Payal Nagpal

Cloud God

Sana Merchant had a god nobody else did; her own personal god who sat cross-legged on the clouds humans only see at dusk—the ones that hang low in the sky, taking on the orange-and-pink glimmer of sunsets, shaped more like streaky bacon than cotton candy. Her god was the harbinger of nighttime. He had a beard that looked like the clouds he hated; the ones that made the skies overcast. He had hair all the way down to his hips and wore a robe fashioned out of old gunny sacks and gabardine.

Sana was eighteen years old when she manifested him. She didn't know what her god was called, but she supposed that was a good thing. She'd always been scared that if she saw him too clearly, or knew him too well, he'd run away from her.

When Sana was in the second grade, her yoga teacher told her class—after a meditation session that went on too long—that God is Mystery. And Sana's classmates took that rather literally.

"Does that make detectives priests?" one boy asked.

"No, it just means that if you chase the image of god, it'll move further and further away from you," the teacher replied.

And so, when they played catch-me-if-you-can and chain-tag on the playground, a slew of seven-year-olds began to refer to the fastest runners as "image of god." Sana's parents approved of this kid-sized blasphemy, chuckling when they heard about Melody Sue's mother, who marched into the principal's office, screamed so loud that the children could hear, and then told her daughter she'd be switching to the convent school in Connaught Place immediately, even though it was the middle of term.

Sana’s parents were devout atheists. They were leftist college professors who raised their children on social justice booklists instead of the *Gita* or the *Avesta*.

The Merchant-Kapoor family lived in Kailash Apartments, in a ground-floor flat with iron-grilled windows overlooking Lala Lajpat Raki Road—which, according to a *Times of India* survey, is the fourth busiest and sixth most dangerous road in India. There’s a Twenty-Four Seven across the street, though, and that’s what Sana’s mother, Arzoo, thought made the tiny flats in Kailash Apartments prime real estate. “We have access to sixty-rupee chicken momos all day and all night,” she would say whenever the topic of apartments, or momos, or desires comes up. “What more could you want in life?”

Kishore would chuckle in response. “Justice and more anti-establishment activism, of course.” Then they’d giggled, flicking pieces of lint off their sweaters and at each other, and Sana’d roll her eyes at the picture of domestic bliss before her.

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Sana was eighteen when the doctors replaced her uterus and ovaries with the void. After a fourth consecutive missed period and a throbbing pain in her stomach that was too intense to quell with four ibuprofen, she made an appointment with a gynecologist. Hours of scans revealed a condition whose name Sana’s tongue always tripped over when she tried to pronounce it. And while it took Arzoo a minute to recover from the insult of not being invited along to the initial doctor’s appointment, Sana’s parents sprung into immediate action as soon as they got the news: they sought second- and third-opinions, Googled doctors and surgeons, and reached out to friends of friends of friends who might have insight into which hospital would provide Sana with the best care.

When Sana was eighteen, the doctors scooped out a chunk of her insides. Sana wasn’t awake to see it, of course, but she often speculated about how it happened. After they placed a mask over her mouth and told her to count backwards from a hundred, they must have got to work labelling her body. Sana had seen it before—bold letters in black marker on limbs in hospital TV shows, reading "DO NOT AMPUTATE THIS LEG."

A nurse must have poked her stomach to ensure she wasn't awake, then lifted the operation gown and outlined Sana's demographic information on her soft, sinking belly. "SANA MERCHANT. AGE 18. PATIENT ID 90976458." Then the doctor would've taken over, gingerly leaning over Sana's chest, acutely aware of this twisted power dynamic before him, not wanting to be accused of anything untoward. He probably wrote in smaller letters than the nurse, etching the details of the medical procedure into her flesh: "Abdominal hysterectomy and bilateral-oophorectomy." And then, once they were sure she was asleep, they would have placed Sana on a gurney and transported her to the surgical equivalent of a production line, where bodies are loaded onto conveyor belts, hands are strapped to torsos, and organs not meant to be tampered with are covered with fleece blankets. Bodies were probably divided by department—gynecology, urology, limb-removal, gastrology, nephrology—and then sent to their respective operating theaters.

"Operating theater" was an interesting term, Sana believed. They implied surgeries were a spectable. But it was reassuring that surgeons felt watched, they were less likely to make mistakes. When they were preparing her for surgery, Sana recalled the YouTube rabbit about medical malpractice she once went down. Through it, she learned that hospitals always set aside money to settle the inevitable lawsuits that result from human error, that it's common for surgeons to leave sponges in rib cages, stitch up parts of intestines and kill people by administering too much anesthesia.

Sana was scared before her surgery. But after it, she grieved.

Sana spent her days in recovery lying in her bed, her body a sinking ship on a white-sheet-sea. For a while, she was anesthetized. Numb. And then came the pain—a stabbing, cutting, gnawing, stinging, scalding sensation that extended all over her body.

The void arrived after the pain subsided. It was a growing, vacuous sensation, the locus of which was at her navel. It made Sana want to cry. She tossed and turned and sniped at her parents when they came to check on her.

“How’s the pain?” they’d ask.

“Gone,” she’d scream. “My stomach is gone...” Her voice trailed off when she couldn’t find the words. “I want my insides back,” she wanted to say.

Sana’s days devolved into a listless haze. After a fortnight of desperation, she decided she needed to fix it. She picked up her phone and typed into Google: “What do you do when you feel an emptiness inside you?” The first thing that popped up was the number of a suicide hotline. But Sana didn’t want to die, she wanted to go back to feeling alive. And so she Googled that instead. She scrolled past the therapy-and-mental-health headlines, past the medical jargon, and to Google’s murkier side. JESUS MADE ME FEEL ALIVE AGAIN, one result read. And the one next to it screamed, ONLY GOD CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE.

Sana clicked. A man began to sing, a video began to play.

The man—white and blond and American—sang a song Sana had heard somewhere before. It was quiet and gentle and the people in the audience swayed to it like it was summer breeze. They put their hands in the air, palms forward, and closed their eyes. Some began to cry. Through quivering lips, a woman the camera zoomed in on whispered, “I feel whole now. I see the light.”

Sana muted the video and reached for a notepad to write down what seemed to be like a viable solution to the void: *Find God.*

The singer finished with a flourish when Sana turned the volume back up. “Hallelujah,” he said.

“Hallelujah,” the crowd roared back.

People who believe in god seem happy, Sana wrote. *They seem whole.*

Sana forced herself out of bed and into the kitchen the next morning, so she could talk to her family about god.

They beamed when they saw her. “We’re so glad you’re joining us,” her mother said. “Can we make you coffee? Pancakes? Aaloo paratha?”

Sana shook her head and helped herself to cereal, nodding at Vidur when he walked in, dressed in his school uniform. “Mom, Dad,” she said. “I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“I know you don’t believe in god, but do you at least believe in the possibility of god?”

Arzoo narrowed her eyes. “I do, yes. I think something—some sort of higher power—could be out there for sure.”

“Hmm…Last night, I was thinking about how there’s no proof that god *doesn’t* exist.”

Vidur scoffed at Sana. “Your point is fallacious—you know it’s impossible to disprove a negative, right? There’s no proof fire-breathing unicorns made out of cotton candy don’t exist either, but you don’t go around worshipping them, do you?”

Kishore gave Vidur a Look. “One may not be able to disprove a negative, but belief doesn’t always ascribe to logical reasoning,” he said, adding after a moment: “And, Vidur, there’s no need to take that tone with your sister.”

“Right,” Arzoo interjected. “Your father and I *want* you to question the beliefs we hold.”

Kishore turned to Sana. “You know, your mother and I may be atheists, but god forbid we turn into *my* parents, forcing our beliefs down our children’s throats because that’s what’s convenient.”

It was rare for Kishore to bring up his parents; when he did, nobody quite knew what to say. Arzoo squeezed her husband’s shoulder, and the family ate their breakfast in silence. “I have to leave early to meet with one of my thesis advisees,” Kishore said as he finished his last spoonful of cornflakes. “Vidur, I can drop you to school.”

Sana watched her mother clean up after breakfast, wondering if it was appropriate to ask about her grandparents.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to discuss what you wanted with us, Sana,” Arzoo said.

“It’s okay. But I have a question. Does Dad not speak to his parents because they’re as involved with the Hare Krishnas as they are?”

“He doesn’t have a problem with them being religious as much as he does with them forcing their religion down everyone else’s throat.”

Sana put down the sponge in her hand. Forcing religion down people’s throats was obviously a bad thing, but in that moment, it seemed to her almost appealing. If she were to go to her grandparents, hungry and aching for something to believe in, would it be so bad if they force-fed it to her?

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Sana made a habit of tracking the void. There were days she became a cartographer, making note of its coordinates in her notebook, measuring the rate at which it expanded and contracted.

16/2/2019: Above belly button, bigger than yesterday. Towards the right-hand side.

19/2/2019: So high, it’s almost in my chest. 9 centimeters wide. Oblong.

25/2/2019: A circle on the left-hand side. Radius—5 centimeters.

Sana took these notes when she rode the Delhi Metro, on the Yellow Line.

The Yellow Line was where she went to think. She developed a routine: she'd tell her family she'd be at her friend's house, take the Violet Line from the Kailash Colony station to Central Secretariat, and then board a yellow-striped train all the way to Samaypur Badli. At first, she stood in the middle of the compartment, being pushed and pulled and accidentally groped by middle-aged aunties scrambling to squeeze themselves into the narrow metro seats, but when the great exodus of Rajiv Chowk happened, she usually got a tail-seat at the back of the cabin.

The Yellow Line was sturdy, sleek, and all-steel, even when the neighborhoods it flew over were shanty-towns stitched together with the tarpaulin roofs of sheet-metal houses. To Sana, the Delhi metro was the definition of modernity. It was an inimitable casteless ecosystem where proximity was forced and no amount of entitled tantrumming could get someone a seat. During rush hour, seats were mice and women were wildcats—because, in the ladies' compartment, they could be.

Arzoo had a half-written paper comparing the ladies' compartment to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. She couldn't finish it because the Delhi government refused to give her the data she needed, but all that research about the ladies' compartment meant that Sana heard plenty of babble about gender as performativity and women-centric spaces as the key to collective liberation. This was because Arzoo specialized in Utopian Studies. Kishore was a medievalist. Vidur was a high-schooler who read Shakespeare for fun.

And Sana was a receptionist.

Her parents insisted they were proud of her—but they insisted on it too often, and it was obvious they were just trying to convince themselves they believed in the politics they preached.

When Sana went to bed at night, she strained to hear what her parents said on the other side of the house. She could imagine Arzoo running a brush through her greying hair, asking Kishore if she should talk to Sana about enrolling in college.

"But she doesn't want to go to college," she imagined Kishore replying. "I want her to have a better career as much as you do, but what self-respecting socialist would be ashamed of their child's minimum wage job?"

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Sana started working her minimum wage job as a receptionist after she graduated high school and refused to go to college. Arzoo and Kishore took her to meet a college counselor when she was set to graduate, and she shot down every university the man suggested she apply to: "That one's too rigid, that one's down south and it's too hot there, and that one has an uneven boys-to-girls-ratio."

"Perhaps if you tell me what you're looking for," the counselor said, "I'll be able to dispense better advice."

"I don't know what I'm looking for," Sana said. "I don't know if I want to go to college at all."

"What do you mean you don't want to go to college? You have to go to college." The counselor laughed. "It's either marriage at eighteen or college, beti. You choose."

Kishore flashed Sana a tight smile and then spoke to the counselor through gritted teeth. "You will not talk to my daughter like that. She can do whatever she wants to do."

The man looked to Arzoo for support, but she shook her head and stood up. "This is pure sexism," Arzoo said. "If Sana doesn't want to go to college, she doesn't have to go to college. And if she doesn't want to get married, she doesn't have to get married."

Sana’s parents led her to the car, shouting to the counselor that they wouldn’t be paying for his useless opinions.

“Thanks so much, guys. I’m so lucky to have such understanding parents,” Sana said when they left the building.

“That settles it, then,” Arzoo cupped her head in her hands, climbing into the front seat of Kishore’s car. “I guess Sana’s not going to college.”

Sana started working at the jingle company and saving up to move out when she finished high school. Her tasks there were usually limited to scheduling meetings and ordering coffee, but once every three months, when the Big Bosses from Bombay flew in and the entire company had Generative Meetings, Sana got to sit in.

She didn’t like the job or her coworkers—mostly washed-up singers who had chosen safe careers in advertising instead of hedging their bets in the music industry—but they were nice to her, so she tried to be nice back. When she asked for three weeks of paid medical leave for her surgery, they gave her four. She spent the week before she went back to work trying to mine her father for information about his parents. She broached the topic hesitantly, hoping her curiosity wouldn’t anger her father.

“Dad,” she said. “Do you miss being part of the Hare Krishnas?”

“Sometimes. I miss the people at the temple more than I miss temple itself.”

“You miss your parents?” Sana spoke slowly, surprised that her father was volunteering information.

“I do, but then I remind myself that they made me choose between them and your mother.”

“Did they have a problem with the fact that Mom’s family is Parsi? Or is the problem with her atheism?”

“A bit of both.” Sana’s father’s voice grew wobbly.

“How would you feel if I were to reconnect with them?” The last time Sana had seen her Dada and Dadi, she was twelve and they were at Kishore’s Dadi’s funeral. Sana knew she’d seen them a few times before that, but she had no recollection of them.

Kishore gulped. “It doesn’t matter how I’d feel. If that’s what you want to do, it’s what you should do. I’ll give you my mother’s email address.”

Sana nodded guiltily. *I’m sorry I’m letting you down like this,* she wanted to tell her father. But instead, she left the room in silence and spent the night crafting the email she’d send to her grandmother.

*

Sana Merchant had a god she constructed out of scraps: comfort from childhood memories like hazy vignettes that played on loop in her mind, the sound of a Prateek Kuhad song, images of benevolent grandfathers on feel-good American sitcoms, and her intractable—often uncontrollable—desire to believe.

Sana Merchant’s god was an old man with laughter as buoyant as froth over boiling milk. He sang into her empty spaces, but his voice wasn’t able to fill them.

Sana Merchant wrote to her god on the Yellow Line, filling her hardbound notebook with questions—*How do I fill the void? Is the void fill-able? Can YOU fill the void?*

Sometimes, when Sana saw picture-perfect families on the Yellow Line, she wondered if it was the knowledge that she could not have children that was causing the void. If the void was fetus-shaped. And so sometimes she watched rowdy toddlers jump off their mothers’ laps and run up and down the metro aisle. She watched children throw tantrums because they wanted to stop at Rajiv Chowk station for sugarcane juice and cheeseballs; little girls stomping their feet and wanting to be held; little boys scowling because being in the ladies' compartment was emasculating. She saw mothers with sunken eyes and messy ponytails, complaining to other mothers about how tired they were. Most of the time, Sana thought her inability to have children was the only peak of the void.

But occasionally, she would stumble upon mothers she was envious of: those wearing kalamkari sarees with jholas gracing slogans like "#Momboss," or women standing hand in hand with little girls in thick-rimmed glasses reading books, or smiling mothers with children who chattered happily about school and swimming practice and fingerpainting. Some of the families she saw were wholesome and picturesque, and if they were compelling enough, she followed them out of the train and onto the platform. She took the escalator up, standing a few stairs behind them, then trailed behind them in the street until they disappeared into their destination.

She turned anthropologist, took notes:

Specimen A2 prefers male child to female child; holds male child's hand with a tighter grip. Speaks to him in a lower, warmer tone. Is this because of sexism or because the female child disobeyed her earlier today?

Specimen X2 is exasperated

Specimen D4 is exasperated

Specimen F6 is exasperated

Specimen H2 screams at her child for letting her French braid come undone

Specimen G5 is exasperated

Specimen V3 attempts to break a bar of chocolate in half. One piece is larger than the other; that is the piece she hands the child. Later, when the child throws a tantrum, Specimen V3 will think *about how she sacrificed the larger half of chocolate. She will regret her decision to bring life into the world; one that she is responsible for, one that she must make sacrifices for.*

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Sana's grandmother responded to her email the day after she sent it. She invited Sana up to Vrindavan, where lived with Kishore's father on temple property, and asked if Sana wanted to join them for the Hare Krishna Sunday Service.

Sana wondered if Krishna could be her god. Her knowledge of him was limited; but he seemed charming enough—an overgrown blue baby who stole butter and danced with courtesans. So when Sana boarded a RedBus that Friday, dressed in a kurti and leggings, with her hair slicked back and braided with jasmine, she promised herself to suspend all judgement and make a sincere effort to Believe.

Her grandparents met her at the Vrindavan bus stop, dressed in gleaming saffron fabric, greyer and plumper than she remembered them. They took her to their quarters in the ashram, fed her daal makhani with ghee rice and kaaju barfi, and then handed her an orange saree to change into.

"So we can attend service at the temple," her dadi explained as she led her to the bathroom.

Sana thanked her.

"How's Kishore doing?" Dadi whispered after a moment. "Your dada doesn't need to know I asked, but just tell me—how is he? What has he been doing? Has he been well?"

"He's doing well," Sana said. "He's still working at the university, and he's been thinking of going vegan."

"Good." Dadi smiled. "He was raised vegetarian, you know. He only started eating meat after he married your mother."

Sana nodded and bit her lip. It was for political reasons, her father had told her once, that he had gone non-vegetarian, gorging on beef as a way of flipping off Hindutva politicians and rejecting the way his parents had imposed religion.

“He read that veganism is better for the environment,” Sana said.

“Of course, it’s better for the environment. Krishna never ate meat. We can’t eat meat, we’re”—Dadi lowered her voice again—“respectable people.”

Sana gulped. There it was, the thing her parents always droned on about, the coded casteism she was told never to let slide. “Call it out when you hear it,” her parents said over and over again, so she took a deep breath and started. “Dadi, I—”

“Has your dad ever spoken about coming to the temple again?” Dadi interrupted.

Sana shook her head.

Dadi fiddled with the edge of her pallu. “Well, you’re here, beti, and that’s what matters.”

Sana nodded, avoiding her grandmother’s eye, wondering how much false hope she’d brought them just by visiting.

Temple service that evening was long and boring. The priest spoke in Sanskrit so pure, Sana could barely understand it. She shifted in her seat, focusing on the women’s section of the audience where she had been seated instead of the garland-decorated podium on stage: women hunched over in their chairs, with their legs crossed and their ghunghats so low, they covered their eyes. Hundreds of them, silent, shriveled, blending into an orange wash.

Sana wished she could have worn her sandals into the temple. Her feet burned, white hot, when she set them on the marble floor. And when she squinted in pain, the whole temple looked like it had been set ablaze with light—sunbeams reflecting off each white-and-gold surface, threatening to set fire to the ostentatious display on the stage.

There were idols of Krishna and all his incarnations on a raised platform, his neck draped in pearls and his concubines wrapped in miniature silk sarees. It rubbed Sana the wrong way. She didn't want a god who'd demand this—who'd only provide blessings in exchange for spectacle and idolatry.

She told herself she'd have to find god elsewhere when her grandparents walked her to the bus stop, asking endless questions about her career plans and romantic life.

"I'm sorry I don't have too many answers," she said. "I'm fairly directionless."

"You know who can provide you with direction?" her Dada asked. "Krishna."

Sana wanted to believe that—desperately so.

*

Sana discovered the idea of *her* god at the jingle company one morning when she sat in on a meeting with the Bombay crew. The executives were discussing jingle ideas for different ads, their voices getting louder and louder, competing to see who had the best riffs and falsettos.

"I think it should go like this," one jingle person said. "*Amul Doodh: The Taste of India*."

"No, I think it should go like this. *Amul Doodh: The Taste of India-a-a-a.*"

"No, I think it should go like this. *Amul Doo-oo-oodh: The Taste of India-a.*"

Eventually, the jingle-people compromised, and the meeting devolved into a debate about something quite meaningless. They discussed other jingles and ad campaigns, both in India and abroad, and then played ridiculous games.

"What's an ad you wish you had made?" one man asked the group.

Natasha from the Delhi office leaned forward in her chair. “That American Campbell’s Soup ad! With the two gay dads—you know that one?”

“Why would you want to make a *gay* ad?” asked Bhavya from Bombay.

“Because… Equal rights?”

“You’re a Christian, aren’t you, Natasha? Doesn’t the Bible say homosexuality is wrong?”

“*My* Jesus would never judge someone for who they love,” Natasha retorted. “And I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

Sana sprinted up to Natasha after the meeting ended. Until then they’d only ever wished each other good morning before, but now Sana felt compelled to ask, “You have your own Jesus?”

Natasha tucked the stray wisps of hair that escaped her braid back in place. “I have my own understanding of Jesus, I guess,” she answered. “Like, my relationship with him reveals parts of his spirit that many others don’t get to see.”

Sana could hear her father’s voice in her head: “These religious people, man! All of them have different faiths and yet all of them are convinced theirs is the right one.” She wanted to ask Natasha how she knew her understanding of Jesus was more correct than that of the millions of other Christians who believed in the same Jesus. But she didn’t. Of course she didn’t.

“That makes sense,” she said instead, and thanked Natasha for answering her question.

What if, she thought on the Yellow Line that evening, it’s not one Jesus that exists with millions of ways to understand him. What if there are a million Jesuses? What if, she thought, she could have her own?

Sana Merchant had a god nobody else did. He ate roasted peanuts for dinner, read more romance novels than he cared to admit, and didn’t judge people who were gay. He did judge people who judged people who were gay, and he also judged grown adults who insisted they had favorite colors and referenced *Harry Potter* too much in casual conversation.

Sana Merchant wrote letters to her god when she rode the Yellow Line. She tried to craft prayers that would reach him, and sometimes she found herself reciting them under her breath, hoping they'd percolate into the air and find their way to their intended recipient.

Will you fill the void if I try to make friends?

Will you fill the void if I spend time with my family?

Will you fill the void if I eat healthy this week?

Spinach and yams in exchange for wholeness, please?

Spin-ach and yams-yams-yams in exchange for wholeness, please?

Spin-ach and ya-a-a-a-ams in exchange for wholeness, please?

She wished she could present her prayers to the jingle-people, see if they could set them to a more compelling tunes—she wondered if that would make her god listen. She bargained with him tunelessly instead, her fingers interlocked, one hand holding the other in a steadfast zipper of prayer.

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Sana Merchant beamed prayers to her god from her seat in the yellow line. Sometimes, she chanted maniacally under her breath, fidgeting, desperation bubbling out of her.

Sana stumbled upon a woman who brought her closer to god on a grey, grotty monsoon day while she rode the Yellow Line. The woman was heavily pregnant, and her stomach burst from underneath the pallu of her saree; she held the hands of two boys, identical twins with buzzcuts, dressed in bright yellow Pikachu-themed outfits. Sana offered the woman her seat, nodding when the boys thanked her on their mother's behalf. The family chatted softly in a language Sana eventually pegged as Lhasa Tibetan. She eyed the mother carefully, wondering, as she did when she saw most mothers, if she also harbored a void.

“The next station is Vishwavidhyalaya,” the woman on the automated loudspeaker boomed. “*Agla station Vishwavidhyalaya hain.*”

The mother gathered her sons.

Sana trailed behind the family instinctively, onto the platform and out of the station. She moved with her eyes fixed on the two buzzcut scalps, clutching her umbrella tightly, dodging people on the pavement, all the way to the steel bridge leading to the Majnu ka Tila market.

Raindrops collided with the metal to produce an ugly thwack, and Sana crossed the bridge, wading through puddles and the throbbing marketplace crowd. She dodged sock- and scarf-vendors in her pursuit, and sped up when a little girl in pigtails and a tattered pinafore called out to her.

“Didi, listen to me!” the girl shrieked when Sana ignored her.

“What?” Sana turned around and snapped, knowing the distraction had caused her to lose sight of the family she’d been following.

“My mother is selling phagsha.” The girl pointed to a pushcart in the distance. “Would you like to buy some?”

“Fine.” Sana bit her lip. “Fine, I’ll buy some.”

The girl led Sana to the phagsha vendor, crouched under an umbrella, in front of her decrepit cart. “One plate of phagsha for fifty rupees,” she shouted, haphazardly chopping the wrinkled, red, glimmering sacs of flesh in front of her.

She caught Sana shuddering at the meat. “Oof, you young people are so easily repulsed!” she said. “The belly is the best part of the pig, you know? My husband gets it for me himself. He cuts the pig’s stomach open, reaches in and pulls out the belly. Easy as 1-2-3.”

Sana paused. There was a roaring in her ears, prickly sweat on her palms. She'd heard of pigs' hearts replacing human hearts before, she'd watched documentaries about cross-species organ harvesting. "Ultimately, our bodies aren't that different from this hog's," she remembered a voiceover informing her, as a snorting pig covered in mud appeared on screen. "So if, in the future, a part of your body isn't working as it should, the answer to your prayers might just be in creatures like these—in their human-sized, human-compatible hearts, livers, and lungs."

Now Sana could see it: her belly filling up with that of something else's, pregnant with pulverized meat. She could see the pig's bellies filling up her empty spaces, a grotesque solution she couldn't believe she hadn't thought of before.

"Which of these"—Sana gestured to the sacs of flesh in front of her—"are from girl-pigs?"

The vendor cackled, exposing all her yellow, uneven teeth. "What kind of question is that?"

"I'll pay you three hundred rupees if you give me all your girl-pig bellies. No need to cook them. Just give them to me as they are."

"Take them all for five hundred. How am I supposed to know which ones are from girls?"

Sana shrugged. She could eat them all, she supposed, and about fifty percent of them would prove useful—it was simple probability. She dug through her purse and handed her money to the woman, who in turn handed her what she hoped would be the Cure.

It was cowdust hour and the air was thick with the smell of petrichor and manure. Sana Merchant walked through Majnu Ka Tila market, breathing quickly, to the rhythm of raindrops hitting the ground. "Thank you, God," she mumbled before reaching into her black bag and grabbing a fistful of pig. "Thank you, God."

She closed her eyes and dug her teeth into a fibrous porcine fillet. She clamped down hard, meat in hand, shaking her head from side to side to dislodge a bite. Cold flesh filled her mouth, turning it red on the inside, causing everything to taste like metal. “Thank you, God,” she said again, the mouthful of belly obscuring the sound of her voice. Clumps of flesh stuck to the back of her throat, got caught between her teeth.

Sana Merchant took a deep breath. And with a mighty swallow, and a chunk of belly slid down her gullet, beginning its journey towards the void.