

Shape Game

“Go slowly,” I said to my sister the first time she cut my hair, but I still screamed, and she covered my mouth to hold back the sound. You can see the mark where I bit her, or where one of the girls bit her, or where we all bit her. What I’m trying to tell you is that in Mumbai, my sister and I were not the only ones like us.

We belonged to a gang of girls that sold pirated books at the Haji Ali junction. Lakshmi was our leader. She was the oldest, a true fourteen, with the rest of us, seven to thirteen, saying we were of age to work.

The seths were the ring leaders. They looked for boys to sell their books, because boys could run and dart through Mumbai’s maze of cars while carrying ten books or more. Lakshmi convinced our seth that we were boy-like enough. She made promises. She cut our hair and said, “Twenty more push-ups before bed.” We went to sleep on the books that didn’t sell and begged for strong arms and quick feet in our dreams. We were dirty and forgotten. We were motherless, fatherless, prideful, and stubborn. We slept under a tarp-and-bamboo tent on the street. We were a family of messed-up girls. We hoped. We dreamed. We thought, *This for just a little longer.*

During the day, we danced through traffic, poking our heads into open windows, saying, “Buy this book, lady,” and “It’s all for you. Special price.” We spit through our teeth into the dirt. We dared each other to touch the girls with the alabaster skin. We pushed each other and fought. We had ears full of street sounds and a pulsing voice inside of us screaming, *Just a little faster.*

But the melancholy night had a way of handing out permission slips for sadness, which is a way of saying that most nights I couldn’t keep myself from crying. To distract me, my sister would say, “Look at me, Dahlia. What is the shape I am making with my face?” And Lakshmi would think of a square or a circle or a triangle and imagine her face taking this shape. And I would look at my sister, her chin jutting out, her eyes askew, her mouth reaching or softened, and guess the shape—a silly game that dulled the hunger and made the thought of the men on the other side of the tent disappear.

The game was Lakshmi’s way of calming us down. She sat with us when we cried, and pretty soon we were one loud giggle rippling up from beneath a blue plastic tarp. And somewhere in all of that crying

and giggling, the game became something that made sense to us—a secret language, perhaps. It didn't communicate sentences or messages—it was more a way of knowing.

Playing the shape game while selling books was also important—our eyebrows raised, our mouths stretched. The best outcome was hoping that someone in one of those cars would understand the game. They would look at our faces and truly know us, and this secret way of knowing would make them want to be something like a mother or a father to us. It is safe to say that every day we were selling books, we were looking for someone to love us.

I guess it almost happened once. It was dark, and Lakshmi and I were the only girls left on the street. The rest of the gang were back at the tent piecing together a meal out of scavenged food scraps, while Lakshmi and I tried to push the remaining books.

It was the summer of *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler's List*. I sold my last copies to an American couple who threw money at me and didn't see one inch of my soul, let alone my face. It was still good to sell books, to make money, to eat something. I turned the rupees over in my hand and looked for Lakshmi. And that's when I saw them.

Lakshmi was standing with a white woman in front of the Haji Ali Juice Center. The white woman had a notebook in her hands. Lakshmi had two copies of *Jurassic Park* left. The woman motioned wanting to look at them. She took the books into her hands but didn't stop looking at Lakshmi's face. She pressed rupees into Lakshmi's hands and didn't let go. When I approached my sister's side, the woman started looking at me all wide-eyed, so I put my hands in with theirs, and all of a sudden I got to feeling less lonely.

We brought our new mother back to the tent, and the other girls slowly came up to her, pressing her skin and touching her hair. We gave her a piece of leftover roti bread and showed her our treasures: a porcelain picture frame with only one chip, twelve green bottles of different shades all lined up in a row, a string of red beads, our tava skillet for cooking roti over a fire, and two carved wooden birds.

The new mother never stopped writing in that notebook she was carrying. I sat down next to her and put my hand on her hand with the pen, thinking maybe if I closed my eyes I might understand what she was writing. Lakshmi and the girls were gathered around.

"She's writing a book about us!" I said to everyone. "But one we don't have to sell, and she's going to take us home and put us in a big tub with hot water and kiss our toes one by one."

I can only imagine what the new mother said, but whatever it was, she stopped writing when I put my hands on her, so I said, “No, keep going, keep going, we need to know what happens.” I motioned writing with my hands, and she got to putting more of our future down on that page, and I kept my hands on top of hers, trying my best to understand the feelings coming up from her pen.

“We live at the top of a hill,” I said. “We have the most beautiful gowns, which our mother sews. She makes a new gown for us each day, and our hair is long and we never cut it. We don’t even have to walk! We float around in our new house. We have bowls of fruit at the feet of our beds. You can wake up anytime in the middle of the night and decide to cut a mango, suck the seeds of a pomegranate, or sink your teeth into a ripe plum, and go to sleep with juices dripping down your chin, never having found the bottom of the bowl. We are so happy we can’t bear it. We are getting fat, she says! She teaches us to read. She pets our long hair until we fall asleep. In the morning, we go out into the fields around the house on the hill and pick a single, perfect flower for our mother. We take it to her in bed and we say, ‘Mother, we love you.’ And her bed is so big it fits all of us, and there are never any men. Our mother doesn’t allow it.”

And I wanted to keep going like this, because it felt so good, but one of the little ones started crying on the far side of the tent. Lakshmi went to her, lying next to her, making shapes. Our new mother wanted to know what was happening, so I took her to observe the game.

At first, she looked confused. I tried to teach her how to play. I looked deep into her eyes and tried with all of my body to be a circle. I dropped the back of my tongue deep, opening my throat like I was yawning. I puffed out my cheeks and opened my eyes as wide as I could. I let my stomach relax. I thought of full moons in the night sky and forgot the piles of sharp metal the boys our age collected. I took our new mother’s hand and traced a circle in her palm. She seemed to start understanding. I did two more, a square and then a triangle, and by the end of the triangle she was nodding and getting excited.

She came back the next night and the night after. They didn’t usually come back, these new mothers. But this one was special. She seemed to understand us, and she came to the tent with gifts of crispy vada burgers of fried potato, spicy garlic, and fresh mint; jasmine oil, which she dabbed on her fingers and rubbed into our earlobes; and two bright orange bangles that we all took turns sliding onto our wrists. She placed marigold garlands around our home, draping them over the bamboo

pieces at the corners of our tent. She wrote stories about us in her notebook and smiled, touched our heads, and left us sleepy and hopeful.

We got to getting used to her and trusting her so much that one night after the rest of the girls were asleep, Lakshmi said, "Dahlia, let's show her." And I knew exactly what Lakshmi was talking about, but I was afraid because it was something between the two of us, and I wasn't sure about sharing it, or trying to share it, and having this new mother not understand. But I trusted Lakshmi and sat down, taking our new mother's hand in one hand and Lakshmi's hand in the other. And as soon as we got comfortable sitting all circled up, Lakshmi started making the shape.

It was the most beautiful, complex shape you've ever seen. The kind that makes you forget about the world and just feel so happy you could burst. It was a special shape Lakshmi showed me when she wanted me to know how much she loved me. I let myself stay in that moment of experiencing it all for a while, and then I looked up at our new mother and saw that she was crying.

I couldn't believe it. She was totally getting it, and then we all started crying. I guess it was a form of loving that we were all needing.

But then our new mother started looking sick. Her thin, white shirt clung to her with sweat, but her body was shivering. She let go of our hands and started pulling up a section of her shirt. And as she started pulling up her shirt, she started looking ashamed of what she was about to show us.

She was pregnant under there. Just a little bit, but we could both see it: a bump that meant someone had been loving her in the middle of the night. And on top of that little baby bump was a birthmark in the same shape Lakshmi had been making. But the way our new mother's eyes stayed fixed on the ground—the way they refused to meet ours—we knew that this woman was not our new mother. She was just another woman who understood how to love us but wouldn't.

She didn't come back the next night or the night after. And the second night she failed to return, our minds drifted back to our first mother. Once more, we hated her for leaving us. But we promised ourselves that we would visit her, because she couldn't help it, the way she was, and we'd bring her some money and tea, and say, "Hi Mother, are you doing okay?" But for the next few days we mourned our loss, dancing through traffic on twice-orphaned feet. Our voices said, "Buy this book, lady." Our hearts said, "Know us."