kaya crouched down next to Shah and said 'You're going to be okay. I spoke with my boss, who's a doctor and he'll visit you soon. You're safe here.' Kaya said as she held Shah's small hands. Shah asked 'Will I ever get my memory back Kaya?' Kaya responded 'You have a Traumatic Brain Injury. It's normal to be scared. Think about your memory like fireflies in a jar. They light up when they're scared to protect themselves. Our brains are similar, but when injured these signals for what memories need to light up can be scrambled. It's hard, but you must let go of your memory before you can capture it for good. You will get better, but it will be a slow process. We may need to send you to a hospital in Trombay, but the other doctor makes that decision. Shah was feeling pretty anxious now and she asked 'Why?' Kaya answered 'Don't worry Shah. Lie back down and I'm going to give you some medicine to help you sleep.' It was mid-afternoon, but Shah had not slept all night. Pavitr Gaay moode loudly next door in the temple.

Chapter 3

Shah's eyes began to get heavy. She yawned as the medication kicked in. She felt weightless at that moment between being awake and being asleep. It's known as the hypnagogic state. Free from everything that chained her down. She saw herself playing at the beach in a white salwar kameez. Being smiled at. Being seen. Being happy again.

Varna looked over at Kaya and said 'Shh.Look!' Kaya smiled and they both exited the tent. Many of the other patients had been discharged. Only Shah, a young man with two broken legs and a young woman who had hemorrhaging from a failed at-home abortion remained. Kaya and Varna walked towards a path that led to an old mango tree for their break. Kaya pulled out a zippo and a pack of Camels. 'Want one Varna?' Varna nodded her head yes and Kaya lit both cigarettes. Kaya inhaled deeply as the ash fell on her muddied red Converse high top sneakers. She rubbed sweat from her brow with her blue t-shirt. 'Woah, I really needed this break. These few days have been so busy with Shah and the other patients. My heart sinks whenever we're unable to help someone. By the way Varna, I'm very sorry about earlier. I'm an idiot sometimes, but that is no excuse. You were the first person to make me feel welcome here. You're really important to me!' Kaya said as she took another drag. Varna was taking long drags of her cigarette while listening to Kaya. 'Thank you sweetie, people usually don't give me a second thought around here. I still try to be kind to everyone though.' Varna said as she took one last drag and flicked the cigarette butt to the ground.

'Do you know when we're moving to the new site?' What about Shah's calf? I keep hearing her mooing, almost in pain.' Kaya asked. Varna replied 'They are clearly bonded and the calf views Shah as her new mother. Despite Shah not remembering Pavitr Gaay. We're moving sites in three days to Digewadi, almost 200 miles from here. I need to speak with the head monk at the temple. They'll most likely be separated until Shah finishes treatment in Trombay. She'll be picked up tonight and I've been asked to accompany her in a temporary guardian role. Depending on her needs, I may not be able to join you at the new site. This is my 20th year as a volunteer for the Red Cross. I've been considering retirement, but something always comes up.' Kaya's eyes welled up with tears. She gulped and began to feel anxious. Without Varna, she'd be without a confidant, in a country where she didn't know the language. Kaya just couldn't get out of her own head to see Varna's point of view. Varna touched Kaya's shoulder saying 'everything alright?' Startled, Kaya jumped back, caught her breath and said 'Yeah, but I keep thinking

about joining you and Shah. 'Think long and hard about it Kaya. Remember, you can go anywhere you want. Shah and I can't.' Varna said as both of them entered the 'staff' tent.

Kaya looked at Varna with one eyebrow raised and asked 'what do you mean?' Varna replied 'Do you remember what the monk told you about the Kolis and the caste system?' Kaya stopped to think and put her hand on her forehead. 'Oh, about the untouchables and such?' Varna clenched one fist, let out a big sigh and cringed when Kaya said 'and such'. It felt dismissive. 'Well, I think the whole system is unfair. You should be able to do what you want!' Kaya said as she touched Varna's shoulder. 'In the United States, you'd be truly free and Shah could go to school there! Maybe you could live with my parents until you two get a place of your own. If I come with you to Trombay and ditch the next site, we could all fly out together. Depending on how Shah feels of course.' Kaya said breathlessly as she grabbed her green duffle bag, shoving in clothing and chatchkes.

Varna's face was completely serious, almost frozen as she dabbed her brow with a shell pink washcloth. 'Kaya, listen, you're a sweet person, but India is our home. We just got independence from the British. We take the bad with the good and still fight for our rights. There's work to be done. Go change and I will speak with the head monk about Pavitr Gaay. Meet me outside by the old mango tree, we'll watch the sunset and finish this conversation. Shah's transfer is in two hours, no dilly-dallying. We need to grab a few outfits for her from the donation bin next to the red supply cabinet.' Varna said as she waved goodbye.

Varna walks next door to the temple on a slim dirt path with small, jagged rocks on either side. Her bones creaked, begging for rest, but she can't put her feet up yet. She starts to lose her balance and falls forwards into someone, sending them both to the ground. 'I'm so sorry!' Varna said as she got up slowly. 'No problem Varna. You're here to see me, right? The head monk said, 'Yes, we need to discuss an arrangement for Shah and her calf, Pavitr Gaay. Shah and I will be in Trombay for up to six months. While we're gone, I'd like you to please put one third of Pavitr Gaay's donations into a school fund for Shah. Once a week I'll bring Shah here to visit her.

What do you think? Varna said. The head monk inhaled sharply and replied 'Well, I must think about this further. I will give you an answer in due time.' He put his hands together and added 'Namaste.' Varna did the same.

As he walked away Varna said 'Look, Shah and her calf are very special and we both know that.' The head monk turned around and said 'Varna, I agree, but sometimes business is business and one third is a lot for one girl. She's not the only orphan around here and will be married off in a couple of years. You could educate three boys for the same sum.' Varna gave him a disappointed look, saying 'Shah was hurt in this temple by the extremists. Why, because you left the doors unlocked again! You wouldn't have this cash cow, had Shah not found the calf. I'm aware of your gambling debts. I guess I'll have to take Pavitr Gaay with us. Since you and I are not seeing eye to eye.'

The head monk crossed his arms and a vein on his forehead pulsed. He looked over at Pavitr Gaay, then to Varna and said 'Fine, take the calf, not my problem anymore. I don't want the police finding out about this. They'll fine me 600 rupees for failing to lock up, it will be the third ticket this year. Besides, Pavitr Gaay hasn't been too lively without Shah. The amount of visitors has dropped.' Varna smiled as she picked up the little white calf, leaving the temple's silken blankets and cushions behind. Pavitr Gaay rubbed Varna's hand with her warm and damp nose. 'Thanks, we'll be on our way now. Namaste.' Varna said as she walked back down the path. A little more carefully this time. She heard someone yelling from the Red Cross tent, 'Shah is vomiting a lot. Please come!'

Varna rushed to the tent marked 'staff', put Pavitr Gaay on her cot and parted the floor length plastic flaps leading to adjacent tent marked 'patients'. 'Right behind you Varna.' Kaya said as she was surprised to see Pavitr Gaay not at the temple. Varna walked towards the big red supply cabinet and swung the doors open with a *thud*, as they hit the taut sides of the canvas tent. Kaya came through the plastic flaps and said to Varna 'I don't see any vomit. *squish* *squish* Oh no, I just stepped in it!' Kaya was visibly grimacing as it seeped through her red Converse sneakers and white socks. 'It's my fault, I woke up and it just *burp* keeps coming out. I feel

yucky.' Shah said as she began to cry. Shah's faded orange pants and little red *salwar kameez* with shiny silver beads were covered in vomit. Varna closed the supply closet, tossed a spray bottle with disinfectant and a towel to Kaya saying 'Clean your shoes and grab those black work boots from the lost and found. Where's the bag of clothes for Shah?' Kaya replied 'Oh shoot, they're next to my cot, be right back!' 'Alright Shah, put your arms towards the sky and we'll get you cleaned up. It's going to be okay.' Varna said. Moments later Kaya came back with the work boots and clothing, in her bare feet. Varna smiled at Shah, wiping her small cheek with a towel and putting the soiled clothing in a biohazard bag. Then pointing to Kaya's feet, saying 'Forgot something? All of the doctors I know wear shoes.' Kaya laughed and said 'Oops!' Varna began to giggle and even Shah wiped away some tears to laugh.

The sun was disappearing into the horizon as it melted from yellow to orange to gold to red to purple and finally black. Flooding the tent each time with color. The temperature plummeted quickly and Shah began to shiver. Kaya finished putting on the boots and ran over to Shah with a plastic bag of assorted clothes. Varna pulled out a large blue polo shirt, a pair of gray children's sweatpants several sizes too big and a black cardigan that went past her knees. 'These will have to do for now. The hospital in Trombay usually has more donations for children from local aunties and mothers.' Varna said as she buttoned up the cardigan for Shah. The Red Cross van was approaching *vroom* *beep* *beep*. The bright white headlights were blinding when the van stopped a few feet away from the tents. 'Time to go.' Kaya said as she checked Shah's bandages. 'I don't want to go, I just got here and I'm not better yet. I'm scared!' Shah screamed and held up her little index finger waving it back and forth 'no'. Varna picked up Shah from the cot and brought her to the van. She placed her across a row of seats that was facing the back doors, instead of the front. Covering her with a green blanket. Kaya got into the van with a first aid kit, some medications for Shah and two green duffle bags. 'We're good to go. Please give this letter and key to my supervisor Dr. Patel.' Kaya said to the young male volunteer, who was just starting his first shift with the Red Cross. 'Okay, see you!' He said anxiously, watching them drive away.

Chapter 4

'I see you've made your decision Kaya.' Varna said with a grin. Kaya opened up one of the green duffle bags to reveal that adorable little white calf with ebony hooves, Pavitr Gaay. Shah gasped and said quietly 'I can't believe you're all here for me, I love you.' Pavitr Gaay poked out half of her head and one hoof, resting them on Shah's outstretched arm. They all looked at each other in silent awe as the van traversed its way through bumpy roads on the way to Trombay. A teenage boy with mopy hair was following them on a blue bicycle. 'I think I've seen that boy before. It must be a coincidence.' Varna said to herself.

The van made a series of sharp right turns down narrow alleyways, trying to avoid traffic. So close that the driver could've pulled off someone's front door. All of this jerking around made Shah feel nauseous again. She shut her eyes tightly. Trying not to vomit. A car swerved in front of the van and the driver slammed on the brakes. Everyone in the van slid forward and then snapped back. 'What a *moorkh* (fool in Hindi), get out of the road already!' The van driver yelled. Trombay was only a 25 minute drive from Mumbai, but the traffic made it take upwards of an hour or more. Cows crossing the road, motorcycles, Tata trucks, Mahita Jeeps, rickshaws, bicycles and people on foot all meet to fight their way through the tightly packed and unpaved roads. 'I need to open the back doors, unless you want to have vomit everywhere.' The van was stopped in a traffic jam, Varna opened the doors as Shah began to dry heave. There were bright headlights as far as the eye could see. A chorus of shouting, singing, car horns and groaning livestock grew louder, the longer the traffic continued. Shah could smell the car exhaust, gasoline, manure and street food. 'If I wasn't feeling so yucky, I'd eat five chapatis with mango chutney.' Varna smiled and said 'We'll get you some soon.' As she shut the back doors, the van became dark, stuffy and quiet. There were only four windows in the van. Two windows in the back were blacked out with spray paint and didn't open. Pavitr Gaay poked out her head, licked Shah's hand and bleated quietly. Kaya rubbed the calf's ears and said 'Shh!' Luckily, the ambient noise from the outside seemed to drown it

out. 'Are traffic jams always so bad here?' Kaya asked Varna. 'Yes, especially since the droughts, which have brought in a huge influx of people.' The government has promised to build highways, like in the western world, but no action has been taken yet.' Varna replied.

After a grueling hour of driving, the van reached Trombay. A large sign on a metal post said: 'Dalits Only'. *Dalit* describes members of the lower castes. The smells of sulfur, garbage and coal hung in the air like a thick blanket. The tanneries, landfills, railroads, slaughterhouses and refineries had been moved to Trombay. In an attempt to shield the higher castes from the smells and pollution. Which in turn, greatly affected the health of those living there, giving it the name *Gas Chembur*. 'You're going to have to walk, I'm not allowed on these premises.' The driver said. A light skinned security guard motioned for the van to move back. Kaya gathered up the two large duffle bags and Varna carefully picked up Shah, as they disembarked onto the arid road. 'Thank you so much.' Varna said as she tapped the back of the van. 'It's 10 miles away and uphill.' Varna said as she sighed. After passing by the towering security guard and razor wire fences. Kaya took Pavitr Gaay out of the bag and put a piece of rope around her neck as a makeshift leash. Shah pointed to Pavitr Gaay, so Varna knelt down and the calf licked her face. Shah giggled and asked Varna 'Are we there yet?' 'We'll be there soon, it's okay.' Varna briefly turned around and saw the boy with the mopyy hair and blue bicycle again. He was staring at Shah and Pavitr Gaay. When he made eye contact with Varna, he pretended to fix his bike chain. 'Wait a second. I saw that boy outside the temple. Is he following us?' Kaya said as she rubbed her temple. 'Let's pick up the pace Kaya. I can't imagine what he wants.' Varna said as she glared at his gawkish frame.

Pavitr Gaay was having fun on her leash, bathed in moonlight and finding little rocks to kick. Every so often needing a gentle tug to keep up. The giant silos of the Bhabha Atomic Research facility's lights could be seen in the distance. Along with rows and rows of *bastis*² on the outskirts of the concrete buildings Shah, Varna and Kaya were passing. After what seemed like forever, they reached Trombay Hospital

² Settlements for Dalit workers

and sat down to rest. 'This will be my first time in an Indian hospital.' Kaya said. 'Well, this will be a learning experience for you Kaya. You must listen until you hear. There will be many people that you want to save. You can't. You're only here for Shah right now.'

It was pitch black outside by the time they entered the building. Upon entry, Kaya was shocked to see the open wards of languishing patients, some with open wounds. A severely malnourished child grabbed her arm and said 'Please help me' with his deeply sunken cheeks and eyes. 'I'll get the doctor, okay?' Kaya said as she squeezed the little boy's hands. The noise was too much for Shah and she began crying. Kaya picked up Pavitr Gaay for Shah to pet her. Like Sion Hospital in Mumbai, there was no electricity or running water. The concrete floors were cracked and stained with blood. The same water was used to bath multiple patients. There was minimal funding sent to these facilities and they heavily relied on the support of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Varna flagged down an orderly asking 'Where are the doctors? This child has a traumatic brain injury!' The orderly silently pointed to a short, young woman in a white coat. 'Hi I'm Kaya, a medical student. Um...' She stumbled over her words this time. 'This is Shah and she has head trauma. I've stopped the bleeding, but she needs new bandages and fluids. She has severe memory loss, no concussion and rapidly shifting moods. Kaya said. The young doctor stretched out her hand to Kaya and said 'Nice to meet you, I'm Dr. Armida Fernandez.' She took Shah to the end of the hallway for a free space to examine her. After a few minutes, Dr. Fernandez said to Varna and Kaya 'Shah is in good health, despite her memory loss and headache. She said that the little white calf's spit made her nausea go away. There could be an enzyme in the saliva that has some benefit. Gir cows have a vein in their hump that has real healing properties. Exposure to sunlight results in gold salts, which travel throughout the cow's bloodstream, through secretions and waste.' 'Wow, I had no idea, so cool!' Kaya exclaimed.

Shah was still crying after the examination and rushed to hug Pavitr Gaay. After their embrace, Pavitr Gaay's little chambered stomach began to growl loudly. 'Let's

get you all some food.’ Dr. Fernandez said. Varna and Kaya followed with their belongings, The five of them walked down dim hallways and up two flights of wooden stairs. Dr. Fernandez held Shah’s hand and then abruptly stopped. Shah’s head wound was bleeding again. ‘I really don’t feel good’ Shah cried, as she put her head in her hands. Dr. Fernandez swung open the stairway door saying to a nurse ‘We need a *trolley* over here.’ Shah was then promptly wheeled away. The hospital kitchen was closed, but a few covered plates of lentils with rice and golden curry were untouched. ‘I’ll keep you updated. I am concerned though.’ Dr. Fernandez said to Varna and Kaya. As the doctor rushed towards the disappearing *trolley*, she added ‘There’s a bottle of Gyr milk for Pavitr Gaay, it’s in the ice bucket behind you.’

Varna grabbed the food and milk, sitting on a thick faded blue rubber mat with Kaya. It was 3am by then, as they dozed off while eating. The bright white moon shone through large windows with the stars twinkling. They were the backdrop to this infinite celestial dream world. A world where Shah could once again enjoy the moonlight without wincing in pain. Pavitr Gaay finished her milk and curled up next to the two adults. They all fell sound asleep, until they were awoken by Dr. Fernandez gently touching Varna’s shoulder. Now, the sun was just rising and slowly illuminating the darkened hospital, back to reality. ‘Shah had a brief seizure. She’s sedated, but needs surgery to release pressure on her brain. Kaya please fill this large metal basin with water from the well outside. We need to boil water to sterilize surgical tools. It’s technically against the rules, because of the drought. But, Shah could easily die from an infection.’ Dr. Fernandez said as she briefly sat down to catch her breath. ‘Can I get you anything doctor?’ Varna asked. The doctor replied ‘No thanks. After surgery I need to head back to Silo Hospital, I was just here filling in for a colleague. I’d like for Kaya to observe the surgery, so she can learn.’ Kaya bolted down the stairs. Varna nodded and pulled out the blue flier she took out of Shah’s soiled clothing. She studied the address and pensively looked out a window. After about thirty minutes Kaya came back huffing and puffing with the water with some splashing on the floor. The concrete almost drank it up. The water was a bit murky. Dr. Fernandez grabbed a handle on the basin, Kaya grabbed the other handle,

as they carefully went downstairs. 'Kaya, while you're shadowing Dr. Fernandez, Pavitr Gaay and I need to track down this address. See you in two hours and do not leave Shah's side while she's waking up. She'll be scared.'

Chapter 5

As Varna and the calf exited the hospital, Varna asked a towering male orderly for directions. 'Do you know where this is?' As she pointed to the flier. 'That's not too far from here. Make two lefts and a right, it should be behind the Welfare Center.' He said. 'Thank you!' Varna replied with a toothy grin. Varna and Pavitr Gaay began walking past cow skeletons, abandoned *jhopadas* (huts) and arid lots that used to be fertile farmland. Varna felt that she was being followed. A man on crutches with a missing leg, a young Koli woman with an eye patch and the boy with the blue bicycle were all trailing behind. Pavitr Gaay pulled away, trying to greet these people. Varna turned around and asked 'Can we help you?' 'That's the holy cow from Mumbai, right? I need blessings from her.' The Koli woman pleaded. 'Me too.' The man replied. Pavitr Gaay bleated. 'What about you, why do you keep popping up?' Varna asked the boy with the blue bicycle, who was no more than 14. He said 'I'm here to kill the little girl and take that calf. My father killed her parents and their masters, she is the only living witness. We've been searching for her for 6 months and we won't stop. I share in my father's Hinduvata beliefs. I'm captain of their youth core and an expert marksman. I never miss a shot. It's an even exchange, get the girl right now and nobody gets hurt! The boy brushed back his mopy hair and pulled a small silver pistol from his pocket. He pointed it directly at Varna and Pavitr Gaay. The man on crutches attempted to flee, but the boy shot him twice in the heart. Two security officers rushed over, but the boy raced away on his bicycle.

Varna and Pavitr Gaay ran inside the nearby Welfare Center. It was currently set up as a *vyayamshala* or gymnasium. Children were running around with cricket sticks, balls and all sorts of toys. Their noise had covered the sound of the shots. Varna was feeling flushed and Pavitr Gaay was shaking. 'Want to play *carrom* (Indian

board game) with us?' A small girl in a bright pink salwar kameez and worn out sandals asked. 'I wish I could, but I must be on my way.' Varna said breathlessly. She grabbed Pavitr Gaay and left. They approached a small concrete home bearing an iron spider on the door. Varna checked the address and this was it. Koli means spider in Hindi, a nod to their fishing nets that catch prey. Varna knocked at the door and asked 'Is anyone here?'. A slot at the top of the door opened. 'Who sent you here?' A woman with brown eyes asked through the slot. Varna presented the blue flier and pointed downwards to Pavitr Gaay. The thick aluminum and wooden door was opened and a portly woman pulled them inside and engaged the locks immediately. 'Are you Shah's legal guardian?' The portly woman asked. Varna replied 'Yes I am, Shah is having surgery right now and may need long term treatment for her brain injury. We're hoping to raise money by touring with Pavitr Gaay. And you are?' 'We're part of the *Shanti Sena*, or Indian Peace Brigade. Our branch specifically helps Koli children affected by the Bhiwandi Riots.

The portly woman with brown eyes asked Varna and Pavitr Gaay to sit on large gray cushions. There were beautiful, handwoven, floor length tapestries that covered each wall and hid the iron window gates. The tapestry behind the gray cushions had a blue background with embroidered yellow, green and gold fish, surrounded by ornate red swirls. 'I'm Shiva, the leader of this Peace Brigade chapter.' The brown eyed woman announced, pointing to a tall and thin woman saying 'Please prepare some chai for Varna.' The thin frame disappeared into the small kitchen, putting an old iron tea kettle onto a single gas flame. 'These tapestries are lovely, they remind me of the ones I made with my great -greatgrandmother here many years ago. My great-grandmother lived to be 106 years old, living through the entirety of the occupation and *Svatantratā divasa*³. Her thumbs were deformed the remainder of her life after the British broke the thumbs of weavers. She never allowed those injuries to define her.' Varna said. Both she and Shiva briefly looked at the floor.

'While you wait for your chai, follow me to the basement. You can leave Pavitr Gaay up here.' Shiva said as she motioned to the thin woman in the kitchen. With

that, Pavitr Gaay looked around, placed her little white head on a red pillow with silver beads and fell asleep; exhaling deeply from her soft ebony nose. Her body began glowing, putting out a very calming energy.

Shiva went behind the calf and slid aside the tapestry to reveal a seemingly blank wall. She removed four white wall plugs and unscrewed the bolts underneath. Pulling back the eight foot by eight foot wall and unlocking the aluminum door behind it. Shiva fumbled in the dark trying to find a light. After carefully going down the twenty or so concrete steps, Shiva reached up and pulled a chain, illuminating the cool basement. There were rows of wooden shelves holding canned goods, tea, dried fruit, spices, nuts, basmati rice, dried fish and flour lined the perimeter. Along with two dozen beige military water jugs. There were boxes of clothing, shoes and toys that were stacked to the ceiling. Several bullet proof vests were resting on a cot. Varna was speechless seeing this massive private cache of supplies. Those living in Koliwadas couldn't even afford dried fish, so this was really something. Shiva handed Varna a large cloth bag and said 'Let's get Shah some supplies, take your pick.' Varna went around and filled the bag. Shiva looked at Varna's ripped Red Cross shirt and pursed her lips. 'Grab a few things for yourself too! We'll be getting more donations next month.' Shiva said. After Varna finished filling up a second cloth bag, they both went up the stairs with Shiva turning out the light. 'I can't thank you enough Shiva!' Varna said. 'Even carers need to be cared for sometimes.' Shiva replied. As they exited the basement and put the wall back together, the kettle began to whistle. Varna put down the bags and grabbed a white mug from the kitchen counter. Sitting back on the gray cushions with Pavitr Gaay and her chai. Notes of nutmeg and cinnamon swirled around her nostrils as she took a few satisfying sips.

'Shah can stay here as long as she needs, there are two bedrooms on the second floor and two beneath the floorboards. We're aware of the threat Shah is facing and this house is secure. We've hired three social brokers for 24/7 security. They are Dalits who have trained with the American Black Panthers, hoping to form their own version of the organization in the coming years. They are only asking for our votes in next year's election and some supplies. As you know, some have described these

brokers as 'Professional manipulators of the poor', but these men seem genuine in their commitment to bringing people out of poverty.

There are two other Koli girls staying here already. They're both about Shah's age and regularly play at the welfare center. They are there now.' Shiva said, pouring herself some chai. 'Who built this house?' Varna asked. 'This used to be our home. My late husband built the second floor with my son in-law for our daughter's family. The three of them died from radiation poisoning from handling raw material, while working at the Bhabha Atomic Research Facility. The government covered it up by giving death settlements in part cash and part community funds. The majority of the money was in a government account that could only be withdrawn by a certified NGO within India. I spent nearly all of my own money on establishing this chapter. The basement and other bedrooms were built by Sikh members of the Peace Brigade. Shiva said. Varna looked at her watch and said 'I have to pick up Shah, her surgery should be wrapping up soon.' 'Should I leave Pavitr Gaay here? She's still sleeping.' 'We'd be honored to watch her.' Shiva said.

Varna pulled back the door slot to see if the coast was clear. She only saw the dried pool of blood where the man once stood, his crutches tangled with tree remnants and a shell casing. Varna ran towards the hospital, pausing a few times to rest. She finally reached her destination, dripping with sweat from the morning heat. She saw Dr. Armida Fernandez leaving, asking her 'How did it go?' 'The surgery was a success and she will be discharged soon.' Dr. Fernandez said while chewing on an ice apple. They hugged and Varna went up to the second floor. At the end of the hallway was Shah on a *trolley* with Kaya standing next to her. 'Are you ready to go home Shah?' Varna asked as Shah's heavy eyes opened and she nodded. 'Did someone give me a haircut?' Shah asked as she felt her bare neck, where her long braid once was. 'Yes I did, dear. I can't believe you remembered that.' Kaya replied. The three of them laughed.

Chapter 6

After a few hours, Varna, Shah and Kaya left the hospital. Shah moaned and tightly shut her eyes, as the blinding midday sun shone. 'Come here Shah, you can

ride on my back and I'll put this over your eyes.' Kaya said as she affixed a dark blue bandana with a white paisley design over Shah's small and sunken eyes. Shah could smell dried sweat and tobacco on the bandana as she sucked her thumb. A habit she had stopped when she was 6, because a boy at school told her 'only babies suck their thumbs!' That memory and many others were lost or inaccessible to her now. As they walked, Varna could see some storm clouds in the distance. Despite the drought, the monsoon season was still coming, albeit later and lighter this year. 'Are you ready to collect some rain water when the storm comes tonight? It won't be much, but every bit counts. You can't drink the ground water here. It's contaminated from the industrial sludge. Children now have to walk up to eight miles to reach the fresh, but rationed water.' Varna said as they passed the Welfare Center. Kaya paused and replied 'Uh, sure. Sorry I'm a little distracted.' Finally, they reached the house with the iron spider on the door. Varna knocked on the door and saw Shiva's brown eyes through the door slot. The door opened slowly, but Shiva stopped Kaya from entering.

'Come here sweet Shah. You're safe now.' Shiva said as she tried taking Shah from Kaya's arms. Shah cried 'Stop!' Shiva looked Kaya up and down, saying 'Sorry, I can't have you in my house. This area is still very segregated. Anything that happens to a lighter skinned person will be squarely blamed on us *Dalits*.' Varna was half shocked, but could remember when a Koli man in this area was jailed when his Westerner dinner guest fell ill. Kaya wiped sweat from her brow and was caught off guard. 'I was allowed at the hospital.' Kaya protested. 'That's different.' Shiva hissed. 'Well Varna, now would be a good time to tell you that my visa and passport are expired. That's why I've been distracted today.' Kaya said as she rubbed her sunburnt neck. 'See Varna, see how I can smell trouble a mile away!' Shiva said. Pavitr Gaay quietly got up from her cushion to see what all of the fuss was about. She nudged Shah's hand and Shah kissed her smooth ebony nose. 'Kaya has to stay with us!' Shah said as she stamped her feet on the dry and crusty ground. 'Why didn't you take care of this two weeks ago when Dr. Patel asked you to?' Varna asked Kaya sternly. Shah looked up at the towering adults, not understanding what the problem

was. 'That was the day Shah came to us. My mom told me to call her attorney when I wanted to leave the country. If I couldn't get him, I would have to pay a bribe to the immigration clerk and fly standby on one of my mother's company jets. Her company owns part of the railroad here.' Varna and Shiva rolled their eyes and then looked at each other. Pavitr Gaay and Shah walked over to Kaya and hugged her. Through tears Kaya hugged them back tightly. 'Look, I appreciate what you've done for Shah. I can tell you've become close. I can give you some food, water and directions to the American embassy in Mumbai. Anything more and I risk losing my funding.' Shiva said as she helped Kaya up. Shah reached her arms up in the air and Varna carried her into the house with Pavitr Gaay right behind them.

Shiva disappeared into the kitchen, grabbing a small plastic bag, putting in nuts, two mangoes, a Coke bottle with water in it and a paper cup with cold chai. Shiva presented Kaya with the bag with her lips pursed in a held back smile. 'Thank you so much, I really appreciate your kindness. Give me five minutes to rest and I'll get going.' Kaya replied.

Varna sat with Shah in the front room with some crayons and paper. Shah took the folded blue flier that brought her from Mumbai to Trombay and tore it in half. Shah thought for a moment and asked Varna 'I don't remember how to spell my name. But I can talk okay, why?' Varna gently said S-h-a-h.' Shah scribbled S-a-h. Frustrated, she asked Varna again. 'It's okay Shah, let's try again.' Shah wrote her name correctly this time with Varna guiding her, adding a heart and a little cow. 'Great job!' Varna said as she flipped over the flier and wrote the home's address. 'Hurry, before she leaves!' Shah said as she grabbed Varna's hand and they headed outside. 'Here, don't forget us!' Shah said as she proudly presented it to Kaya. Kaya's eyes welled up as she said 'I knew that this wasn't forever, but I'll still miss all of you so much.' Varna, Kaya, Shah and Pavitr Gaay all hugged one more time. 'Don't forget to write!' Varna said as she smiled and shook her head. 'Once you reach the gates, walk half a mile to the red bus and take it to the last stop. The embassy is a big stone building with an American flag, you can't miss it.' Shiva said as she waved goodbye. Pavitr gaay bleated as Kaya started on her ten mile journey to the gates of this

segregated Koliwada. Kaya thought she had a better understanding of what Varna meant when she said that Kaya, as a western person, could go anywhere she wanted. She got a taste of what being restricted was like. She carefully put that little piece of paper in her wallet and picked up her pace.

Varna, Shah and Shiva went back into the cool house after Kaya disappeared from view. Moments later, the thin framed woman came back with the other girls and headed to the kitchen silently. They both giggled nervously. One girl had an eye patch with two long braids and a crooked front tooth. The other had one long braid and was missing three fingers on her left hand. In unison they said 'Hi Shah!' Pavitr Gaay and Shah backed away and gave them severe side eye. Shah waved with a half smile. 'Okay girls, go wash up. Lunch will be served in twenty minutes.' The thin framed woman said as she stirred a large pot of chicken masala. It had been slowly cooking in the iron pot for hours. The smells of garlic, turmeric, ginger, red chili powder and bay leaves swirled around the front room. Shah ran to the kitchen after a few whiffs and began dry heaving at the sink. Too embarrassed to look at anyone, Shah read the label of a box of Parle-G biscuits on the counter. The address on the label said East Mumbai. It was the staple of every Indian household since Parle's founding in 1928 by Vijay Chauhan. A converted cattle shed was their first store front. Varna said to Shah 'Why don't you take a little nap with Pavitr Gaay and we'll keep a plate warm for you?' Shah looked down and replied 'I'm sorry, my head is making me feel icky again.' Varna took Shah's hand and led her towards the bedrooms on the second floor. Pavitr Gaay balked at the stairs, then cautiously put her front hooves on the first step. She slipped when it was time for the back hooves, but was able to maintain her balance. Halfway up she stopped again and Varna gently guided her up until they reached the landing. Three thin mattresses were laid on the floor with dark red sheets and pillows. Taped to the wall was a poster of the Hindu bovine goddess Kamadhenu. Shah cuddled up with Pavitr Gaay as a light breeze blew in from the slightly open window. They both drifted off to sleep before Varna made it downstairs.

After a few hours, Shah woke up with the calf's head on her shoulder. It was now dark. Shah got up, feeling a little better and exited the room. Pavitr Gaay then rolled over and woke up. She walked towards the stairs and laid down in protest. Going down looked a lot scarier than going up the stairs for the calf.. 'Come on, aren't you hungry?' Shah said as she rubbed Pavitr Gaay's ear. 'Varna can you come help, please?' Shah shouted down the stairs. Varna came and guided them both down. The thin framed woman presented a plate to Shah. Then she poured some milk in a bowl with a plate of rice for the calf. They ate silently next to the two girls, who were making flower garlands with Shiva. 'Where are you from?' One of them asked Shah. 'I don't remember.' Shah replied as a tear ran down her face. 'Shah is Koli like us and we need to help her remember.' Varna said. 'We're getting ready for Diwali!' The girl with the eyepatch exclaimed. 'The Hindu festival of lights is very important. It's when we women perform the traditional Koli folk dance. It is very fun and was created by our foremothers. The rhythm is based on the ebbs and flows of the sea, which gives us life.' Shiva told the girls and then added 'We can't forget these and wear them with pride!' Pulling out seven *Koli Topis*, a traditional koli cap made from red cloth with two blue stripes, two triangle ears and a pom-pom in the middle. Everyone took their cap and Shah put one on Pavitr Gaay. Varna attached a little bell to a red ribbon, loosely tying it around the calf's neck. Thunder snapped and cracked outside as the storm came overhead. Not a single drop of rain fell, just a lot of noise and hot air. Shah was feeling less anxious, even happy at that moment, despite her splitting headache. 'People from Punjab to Maharashtra and those from higher castes perform our dance. Although it really pains them to treat us as equals. Our president presented it proudly to foreign dignitaries without recognizing our communities once. Always be proud of who you are, girls, even when someone refuses to say your name.' Shiva said passionately.

Shah began to feel nauseous again as she burped and put her wrist over her mouth. Pavitr Gaay licked her hand several times. The nausea subsided after a while, as it had in the hospital from the holy calf's saliva. 'Can I pet her?' The girl with the single braid asked. 'Okay, but be gentle!' Shah replied, as Pavitr Gaay sniffed the

girl's left palm, which still had an open sore from the bomb blast that took her fingers. Pavitr Gaay licked the sore. Pavitr Gaay playfully bleated as everyone took turns slowly rubbing her head and little stumps that would become horns. As the night progressed, it was bedtime for the girls and meeting time for the adults.

Chapter 7

After the children were put to bed there was a heavy knock on the door. Shiva waited until the second knock and then opened the door slot. She saw a man all clad in black, wearing a beret with an Indian flag pin and carrying a wooden rifle on the other side of the door. 'Can I help you?' Shiva asked. The man replied in a serious tone 'Yes Madam, I'm one of the security guards.' 'Oh okay. Do you want a cup of chai?' Shiva asked. 'No thank you, but can I see Shah and the holy calf? I heard about her from my brother in Mumbai.' He responded. 'Please tell anyone coming for blessings that she'll be available at 7 am tomorrow morning. You can see them after your shift, but tell no one. Thank you.' Shiva said as she slowly closed the door slot.

The security guard reached into his cargo pocket the moment Shiva was gone. He carefully lit it with a matchbox that said *See Jawab* at Imperial. A movie from 1970 possibly in the area of Mumbai. He had another matchbox in his pocket with a delicate cashew illustration. Most matchboxes in India bore beautiful portraits and flowers and so on, but most were imported from countries like Sweden and Japan. He inhaled deeply and then coughed. He was thinking about what a sweet deal he'd hatched with the boy on the blue bicycle on his way to work that night. The plan was to chloroform the calf and high tail it back to the boy. The boy's father would swoop in and kill Shah while the security guard was busy. It went against his training from the visiting American Black Panther, but he was desperate for a quick windfall. He was promised 100 rupees, a large sum. Except the rupee had lost nearly all of its value since 1958. He lived in a cramped jhopada with seven other people and the drought made hygiene very difficult.

'Who was that?' Varna asked. 'It was the security guard. Please tell the girls to go back to sleep. I heard two little sets of footsteps on the stairs. Shiva replied with a

smile. Shah had not left her bed. She and Pavitr Gaay were both gently snoring. Shah was dreaming about two men playing sitar and tabla on a beach. They seemed vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place them. She went over to the orange gourd sitar, plucked a string and it buzzed. The men had distorted faces and wouldn't speak. Shah smiled and said in her sleep 'I love that sound!' Varna laughed, it warmed her heart seeing Shah so relaxed. 'Why is that man downstairs?' The girl with the eyepatch, Riya asked. 'He's here to protect us.' Varna said as she tussled Riya's now unbraided and wavy hair.' Varna waited for a minute or two at the door frame until everyone was asleep. She was ready to sleep herself. The second bedroom on the floor had a similar setup, except the sheets and pillows were faded dandelion yellow. Varna laid down for what seemed like a few minutes and suddenly it was the wee hours of the morning. She felt a small finger poking here on the cheek. It was Shah and she asked. 'Varna, can you come back to our room? One of the girls feels weird.' Varna took Shah's small hand as they entered the room. 'You were talking in your sleep last night, do you remember?' 'Nope!' Shah replied. The girl with the missing fingers, Avina, was staring at the wound on her left hand. It had formed a thick scab several hours after Pavitr Gaay had licked it. 'That cow really is special, look!' Avina said as she proudly showed Varna, Shah and Riya. Varna and Shah looked at each other and grinned.

Avina sighed, looking behind the tapestry and window bars into the near darkness. A line of figures is beginning to form. They slowly shuffle and stop every few feet. Their destination? A mere twenty feet away from that window. They were eagerly awaiting blessings and healings from the calf. Crowds made Avina tense. Six months earlier, tensions between Muslims and Hindus were at a boiling point, as the Bhiwandi Riots began. Avina and her family were coming out of a Hindu temple and a nearby mosque was attacked in Mumbai. Hundreds of people ran in all directions. Caught in the crossfire, Avina lost her eye and both parents. Like Shah, she was told to run and not look back. The silver bangle that had been given to her by her father that day remained on her wrist unharmed. She was now nervously rubbing it as the crowd grew. 'It's okay.' Shah said to Avina, as she could sense her unease and hugged

her. That was Shah's true gift, her instincts. When you lose everything as these children had, instinct is what enables you to survive.

'How do you feel?' Varna asked Shah. 'I'm okay, kinda.' Shah said as she shut her eyes and winced in pain. 'Let's do your breathing and I'll give you one big capsule the doctor gave you. You'll feel better soon.' Varna replied. The treatment for traumatic brain injuries was limited to hyperventilation and barbiturates. The fast breathing made her dizzy, the pill made her feel slow and fuzzy around the edges. However, at last the pain in her head was dulled and she didn't have time to fret over the anxious crowd outside. The sun had risen at that point and Pavitr Gaay woke herself up by passing gas pretty loudly. That little calf, no bigger than a goat, cleared that room faster than a swarm of mosquitos. The children carefully made their way downstairs for breakfast. The sweet smell of tamarind paste filled the house. A few plates, a platter of *Puran*⁴ with rice and a stack of papers with words to a song (a prayer for the sea) on the table. Shiva waved at the sleepy girls, pointing to the table. 'Each of you take one. Avina, can you start us off please? We'll be going to the ocean later today to sing this song with some other families and learn our dance.' Shiva said as she finished folding red and gold saris, placing them in a box underneath the flower garlands.

Rat-a-tat-tat Shiva opened the door slot and saw the black boots of the security guard. 'Yes? We still have one hour before we attend to the visitors.' Shiva said. 'Please open the door madam. I must get a drink of water. I am so parched.' He replied. 'I will bring you some water, one moment.' Shiva said as she closed the door slot and motioned for Avina to begin singing. She took a blue cup from the counter. After filling it from a beige gallon jug. Shiva shut the door behind her and delivered the water. 'Thank you so much. Where is the calf? Is it okay?' The security guard asked as water dripped from his waxy mustache. Shiva scanned the ground around her and the security guard. She saw cigarette butts and a small bottle with a skull and crossbones on it, empty and missing its cork top. She pretended not to notice and asked 'Would you like to see her now instead? We'll be too busy later.' He nearly

⁴ Sweet Flatbread

choked on his water as he nodded at Shiva. His eyes widened and his heart skipped a beat. 'This is it! Don't mess it up!' He said to himself. Shiva took back the blue cup and led him inside. Shiva hung up his rifle on a nail near the front door. The thin framed woman stood guard over it as the girls continued to sing. Shah was struggling, the sounds from both inside and outside distracted her, impacting her auditory processing. Shiva and the guard stopped at the top of the stairs. Shiva asked 'Varna, I have a guest for Pavitr Gaay. Is she ready?' Varna walked outside with Pavitr Gaay as her little white ears flopped from side to side. The security guard had a white handkerchief soaked with chloroform with the dry side hanging from his back pocket. He left little droplets on the concrete stairs. His left hand reached back to grab it, when Shiva said 'If you can get Pavitr Gaay down the stairs, then you can have your visit with her'. He sighed and said 'No problem. I was around cows as a child.' He looked at the outstretched calf and said 'Go! Okay...Go now!' She looked back at him with her big blue eyes and huffed. He then tried picking her up, but she wriggled and made herself flat like *chapati* on the floor. He then tried pulling her by her back legs. She promptly pooped all over his hands. 'Are you sure you don't want to try again?' Shiva asked him. 'No thanks, I've seen and smelled enough for today. I'll be outside.' He replied as he slyly attempted to put some of the holy calf's saliva in an empty glass bottle, as a souvenir of sorts. 'Put the bottle down.' Varna said sternly. He placed it back on the floor, trading it for a damp towel and headed downstairs disappointed.

Chapter 8

The security guard grabbed his rifle from the hook and closed the door behind him. The girls stopped singing and finished eating their breakfast in silence. Shiva handed Shah a folded, red salwar kameez, it had a faint scent of washing powder. Shah went to a bedroom adjacent to the kitchen to change. 'Do you want my help?' Varna asked. 'No thanks, I'm a big girl!' Shah replied. Pavitr Gaay got up from her cushion and followed Shah. The door was partially closed when Shah peeled off the dusty, sweaty polo shirt and the calf startled her. 'I'm not done yet Varna, please give me a minute!' Shah said as she crossed her arms around her chest. Pavitr Gaay

playfully headbutted Shah's bare back with her damp ebony nose. 'Oh, it's just you, my little cow!' Shah said as her heart rate slowed. She finished getting dressed and brushed the top of her short hair forward. Shah took Pavitr Gaay's head in her hands and whispered 'Get ready for our visitors. As long as we're together, we'll be okay!' Shah inhaled deeply and walked back to the front room with Pavitr Gaay.

Avina and Raja were helping Shiva select a few conch shells to go into the box for the trip later on that day. 'Shah, you can hear the ocean and make music with these shells!' Avina said. Shah took one of the shells with her right hand. It felt smooth on the inside, rough on the outside and the corkscrew shaped top felt like little mountain tops. Shah put it to her ear and could hear a whooshing sound like crashing waves. Shah closed her eyes briefly and allowed the peaceful whooshing to wash over her. Then she blew air into the shell, no sound came out though. 'Here, let me show you how.' Avina told Shah with a toothy grin. Avina took the shell, formed her lips into a circle and blew. Two trumpet-like noises came out. Shah tried a few times and eventually got it. 'What beautiful sounds!' Shah replied to Avina, who nodded her head in agreement. 'Alright Shah and Pavitr Gaay, it's time.' Varna said. 'How long will we be outside Varna?' Shah asked. 'Only a few hours, then we'll have lunch and go to the beach for the ceremony.' Varna replied.

Varna opened the door to see at least one hundred people in line. Shah said to herself 'Stay calm under pressure!' Varna placed a woolen olive green blanket on the ground, Shah and Pavitr Gaay sat down on it. Their first visitor was a woman missing both her legs. She scooted towards them on a piece of wood with metal wheels on it. Her hands had scrapes and cuts on them from pushing herself around. 'I want my legs back right now holy cow! I have nothing to live for, I hate myself.' The woman pleaded. Pavitr Gaay stretched out her front hooves and licked the woman's knee length stumps. 'That's not going to do anything. And you, you're a child. What could you know about pain? I want my rupees back. What frauds! The woman hissed. Shah paused and recited a line from the Bhagavad Gita: 'You are what you believe in. You become that which you believe you can become.' Pausing again and saying 'The holy calf is not a cure all. Her healing powers are subtle. I empathize

with your pain. I believe that you're more in need of hope right now than healing. I'd like for you to tell yourself five nice things about yourself every day and come back next week. If nothing has changed, I'll return your money. The woman glared at her and rolled away saying 'You are what you believe in.' Shah felt as if she'd had an out-of-body experience. She'd heard her late father Darsh repeat that line from the Bhagavad Gita many times. Why did this phrase stay in her memory, if she had no other memories before the accident? 'Next!' The security guard bellowed. A very tall and clean shaven man approached and then squatted. He was wearing a white button down shirt, khaki shorts and a black triangular garrison hat. 'How much for the holy calf?' He asked, 'She's not for sale.' Shah replied and the man continued. 'I could send you to school and you could marry my son.' As he dabbed his brow with an orange handkerchief. Varna and the security guard recognized the garb as the uniform of the Hinduvata group. Varna tapped the man on the shoulder and said 'Time to go.' As the morning wore on, no more disagreements were had. The noon sun beat down and soon it was time for lunch. Shah and Pavitr Gaay were able to see about half of the crowd that had formed before dawn.

As lunch was served, Pavitr Gaay happily lapped up her milk and rice. Soon she would be producing milk of her own. Shah's head beat like a drum though. Even the kisses she got from her calf weren't working. Avina and Raja had changed into their red salwar kameezes and *Koli Topis* on their heads. They were clapping and playing with the little red bells for the calf. *Clink* *Cling* Each and every sound was amplified in Shah's head. Varna came over and rubbed the back of Shah's tense little neck. 'It's time for another tablet.' Varna said as she took out the cardboard sleeve and took out one large white capsule. It took Shah four big sips of water and a bite of food to get that bitter, chalky thing down her throat. 'Yuck!' Shah said as she wiped her tongue on her clothing. Raja and Avina felt bad for Shah, so they both imitated her. It made Shah laugh, before she began to feel fuzzy again from the medication. Shiva picked up the two cardboard boxes with the supplies and ushered everyone outside. 'Clean your plates first please!' Shiva said. The thin framed woman washed Shah's dish, while Shah put Pavitr Gaay's *Koli Topi* on her and a frayed rope as a lead.

Shah tried tying the other end around herself, but Varna had to secure the knot. The security guard led the procession, passing by dried out eddies that once had fish in them. Now industrial sludge flowed with hundreds of fish bones circling on the surface. The salty sea air wafted the closer they got to the beach. There were rows of artisans with rugs, clay pots, jewelry and other hand made items. Shah briefly got distracted by the Western tourists ooo-ing and ahh-ing at the wares. She felt a tug on the rope and kept walking. 'Do you remember what sand feels like, Shah?' Varna asked and Shah replied 'No.' Shah removed her sandals and put one foot into the warm sand. She could feel the uneven textures. Some sand was really fine, but her toes could also feel rocks and crunchy seaweed. She looked up and saw at least two dozen Koli families getting ready to celebrate. The open wooden boats had fresh paint, as they swayed back and forth in the water. This water was clear. Shah inhaled and then smiled. Despite her memory loss, she was feeling clear at this moment.

Shah kept her foot in the sand a few moments longer. Varna crouched down to hand her a thick green composition book. Written on the front in black marker was Shah's Memory Book. Varna had filled up the first ten pages with all of the information she could find out about Shah since they met. 'I want you to write down what the sand feels like right now and all of the new memories you make. Don't worry, I'll help if you need me to.' Varna said with a tear in her eye. Shah was speechless as she threw her arms around Varna's neck. After a few minutes, Shiva called everyone to come into the water. Shah, Varna, Shiva, Raja and Avina all held hands, while Pavitr Gaay ran with them towards the foamy tide. Shah yelled out 'Ready or not, here I come *Samudra*⁵ Shah could feel the minnows lightly brushing against her submerged ankles. The familiar sound of a sitar cut through the loud crashing of the waves. The cautious little calf turned bold when she discovered how much fun it was to chase the moving water. Shah scratched Pavitr Gaay's sopping wet head and heard her make a purring noise. When cows are really happy and relaxed they purr! Back on the beach, the men were simulating waves and dancing around their oars as they began the traditional dance. Varna put a flower garland

⁵ Sea in Gujarati

around Shah as she tried mimicking the people in front of her. She lost herself in all of the excitement. These small blissful moments made Shah feel more like a child of her age without burdens. As the sun began to set, Shah stood up and said 'I may not remember anything from before my accident, but I now remember what love is, because of you all!' With that, Shah and her holy calf were lifted into the air by the community for one more round of dancing.

Chapter 9

Over the next several years things would change. The small white calf grew into a hefty 450 pound cow with sizable horns. Shah frequently rode on her back. Due to Shah's traumatic brain injury, she had trouble learning at a traditional school. So, she did a lot of self study. Shah really wanted to become an activist. Varna and Shiva taught Shah how to weave. Another woman from the community taught Shah how to clean and arrange fish for the market. Both were essential skills for a Koli woman. Shah learned English from the books Kaya periodically sent with her letters. Kaya completed medical school in 1972, the year the drought in Trombay ended. She returned to India in 1975 for Shah's wedding and planned to stay permanently. The marriage shortly dissolved after Shah found out her groom was the boy with the blue bicycle. He'd completely changed his appearance by growing a long beard, shaving off his mopyy hair and scarring his face. His father shot him in the knees for screwing up the marriage and his plan to finally exact his revenge on Shah; the young man was left clinging to life in a dust cloud. His father was arrested and jailed in Bangalore, where the authorities connected him to several extremist bombings. Shah fell pregnant shortly after and gave up the baby girl she named Aarna.

Kaya negotiated with her mother's railroad company to donate funds for a Koli school, a new groundwater treatment system and to remodel Trombay Hospital. Her mother and the company's board reluctantly agreed after Kaya threatened to report them to the United Nations for human rights violations. By doing that, Kaya had to sign a legal document cutting her out of her family's will and a restraining order. They never wanted to see her again. Varna's health was failing from a sudden heart

attack. Varna always had a bad heart, but never told anyone. She died two days before the hospital and school were completed in 1977. The volunteer department in the hospital was named in her honor. A frame containing Varna's Red Cross vest and a sepia photo of her hung in the office. Avina and Raja were the first volunteers there.

Shah and Pavitr Gaay traveled around the Maharashtra region. They gave wisdom and healing to thousands of people. The amino acids in Pavitr Gaay's saliva were used to develop a vaccine and anti-nausea patch. Her urine was sold as a toxin remover and shampoo. She was artificially inseminated by researchers and gave birth to a pure white calf. Her calcium rich milk lowered the blood pressure of half of the community and so much more. In the 1980's Shah and her cow both received honorary degrees from The Grant Government Medical College. They became extremely famous and Pavitr Gaay's adorable calf often stole the spotlight. At each appearance there were blue fliers handed out saying 'Listen for the voice in the darkness that whispers you're safe.'

I was at a second hand bookstore in New York City this year when I learned about Shah and her Koli cow from one of those fliers. It was folded inside a thick green composition book with faded lettering on the front saying 'Shah's Memory Book.' I approached the cashier, her name tag said Aarna. She gasped and said 'This isn't for sale. It's my mother's journal! I just got this in the mail today from Mumbai and must've put it down outside. Thank you for returning it.' I asked her "Can you please tell me more about your mother, her holy cow and the Koli?"

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