

Life Choices
Farita Tasnim

'Ow, shit.' She cut her pointer finger on a knife while otherwise deftly slicing an onion into thin semicircular rings. It always annoyed Moina when she slipped up like this. Lately her mind was swimming in a whirlpool of dizzying thoughts and it was starting to take a physical toll. Poor coordination, missteps. She even fell down the stairs twice last week because she was thinking too hard. Instead of thinking about the steps upon which she walked, she was thinking about the steps required to spur guided genetic recombination in astrocytes such that metabolite clearance in the cerebral interstitial fluid occurred during wakeful states. Essentially, she was designing a method to alter the human brain such that it no longer required sleep. The AQP4 gene she could regulate easy enough to produce aquaporins on demand and all the physiological symptoms of drowsiness she had practically eliminated by now, but she was still having trouble regulating levels of the neurotransmitters adenosine and melatonin. The effect manifested itself in her patients as sporadic psychological feelings of sleepiness and wakefulness, despite their lack of a biological need to sleep. || Fhwhooooooo. She was getting caught up again. 'Alright,' she thought out loud. 'Just focus on making the food.' She was making her favorite - goat curry, a delicacy for Bangladeshis. Moina loved cooking. Unlike her mother, who cooked every day and for every meal, and thus grew to dislike it, Moina had the luxury of cooking seven days' worth of food once a week for her and her fiancé, so she very much reveled in the joys of frying onions, roasting cloves, cardamom, turmeric, and red chili powder, adding excessive amounts of spicy green peppers, and mmmm... luxurious goat meat. After all, she didn't get to do this all the time. Meanwhile her fiancé, Nikhil, was conjuring up an American roasted cauliflower dish and what he called jalapeño daal, a Mexican-Bengali mashup of lentil soup that would leave any but their tastebuds scorched and numb for at least two days. || 'Thik asish?' Nikhil asked, glancing at her while stirring the jalapeño daal in a wok. || Moina looked at him. Handsome high cheekbones flanked by stubble in the shape of a goatee, uncharacteristic for his West Bengali origins. And he was cooking with her, another anomaly. In all the suffocating Bangladeshi households she had seen growing up, including her own, the man worked while the woman stayed home and took care of all the duties of the house from cleaning to cooking to anticipating every hungry moment and offering food to her family. A surge of passionate appreciation welled inside her as she thought about how she didn't have to act as a servant for Nikhil. Ah, she loved him. || 'Ei, bokar moton takai achish ken? Ki holo re?' Nikhil snapped. || Moina giggled. 'Sorry, I was just thinking about how I love you. You know that right?' || 'Of course I do. I love you too. But tui thik asish? Food er dike focus korte parchish na?' || 'Ah yeah, caught up in thinking about work again. Eto stress hocche amar. I just can't figure out the proper regulation pathways for adenosine and melatonin when they're being flushed out so often by cerebrospinal fluid.' || 'Is that really what's bothering you? You know you'll figure it out soon with some more time. What're you hiding under that shell of busybody work? Ar kisu hocche?' Nikhil knew that Moina was more stressed than anything about her parents' reaction to their imminent marriage. || Moina breathed a heavy sigh that could break walls. 'It's just total injustice, you know. Mental abuse.' Tears welled up in her eyes as she violently sliced the last few chunks of onion. Was it the onions or real tears? Sometimes she liked slicing onions because it allowed her to get a little crying in without anyone knowing. Sometimes even she didn't know. 'Fuck.' || Nikhil was close to her now, rubbing his hand on her back. He kissed her gently on the cheek, 'It's okay, Moina. They will come to eventually.' || 'Eito, peth theke koi ekta ber hoile ora thik hoye jabe' she joked. But she knew she would absolutely not have kids until she and Nikhil felt ready to take on the monumental task of raising an independent, individual human consciousness that they willed into existence. The world can be so cruel. She did not want to raise a child in a way that made them resent their existence. She knows what it feels like, and she thought that there's no feeling in the world as scary as wondering what it would be like if she didn't exist, precisely because she would have no feeling and no mind and wouldn't be able to think at all. It was the worst paradox. Sometimes she wondered if it was even morally right to birth a full-fledged human consciousness without their consent. But it's not like she could even get their consent. What would she do, implant a microphone into her womb, pretend like the baby can think and speak, and expect an answer? || 'Ei, ki holo abar?' Nikhil asked, knocking Moina out of her stupor. || 'Oh, sorry I was just thinking about giving a fetus a microphone and asking them if they want to exist before I pop them out of my belly. To get their consent, you know.' || Nikhil burst out laughing. 'How would that even work? Fetuses don't mature enough to be able to think about such a question, or fathom it.' || 'But what if they could?' Moina wondered if they could come up with any implementable ideas. || 'Well, assuming they could make a decision and communicate it, they would also require some knowledge about the world.' || 'I can microfabricate a tiny speaker that can be implanted and used to tell it stories about the world. But I suppose it probably wouldn't understand anything. What if we could speed up the growth of their hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex for a short period of time in the womb so they could evaluate properly?' || 'Now that's crazy talk. Besides, is that even at all possible?' || 'I wonder...' || After dinner, she popped a few L-Tyrosine pills to keep her feeling motivated and wakeful while she desperately researched neonatal neural development in hopes of finding scientific bread crumbs in the literature. Besides, she didn't need to sleep. Not tonight at least. She could deal with the side effects later.

Smooth Cuts
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The amalgam of animals, their voices, their clop-clops and their bok-boks, their strange movements, and most of all the empty eyes would continue to haunt Moina even two hundred years later when she would feed goat curry to her two bold kids (she and Nikhil had tried five times but only the last two were brave enough to want life). She always remembered that moment, when she stared into those eyes all-absorbing like black holes, when she held its mouth shut so it couldn't yell its deafening yell, when she dug a knife into its throat with surprisingly smooth cuts, when hordes of blood spilled out onto grass recently tousled by much resistance. || After she successfully ironed out her solution to eliminating sleep, recognized widely as one of the greatest and most controversial breakthroughs of the millenium, global productivity increased to earth-shattering levels while socioeconomic divides grew deeper. The latter was never her intent, but it seemed that when those at the top received more opportunities to climb higher, they often scrambled for individual glory, and not feeling a drop of drowsiness nearly doubled their working time, leaving those less well-off in the dirt, literally. Meanwhile, Moina moved on to research the question that haunted her during her dreams, when she used to sleep, that is. || One moment she was lying next to Nikhil after a long celebration marking the anniversary of her original sleep nuker patent, and the next, she found herself coughing up blood into her hand, staring at the pattern it left - a goat. No way, she was seeing things. *It'll be alright*, she thought. *I just drank too much, is all*. She drank two glasses of water and, after a restless half hour rolling around in bed, went outside to smoke one of her favorite side projects - menthol fish-stick vape-arettes. She was able to create a vape that actually withered away as she smoked it, giving the exact feel and aesthetic of a cigarette without the negative side effect of inhaling carcinogens. The turbulent flow emanating from her vape-arettes faded quickly in the dense, misty night air. Enjoying the moment, she relaxed her stance, leaned against the railing separating her from an ice cold dunk in a toxic river, and slid her hand into her pocket. She realized she had a joint with her, probably gifted to her from one of her friends at the party. *Fuck it, why not*. Once the plumes of smoked grass faded away from in front of her eyes, she saw a strange shape approaching her. Thankfully this strain had enough CBD that her muscles did not tense up. Meanwhile, her mind raced her heart for bodily control. Out of the shadowy air emerged a goat. || 'Right, so don't worry about hiding that. I already know you smoke. And drink,' spoke the goat. Hiding the joint was the last of her concerns, but she was utterly confused, scared. || '... despite the lies you've been feeding us for all these years. Goodness knows what else you've done. But I'd rather not ask. I don't think I can take it,' it continued. || She was too baffled to speak. || 'How could you slaughter me at the throat? How could you do that? And then feed me to your children?' continued the goat. || 'I-I d-don't believe in eating mass-produced meat' was the first thing her vocal cords could muster up. || 'That was the first time, you know. Prothom bar. That was the first time my head was completely disconnected from the rest of me. You know maybe I died, but it was the first time I could actually think.' || Moina felt the mist in the air suddenly turn into a fierce, dry wind that stabbed at her flesh. || The goat continued to speak to her, unsolicited, now with tears in its eyes, 'I suppose all that's left now is to thank you. For opening my eyes to a world I refused to accept. Thank you, ma.' Then, as quickly as it came, the goat crystallized into soft sand that blew away with the windy air, now sweltering hot. || She didn't quite understand why, but she fell to her knees, which touched the hot sand atop a massive desert dune. The rock she had so carefully carved, shaped, breathed a livable life into - the rock she used to replace her heart, felt massive seismic disruptions after eons of solid stoicism. *How could it be? How could it be that after all I've been through and everything I've fought for, I'm still at mercy to spikes of cortisol and drops of dopamine ravishing my amygdala?* || Nikhil woke her up, having come back from his own smoke of one of the vape-arettes she had left on the counter. She had fallen asleep for an hour, the first time in two hundred years. 'Moina, thik achish tui? Eije, eije... Kanna korcho keno? Ami asi na? Bolo ki hoyeche.' || At first Moina didn't respond. She just wanted to feel the warm, loving embrace of her brilliant husband. Once she had reveled in his solace, she kissed him and asked, 'Nikhil, amake phone ta de to please.' || . . . || 'Hi, Abbu.' She choked up, started crying. 'Kemon aso tumi?' she spluttered out between sobs. || No words, just listening to the other weeping while tears exploded out of each other's eyes.

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The stench swam in caustic swirls up her nostrils and made the peripheral nerves there wish they didn't exist. Her entire experience of the moment manifested itself as a conundrum of intense love, acceptance, and belonging coupled with confusion, anger, and apprehension. As she stripped out the next set of organs – airsac, stomach, intestines, liver, and heart – she accidentally flicked some of the blood onto her face. Casually, she wiped it off and continued to the next one. || Grabbing the fifty-pound catfish by its slippery stomach with two hands, she placed it on the tarp in front of her. With the cleaver in her right hand and the spine in her left hand, she made a clean single swipe along the belly to expose its guts. She put the cleaver aside, and picked up her small paring knife to gingerly cut away the internal organs without popping the spleen and releasing intensely offensive smells. This one was a mom. Its eggs she kept aside for a separate fish egg curry. || 'Eito amar meye! Shobai dekhbe amar meye koto kisu korte pare. Shudhu amar meye!' cheered her dad from the other side of the garage. 'Amar kolijar tukra, kolijar tukra reeeehhh!' he sang, doing a silly dance while singing about how his daughter was a beloved piece of his heart (actually liver, if you translate directly). He was proud of her for being able to slaughter goats and cut up fish with him, an ability not often seen in women, let alone Bangladeshi women. Moina giggled. || Once she was done with the mom fish she handed it to her dad and asked if there were any more, 'Ei nao. Ar kono maas aseh?' || 'Na, ar nai. Ei maaser dim gulo felo dao, catfish er dim khai na amra,' he said. No more. || 'Oh, no eggs?' Moina was dismayed. She enjoyed eating the fish eggs of ilish maas, the national fish of Bangladesh, and didn't realize why catfish eggs were somehow different. || Once they were finished gutting and cutting the fish, she washed the watery blood from her hands and started to head inside. || 'Moja hoise na?' asked her dad. || Moina smiled. She could be truthful this time. She truly did enjoy cutting up fish with her dad. 'Hyan, onek moja hoise.' || 'Eidik ai,' her father beckoned her and, to her surprise, hugged her. In the warm softness of his tight embrace, she felt tears threatening to spill down her eyelids onto her cheeks. Before they could, she hardened herself because she didn't want to be asked why she was crying. *This is one of the few times I can appreciate an honest hug. And then I'll be plunged back into the reality of constantly drowning in an ocean of disappointment, regret, the child I could have been but chose not to be because above all, I value individual freedom... Because I want to make my own life choices, suddenly every other thing that I've done or ever will do has been invalidated. That's enough now. Grit your teeth and put on a smile.* She did exactly as she willed. She'd had several years of practice doing this by now. This time was a little more difficult, but Moina mustered up her mettle, put on her characteristic smile, and looked up at her dad. He patted her on the back, a little too hard but friendly nonetheless, like he did when she was his beloved baby girl, his entire world. The problem was, now she was just his rebellious just-past-teenage daughter, and she was making her own decisions. || Inside the house, her mother had prepared Moina's favorite dishes – beef biryani (gosh biryani), goat curry (khashir mangsho), roasted chicken korma (chicken roast), rice pilaf (polao), hilsa fish curry (ilish maaser jhol), and red spinach with shrimp (laal shaak ar chingri). For every bite, Moina felt like she was in heaven, completely lost in the spicy adventures and luxurious textures of Bangladeshi food. Her mom was a wizard, truly. *I wish this was all there was to life.* || But that was far from true. Later, as she wrote an essay about the lasting effects of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent, she could not untangle her thoughts to distinguish past from present. She sobbed incessantly over the tragedy of the Bengal Famine, the essential genocide of Bengalis by Churchill under the veneer of fighting Hitler's holocaust of Jews. *Lucky bastard British imperialists had their cake and ate it, too. They exploit half the world and then fucking write history to douse themselves in a rosy glow. Now all people care about the British are their 'amazing accents.' Bull-fucking-shit.* She felt sick thinking how the accent, too, was all she associated with British people before she started to dig into her peoples' history. That made her cry more. || She never felt a strong repulsion towards British Imperialism when she learned about the American Revolution in school. Now it was personal. *Pitting the Hindus and the Muslims against each other was a favorite playground prank used by the Brits to distract Indians while they continued pickpocketing their productivity and economic wellbeing. 'Divide and rule,' it was called.* Moina was so angry. She was so angry she could not speak except for a few odd utterances that sounded like steam spewing out from a boiling teapot. She was so angry she tried to take a cold shower to knock her out of it, but Time's sticky black tar had already latched onto her soul. She was too far lost in grievance. || She could feel the aftermath of the three Partitions rippling through her as history gripped her mind in an uncontrollable seizure. Amritsar slashed her prefrontal cortex, Direct Action Day made her regret her consciousness, and Radcliffe killed her hippocampal cells. Operation Searchlight was the worst of it, the most hypocritical, nearly impelling her to tear her own amygdala out and rip it to shreds. And after all this, there is only now, irreparably scorched by the infernos of history. || She would be going back to college the next day. Her Spring Break was coming to an end. || For the next six months she sobbed into her pillow every day, in stints of 05 or 47 or 71 minutes. Notun meye beriye ashlo. || To defend her right to human freedom and to defy the ruinous social shambles in which her home country still lay due to several layers of ruthless exploitation, she knew what she had to do. Nikhil was the love of her life. More importantly, he loved her – Bangladeshi, Bengali, American, Muslim origin, whatever the fuck she was, he loved her. Most importantly, she finally learned to let herself love her self. She was Moina, and that's all that mattered.

Farita Tasnim
21L.512 Final Project (Word Count: 3090)

Explanation of Ties to Class Material:

These three short stories represent an extension of 'Weird Americas' literature, which focused much on African American and Latin American post-colonial experiences, to a 'Weird South Asia' or more specifically 'Weird Bengal' These stories are extremely personal for me. All of the stories combine science fiction as well as time warping to show how Bengal's traumatic history has rippled through time to send massive waves that affect even the life of diaspora today. The stories follow Moina, a Bangladeshi woman and neuroscientist who faces pressure from her family due to what she believes are mindsets of Hindu-Muslim hatred ingrained by history into millions of people from South Asia.

'Life Choices' takes place in the near future (anywhere between 10-20 years from now), in which Moina, a PhD student, has engineered a solution such that people don't need to sleep anymore. She is ironing out the last few bugs of her solution when she starts to think about how unfair is the paradox that a human consciousness cannot choose whether or not it wants to come into existence. 'Smooth Cuts' takes place a few hundred years in the future, where Moina is haunted by a goat ghost, an imagined reincarnation of her father. Human aging is a solved problem. And yet, she cannot escape her past. 'Blood Ties' takes place in the past, when Moina is an undergraduate student. Here, she is haunted by Bengal's past and South Asia's past. Through following Moina on these three timescales, we can hopefully think more critically about how important it is to be mindful of the past, especially in the form of the history of one's origin, while leading life in the present.

The stories are meant to play with the ideas of human consciousness, the problem of mind-body separation versus togetherness, motherhood, food, parent-child relationships, and the effect of colonialism on entire nations and their diaspora -- huge populations of people. They allude to and tie back to styles seen in *Beloved*, *Daytripper*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *West World*.

Life Choices

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method to alter the human brain such that it no longer required sleep. The AQP4 gene she could regulate easy enough to produce aquaporins on demand and all the physiological symptoms of drowsiness she had practically eliminated by now, but she was still having trouble regulating levels of the neurotransmitters adenosine and melatonin. The effect manifested itself in her patients as sporadic psychological feelings of sleepiness and wakefulness, despite their lack of a biological need to sleep.

Fhwhooooooo. She was getting caught up again. 'Alright,' she thought out loud. 'Just focus on making the food.' She was making her favorite – goat curry, a delicacy for Bangladeshis. Moina loved cooking. Unlike her mother, who cooked every day and for every meal, and thus grew to dislike it, Moina had the luxury of cooking seven days' worth of food once a week for her and her fiancé, so she very much reveled in the joys of frying onions, roasting cloves, cardamom, turmeric, and red chili powder, adding excessive amounts of spicy green peppers, and mmmm... luxurious goat meat. After all, she didn't get to do this all the time. Meanwhile her fiancé, Nikhil, was conjuring up an American roasted cauliflower dish and what he called jalapeño daal, a Mexican-Bengali mashup of lentil soup that would leave any but their tastebuds scorched and numb for at least two days.

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Moina looked at him. Handsome high cheekbones flanked by stubble in the shape of a goatee, uncharacteristic for his West Bengali origins. And he was cooking with her, another anomaly. In all the suffocating Bangladeshi households she had seen growing up, including her own, the man worked while the woman stayed home and took care of all the duties of the house from cleaning to cooking to anticipating every hungry moment and offering food to her family. A surge of passionate appreciation welled inside her as she thought about how she didn't have to act as a servant for Nikhil. Ah, she loved him.

'Ei, bokar moton takai achish ken? Ki holo re?' Nikhil snapped.

Moina giggled. 'Sorry, I was just thinking about how I love you. You know that right?'

'Of course I do. I love you too. But tui thik asish? Food er dike focus korte parchish na?'

'Ah yeah, caught up in thinking about work again. Eto stress hocche amar. I just can't figure out the proper regulation pathways for adenosine and melatonin when they're being flushed out so often by cerebrospinal fluid.'

'Is that really what's bothering you? You know you'll figure it out soon with some more time. What're you hiding under that shell of

busybody work? Ar kisu hocche?' Nikhil knew that Moina was more stressed than anything about her parents' reaction to their imminent marriage.

Moina breathed a heavy sigh that could break walls. 'It's just total injustice, you know. Mental abuse.' Tears welled up in her eyes as she violently sliced the last few chunks of onion. Was it the onions or real tears? Sometimes she liked slicing onions because it allowed her to get a little crying in without anyone knowing. Sometimes even she didn't know. 'Fuck.'

Nikhil was close to her now, rubbing his hand on her back. He kissed her gently on the cheek, 'It's okay, Moina. They will come to eventually.'

'Eito, peth theke koi ekta ber hoile ora thik hoye jabe' she joked. But she knew she would absolutely not have kids until she and Nikhil felt ready to take on the monumental task of raising an independent, individual human consciousness that they willed into existence. The world can be so cruel. She did not want to raise a child in a way that made them resent their existence. She knows what it feels like, and she thought that there's no feeling in the world as scary as wondering what it would be like if she didn't exist, precisely because she would have no feeling and no mind and wouldn't be able to think at all. It was the worst paradox. Sometimes she wondered if it was even morally right to birth a full-fledged human consciousness without their consent. But it's not like she could even get their consent. What would she do, implant a microphone into her womb, pretend like the baby can think and speak, and expect an answer?

'Ei, ki holo abar?' Nikhil asked, knocking Moina out of her stupor.

'Oh, sorry I was just thinking about giving a fetus a microphone and asking them if they want to exist before I pop them out of my belly. To get their consent, you know.'

Nikhil burst out laughing. 'How would that even work? Fetuses don't mature enough to be able to think about such a question, or fathom it.'

'But what if they could?' Moina wondered if they could come up with any implementable ideas.

'Well, assuming they could make a decision and communicate it, they would also require some knowledge about the world.'

'I can microfabricate a tiny speaker to tell it stories about the world. But I suppose it probably wouldn't understand anything. What if we could speed up the growth of their hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex for a short period of time in the womb so they could evaluate properly?'

'Now that's crazy talk. Besides, is that even at all possible?'

'I wonder...'

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Smooth Cuts

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One moment she was lying next to Nikhil after a long celebration marking the anniversary of her original sleep nuker patent, and the next, she found herself coughing up blood into her hand, staring at the pattern it left - a goat. No way, she was seeing things. *It'll be alright*, she thought. *I just drank too much, is all*. She drank two glasses of water and, after a restless half hour rolling around in bed, went outside to smoke one of her favorite side projects - menthol fish-stick vape-arettes. She was able to create a vape that actually withered away as she smoked it, giving the exact feel and aesthetic of a cigarette without the negative side effect of inhaling carcinogens. The turbulent flow emanating from her vape-arettes faded quickly in the dense, misty night air. Enjoying the moment, she relaxed her stance, leaned against the railing separating her from an ice cold dunk in a toxic river, and slid her hand into her pocket. She realized she had a joint with her, probably gifted to her from one of her friends at the party. *Fuck it, why not*. Once the plumes of smoked

grass faded away from in front of her eyes, she saw a strange shape approaching her. Thankfully this strain had enough CBD that her muscles did not tense up. Meanwhile, her mind raced her heart for bodily control. Out of the shadowy air emerged a goat.

'Right, so don't worry about hiding that. I already know you smoke. And drink,' spoke the goat. Hiding the joint was the last of her concerns, but she was utterly confused, scared.

'... despite the lies you've been feeding us for all these years. Goodness knows what else you've done. But I'd rather not ask. I don't think I can take it,' it continued.

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'How could you slaughter me at the throat? How could you do that? And then feed me to your children?' continued the goat.

'I-I d-don't believe in eating mass-produced meat' was the first thing her vocal cords could muster up.

'That was the first time, you know. Prothom bar. That was the first time my head was completely disconnected from the rest of me. You know maybe I died, but it was the first time I could actually think.'

Moina felt the mist in the air suddenly turn into a fierce, dry wind that stabbed at her flesh.

The goat continued to speak to her, unsolicited, now with tears in its eyes, 'I suppose all that's left now is to thank you. For opening my eyes to a world I refused to accept. Thank you, ma.' Then, as quickly as it came, the goat crystallized into soft sand that blew away with the windy air, now sweltering hot.

She didn't quite understand why, but she fell to her knees, which touched the hot sand atop a massive desert dune. The rock she had so carefully carved, shaped, breathed a livable life into – the rock she used to replace her heart, felt massive seismic disruptions after eons of solid stoicism. *How could it be? How could it be that after all I've been through and everything I've fought for, I'm still at mercy to spikes of cortisol and drops of dopamine ravishing my amygdala?*

Nikhil woke her up, having come back from his own smoke of one of the vape-arettes she had left on the counter. She had fallen asleep for an hour, the first time in two hundred years. 'Moina, thik achish tui? Eije, eije... Kanna korcho keno? Ami asi na? Bolo ki hoyeche.'

At first Moina didn't respond. She just wanted to feel the warm, loving embrace of her brilliant husband. Once she had reveled in his solace, she kissed him and asked, 'Nikhil, amake phone ta de to please.'

. . .

'Hi, Abbu.' She choked up, started crying. 'Kemon aso tumi?' she spluttered out between sobs.

No words, just listening to the other weeping while tears exploded out of each of their eyes.

Blood Ties

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Grabbing the fifty-pound catfish by its slippery stomach with two hands, she placed it on the tarp in front of her. With the cleaver in her right hand and the spine in her left hand, she made a clean single swipe along the belly to expose its guts. She put the cleaver aside, and picked up her small paring knife to gingerly cut away the internal organs without popping the spleen and releasing intensely offensive smells. This one was a mom. Its eggs she kept aside for a separate fish egg curry.

'Eito amar meye! Shobai dekhbe amar meye koto kisu korte pare. Shudhu amar meye!' cheered her dad from the other side of the garage. 'Amar kolijar tukra, kolijar tukra reeehhh!' he sang, doing a silly dance while singing about how his daughter was a beloved piece of his heart (actually liver, if you translate directly). He was proud of her for being able to slaughter goats and cut up fish with him, an ability not often seen in women, let alone Bangladeshi women. Moina giggled.

Once she was done with the mom fish she handed it to her dad and asked if there were any more, 'Ei nao. Ar kono maas aseh?'

'Na, ar nai. Ei maaser dim gulo felo dao, catfish er dim khai na amra,' he said. No more.

'Oh, no eggs?' Moina was dismayed. She enjoyed eating the fish eggs of ilish maas, the national fish of Bangladesh, and didn't realize that catfish eggs were somehow different.

Once they were finished gutting and cutting the fish, she washed the watery blood from her hands and started to head inside.

'Moja hoise na?' asked her dad.

Moina smiled. She could be truthful this time. She truly did enjoy cutting up fish with her dad. 'Hyan, onek moja hoise.'

'Eidik ai,' her father beckoned her and, to her surprise, hugged her. In the warm softness of his tight embrace, she felt tears threatening to spill down her eyelids onto her cheeks. Before they could, she hardened herself because she didn't want to be asked why she was crying. *This is one of the few times I can appreciate an honest hug. And then I'll be plunged back into the reality of constantly drowning in an ocean of disappointment, regret, the child I could have been but chose not to be because above all, I value individual freedom... Because I want to make my own life choices, suddenly every other thing that I've done or ever will do has been invalidated. That's enough now. Grit your teeth and put on a smile.* She did exactly as she willed. She'd had several years of practice doing this by now. This time was a little more difficult, but Moina mustered up her mettle, put on her characteristic smile, and looked up at her dad. He patted her on the back, a little too hard but friendly nonetheless, like he did when she was his beloved baby girl, his entire world. The problem was, now she was just his rebellious just-past-teenage daughter, and she was making her own decisions.

Inside the house, her mother had prepared Moina's favorite dishes – beef biryani (gosh biryani), goat curry (khashir mangsho), roasted chicken korma (chicken roast), rice pilaf (polao), hilsa fish curry (ilish maaser jhol), and red spinach with shrimp (laal shaak ar chingri). For every bite, Moina felt like she was in heaven, completely lost in the spicy adventures and luxurious textures of Bangladeshi food. Her mom was a wizard, truly. *I wish this was all there was to life.*

But that was far from true. Later, as she wrote an essay about the lasting effects of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent, she could not untangle her thoughts to distinguish past from present. She sobbed incessantly over the tragedy of the Bengal Famine, the essential genocide of Bengalis by Churchill under the veneer of fighting Hitler's holocaust of Jews. *Lucky bastard British imperialists had their cake and ate it, too. They exploit half the world and then fucking write history to douse themselves in a rosy glow. Now all people care about the British are their 'amazing accents.'* *Bull-fucking-shit.* She felt sick thinking how the accent, too, was all she associated with British people before she started to dig into her peoples' history. That made her cry more.

She never felt a strong repulsion towards British Imperialism when she learned about the American Revolution in school. Now it was personal. *Pitting the Hindus and the Muslims against each other was a favorite playground prank used by the Brits to distract Indians while they continued pickpocketing their productivity and economic wellbeing. 'Divide and rule,' it was called.* Moina was so angry. She was so angry she could not speak except for a few odd utterances that sounded like

steam spewing out from a boiling teapot. She was so angry she tried to take a cold shower to knock her out of it, but Time's sticky black tar had already latched onto her soul. She was too far lost in grievance.

She could feel the aftermath of the three Partitions rippling through her as history gripped her mind in an uncontrollable seizure. Amritsar slashed her prefrontal cortex, Direct Action Day made her regret her consciousness, and Radcliffe killed her hippocampal cells. Operation Searchlight was the worst of it, the most hypocritical, nearly impelling her to tear her own amygdala out and rip it to shreds. And after all this, there is only now, irreparably scorched by the infernos of history.

She would be going back to college the next day. Her Spring Break was coming to an end.

For the next six months she sobbed into her pillow every day, in stints of 05 or 47 or 71 minutes. Notun meye beriye ashlo.

To defend her right to human freedom and to defy the ruinous social shambles in which her home country still lay due to several layers of ruthless colonial exploitation, she knew what she had to do. Nikhil was the love of her life. More importantly, he loved her – Bangladeshi, Bengali, American, whatever the fuck she was, he loved her. Most importantly, she finally learned to let herself love her self. She was Moina, and that's all that mattered.